LEARNING TO ADJUST TO THE CANADIAN GRADUATE CLASSROOM: 
A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF THE PARTICIPATION OF FOUR CHINESE 
GRADUATE STUDENTS IN CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS 
AT A CANADIAN UNIVERSITY

by

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Abstract

This study investigates how 4 newly admitted Chinese international graduate students participate in classroom discussions at a Canadian university. This qualitative research provides rich descriptions of their backgrounds and classroom participation, as well as their voices related to their classroom experiences. Framed by Language Socialization Theory, the study examines the classroom contexts where the students are socialized, particularly the social relations in the classroom that influence the 4 students’ participation. The study also investigates the role of the 4 students’ agency in the negotiation of access and participation in classroom discussions, as well as their identity formation in classroom communities. The findings of this research highlight the co-constructed and bi-directional nature of language socialization. The 4 students’ classroom experiences are not only shaped by their educational, cultural and social backgrounds, but are also jointly constructed by local contextual factors in Western classrooms. Pedagogical implications are also discussed.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Issue

The number of Chinese students seeking an international education has increased rapidly in recent years (Jun, 2010). According to statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education, the number of Chinese overseas students exceeded 150,000 in 2008. Canada is one of the four most popular overseas study destinations (US, the UK, Australia and Canada) among Chinese students (Chinanews, 2008). In a mere 6 years, from 2002 to 2008, the number of Chinese students in Canada has more than doubled from 20,415 to 42,154 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2009). Due to economic progress in China and the evolving immigration policy in Canada, it is expected that this rapid growth will continue in the foreseeable future (Zhejiang Technology News, 2010).

The surge of Chinese students in Western English-speaking universities has generated discussions among researchers and educators around the world. The discussion has centered on Chinese students’ academic competence, especially their proficiency in English. While some Chinese students function well in the Western education system, many more seem to struggle to meet degree requirements. For example, Edwards, Ran and Li (2007) point out that academic writing is one of the areas where the problem is especially acute. It involves skills that are found to be weak among Chinese students such as critical thinking, forming arguments, and paraphrasing. Listening and speaking are also challenging for many Chinese students. In Western classrooms, Chinese students are perceived as being silent and passive, contributing only the minimum when they have to (Liu, 2002; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). Collaboration and group work with peers also point to difficulties in general communication skills for these students (Homes, 2006).

In the context where many Western universities have adopted a market orientation in the past few years, the large number of international students coming from non-English speaking countries, such as China, has contributed to mounting tensions in the area of university teaching and learning (Johnson, 2008). There have been concerns among educators who wonder if accepting students with low English proficiency will lead to a deterioration of standards, since many educators find themselves compromising the value of university credentials (Benzie, 2009; Birrell, 2006; Edwards et al., 2007) by
lowering academic expectations to allow international students to graduate. Some researchers also suggest that a more cautious approach should be taken towards language proficiency test scores in the admission process as they may not be valid predictors of academic success (Zeegers & Barron, 2008; Birrell, 2006).

While language proficiency is emphasized in the literature as a major source of difficulty for international students, there have been surprisingly few studies focusing on students’ language learning experiences once they enter university programs. The setting of most studies that address international students’ language learning has been ESL or university preparation classes where learning academic English is the major object. The experiences of international students in graduate programs seem to be largely ignored.

However, language acquisition researchers agree that language learning occurs when learners are engaged in meaningful interaction (Ortega, 2009). Given that new international students usually have limited social networks (Wang, 2010), the classroom is an important site, if not the only site, for many graduate students to develop language proficiency, and particularly to acquire academic oral discourse. The kind of language learning environment graduate classrooms provide for international students should be discussed. The opportunities and constraints in the graduate classroom context that affect international students’ language learning seems to be a legitimate area for exploration. The present study intends to fill this gap in the literature through the investigation of the language learning experiences of 4 newly admitted Chinese students in graduate classrooms at a Canadian university.

The Study

Language learning involves more than just acquiring linguistic skills. It also involves acquiring local norms, negotiating participation and values, and becoming a competent member of the local community. Language learning in this sense is fundamentally social and situated. The current study takes this sociocultural and participation-based perspective of language learning and employs Language Socialization Theory as the theoretical framework. I see the language learning experience of the 4 Chinese students who participated in this research as a process of socialization into their classroom communities. I investigate factors in their classroom contexts that shape the 4
students’ classroom participation and language learning. At the same time, I focus on the activity of classroom discussions, a practice that is commonly seen in Western classrooms but rarely studied from a socialization perspective. Language socialization research has also identified how students’ identity construction is tied to language learning. This study therefore also pays close attention to how students exercise their agency to react to the local contexts and how their identity is constructed or reconstructed as they participate in classroom discussions.

My overarching research question is: “How do 4 new international graduate Chinese students socialize and how are they socialized in classroom discussions at a Canadian university?” I approach this question by addressing the following sub-questions:

1) What are some of the contextual factors in their classrooms that facilitate or constrain the participation of the 4 Chinese participants in classroom discussions in their graduate courses in a Canadian institution?
2) How do the 4 Chinese students negotiate their participation in classroom discussions? What effect do their classroom experiences have on their evolving identities in their classroom communities?

A case study approach is employed as the research methodology in this study. Multiple data collection methods are used to triangulate the data, including classroom observation, field notes, classroom audio recordings, individual interviews and focus group interviews.

Purpose of the Study

Research has shown that many Chinese students experience language difficulties when studying in Western universities. However, there have been few studies that investigate students’ language learning experiences once they enter a graduate program, particularly how they acquire academic oral discourse. This study looks at the language learning experiences of 4 newly admitted Chinese international students from Mainland China studying at the graduate level at a major Canadian university. Through a multiple-case study, I describe their classroom experiences in the university, particularly how they participate in classroom discussions. I discern, on the one hand, the
environmental factors in classrooms that influence (both limit and enhance) their participation. On the other hand, I highlight these students’ inner voice regarding their classroom experience and their investment and agency in socializing into the academic oral discourse and classroom communities.

The findings of the study have implications for the increasing mobility and multiculturalization of Western graduate classrooms. By gaining a deeper understanding of how Chinese students socialize and are socialized in classroom discussions, educators will become more aware of the special needs of second language graduate students, and the practices and strategies that need to be implemented into their classrooms. Also, the findings may assist second language graduate students in a new educational environment by enhancing their understanding of expectations and practices of the Western academic community, and thus maximize their opportunities to acquire second language communicative competence in an academic context.

In addition, this study attempts to contribute to a better understanding of Language Socialization Theory. Through investigating Chinese students in Western classrooms, I intend to fill gaps in the literature where there are very few studies on the acquisition of second language oral academic discourse.

At the same time, I recognize the limitation of a single study based on 4 Chinese graduate students at one Canadian university. The study provides insights into the experiences of these specific learners and only seeks to “assist the reader in making naturalistic generalizations” (Stake, 1995, p. 86) by providing detailed descriptions of the four cases.
Chapter 2: Language Socialization Research

Language Socialization Theory frames my study. In this chapter, I explain the theory by first focusing on its basic tenets and assumptions. I then explain its theoretical expansion towards the community of practice orientation when the theory was increasingly applied to second language acquisition in the last two decades. I also review some empirical studies in second language teaching and learning that bring insights to the theory. Finally, I review the second language socialization research that has been carried out in Western university contexts.

Language Socialization Theory

Language Socialization Theory is used to inform my study. This theory examines how children/novices acquire linguistic and cultural knowledge through social interactions with experts (Duff, 2008; Garrett, 2008; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). This type of socialization is required in order to effectively participate in the social life of the community (ibid, 2008, 1986).

An ultimate goal of socialization is to gain communicative competence (Garrett, 2008). According to Ochs (1986), the nature of socialization is a process of dealing with the relationship between self and society. On the one hand, individuals internalize social values through socialization. On the other hand, individuals also exercise their agency in selecting what to internalize. In this sense, “individuals and societies co-construct each other through social interactions” (ibid, 1986, p.1). Socialization itself is a process of living and being, of how to become competent and legitimate members in the cultural community (Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002). Therefore, Language Socialization Theory is not only a theory of language acquisition, but a theory of human development over time (ibid, 2002).

According to language socialization theory, there is an intertwined relationship between language and socialization: “socialization through language” and “socialization to use language” (Ochs, 1986, p3). The former addresses the acquisition of tacit cultural knowledge while learning a language; the latter addresses language acquisition through interactions in particular contexts (DuFon, 2006).

A number of theoretical and empirical studies have documented this twofold
relationship between language and culture acquisition (Ochs, 1986, 1996). Ochs (1986), for example, explains theoretically how linguistic forms can transmit sociocultural knowledge. She argues:

Our perspective is that sociocultural information is generally encoded in the organization of conversational discourse and that discourse with children is no exception. Many formal and functional features of discourse carry sociocultural information, including phonological and morphosyntactic constructions, the lexicon, speech-act types, conversational sequencing, genres, interruptions, overlaps, gaps and turn length. In other words, part of the meaning of grammatical and conversational structures is sociocultural (p. 3).

In this way, language transmits cultural knowledge not only because it can serve as a medium for cultural transmission, but also because language itself indexes sociocultural knowledge.

Activity is another important construct in Language Socialization Theory. According to Ochs (1988), activities mediate linguistic and sociocultural knowledge. Children or novices are socialized into a community through engaging in joint activities with experts (ibid, 1988). These joint interactions are seen as learning environments that enable experts to transfer linguistic and cultural knowledge to children or novices (ibid, 1988). Activities are also important methodologically in that they serve as units of analysis in socialization research (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986; Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002). In other words, socialization research is activity-based research. One type of activity that has been intensively investigated involves interactional routines.

An empirical example of research involving interactional routines in various literacy activities is the study done by Hellermann (2006). In his study, he traced 2 adult learners of English in an ESL program and observed how they participated in three repeated literacy activities: book selection, opening post-reading re-telling, as well as completing and filing reading logs. Data collected from video recordings and reading logs reveal how these 2 learners participated in these activities and how teachers and classmates socialized them through devices such as explicit modeling. The findings of the study show that over three semesters, the 2 learners developed a wider range of interactional practices for the literacy activities, and they were able to move from peripheral to more engaged positions in the ESL classroom. Hellermann interpreted that
one of the reasons for the 2 learners’ improvement lies in the repeated literacy activities. It is the repeated activities that afforded the 2 learners opportunities to negotiate social actions and develop interactional skills.

The distinction of the participant’s role as a child/novice or an adult/expert is another important construct in Language Socialization Theory. Socialization is considered bidirectional, as children or novices are not seen as passive accepters of language and cultural values (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2008; Kulick & Schieffelin, 2004). They are not only distinctive individuals with differences in cognitive and psychological characteristics, but also interlocutors who socialize adults or experts into their roles as caregivers or the more knowledgeable ones (ibid, 2008). Thus socialization is co-constructed by both novices and experts. Novices, through interaction with experts, acquire the knowledge that is necessary for participation in social life and learn how to be competent members of a community.

Theoretical Expansion: Towards Community of Practice

When the theory of Language Socialization was first developed by Schieffelin and Ochs in the 1980s, it was mainly used to explain how culture shapes first language acquisition and how children acquire cultural knowledge when they acquire languages. From the 1990s, the focus of Language Socialization Theory shifted from first language to second language studies. To respond to the increasingly multicultural and multilingual modern world, the theoretical framework of language socialization also expanded on and was enriched by other perspectives, such as identity theory, sociocultural theory and particularly the community of practice (Duff, 2007; Ortega, 2009).

Duff explains the theoretical shift: “whereas earlier work in language socialization was more anchored in the sociolinguistic constructs of SPEECH COMMUNITY or DISCOURSE COMMUNITY, much current [second language socialization] research has adopted the notion of COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE instead (or in addition to other terms)” (Duff, 2007, p. 315). While earlier language socialization research looking at first language socialization usually conducts “micro-linguistic analysis” and examines children’s acquisition of linguistic forms over time in social interaction, recent studies on second language learners’ socialization takes more
“macro-social level of analysis” and focus on socialization processes that “facilitate or obstruct learners’ increasing legitimacy, participation and identities within their new communities” (ibid, p. 315-316).

Community of Practice and Legitimate Peripheral Participation

The community of practice concept grew from the notion of situated learning put forward by Lave and Wenger in 1991, the central concept of which is legitimate peripheral participation. Legitimate peripheral participation refers to the participation of learners in communities of practitioners and the way they acquire the skills required to move from peripheral to fuller participation in the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learners must be acknowledged as legitimate members of the community in order to engage in practice and gain access to learning resources. Peripherality is considered as a positive term by Lave and Wenger. Taking a peripheral position, learners can “develop a view of what the whole enterprise is about, and what there is to be learned” (p. 93). It also suggests “an opening” and “a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement” (p. 37).

Access is the key. To become a full member of the community, access to a range of resources is required. However, access can be manipulated. The power relations that exist between newcomers and old timers in the community can either facilitate or prevent legitimate participation. Old timers may have control of resources and have power to either deny or offer access. Therefore, learning is not seen simply as increasing knowledge, but “involve[s] a struggle over access to resources, conflicts and negotiation between differing view points arising from differing degree of experience and expertise” (Morita, 2004, p. 577).

Learners’ identity is also critical in legitimate peripheral participation. The desire to be a full member of a community is the motivation for engaging in a community of practice. As learners become more engaged in the local practice, they adopt a new identity as a more competent member. Withdrawal from the community, or non-participation, as Wenger further brings forth in 1998, connects to identity development: “we not only produce our identity through the practice we engage in, but we also define ourselves through practice we do not engage in. Our identities are
constituted not only by what we are but also by what we are not” (p. 164).

There are many similarities between the community of practice framework and Language Socialization Theory. Swain (2007) also points to the compatibility of the two frameworks as both emphasize situated learning, consider learning as processes of moving from the peripheral to the central in community, and connect to learners’ identity construction in relation to local communities. Indeed, many researchers have combined and navigated smoothly between the two conceptual frameworks (Swain, 2007).

Second Language Socialization Research

Several of the central concepts of Language Socialization Theory have been discussed by a number of second language researchers. Many empirical studies have contributed to more complex views and insights about the key constructs in the theoretical framework. Discussions around access and participation, the expert and novice relationship, learners’ agency, identity and transformation have led to better understandings of second language teaching and learning.

Access and Participation

One of the difficulties second language learners have when engaging in classroom practice is the lack of access to knowledge that is imbedded in local culture. As Ortega (2009, p. 237) puts it, “when the assumed shared knowledge is not shared”, participation is obstructed. Duff’s (2004) study on high school social classes demonstrates how pop culture is constantly introduced into classroom discourse to engage students. Topics such as The Simpsons or Seinfeld are elaborated on by teachers and local students. However, second language students are often excluded in these discussions. Duff’s analysis which focuses on the intertextuality of classroom discourse also shows that pop culture topics are mentioned across classes and are interwoven in surrounding texts. Therefore, further difficulties are created for second language students, especially newcomers, as it requires them to make quick connections to references across classes (Duff, 2001). While students who are more proficient in English can follow the discussions, they seldom participate in these discussions. For newcomers, the content, however, is incomprehensible. What is more surprising in Duff’s study is that teachers
and local students are not aware of these newcomers’ difficulties but blame them for not trying hard enough.

Second language research has also shown that learners may not experience the same degree of access and participation because the experts in the community are not equally supportive and encouraging. Some experts may be welcoming and accepting, while others, for a variety of reasons, may not be as accommodating. The power relations that exist between experts and novices influence the learners’ access and participation.

A study by Morita (2004) describes how 6 Japanese graduate students negotiate their participation in class at a Canadian university. One of the participants, Rie, had very different experiences in the two courses that she took. Although she was very interested in both of the courses and the courses were similar in content, format, class sizes and student numbers, her experience in the two differed markedly. In Course J, she was able to participate actively and make meaningful contributions. Her perspective as a minority student was appreciated and valued. As Rie wrote in a report for Morita’s study:

In the beginning I was concerned that my perspectives might be too foreign for the class, but people seemed to listen to me with respect and they gave me positive feedback. . . . The biggest difference between this course and the other courses I took this term is that I could feel my own presence in this course (p. 592).

However, in Course F, she experienced challenges in comprehending course readings, class discussions and videos displayed in the class. The topics and theories were beyond her. Although she adopted a range of strategies against being marginalized, the efforts were in vain. For example, in class, she voiced her needs, trying to make the instructor realize that she could not follow the class. She also asked her instructor to adjust the course content so as to accommodate second language students like her. However, the negotiation was not successful. The instructor replied that she had made the greatest accommodation possible. Any further trying would only slow down the class. The instructor pointed out that what Rie faced was a language barrier. Morita proposes that this exchange between Rie and her instructor is an “implicit negotiation of each other’s roles, statuses, or power” (p. 593). The participation of Rie in the two different courses reveals how participation in the academic community is negotiated and
co-constructed by the members. Although Rie’s resistance did not change her marginalized position in class, it is important to recognize her fight against educational inequality (Morita, 2004).

As Rie in Morita’s study actively engaged in negotiation with her teacher, learners in the socialization process can exercise agency to modify their experience. In this sense, participation is co-constructed.

A study conducted by Duff (2002) documents how a teacher deliberately offered speaking opportunities to ESL students in a mainstream classroom, expecting them to make cultural connections to certain topics. However, the ESL students in the class did not necessarily participate in class discussions as actively as the teacher expected. Instead, they usually made their contribution after native English-speaking students, and their contributions tended to be “short, muted, tentative and often inaccessible to others”. Duff’s interview data further revealed the tension in the multicultural classroom. ESL students were afraid of being criticized by their classmates because of their English. However, their quietness and passiveness in class were not appreciated by native English-speaking students who viewed them as having a lack of motivation and being intimidated and unwilling to contribute.

Novice and Expert Relationships

As the studies reviewed above show, access and participation are restricted by power relations between novices and experts. However, it is also important to note that the status of “experts” and “novices” is contingent on and emerges during social interaction. In other words, native speakers of English are not inherently “experts”. Non-native speakers of English are not inherently “novices”. The relationships between novices and experts are not predetermined by individuals’ identities as native and non-native speakers of English, but are negotiated in interaction (Vickers, 2010). Taking this post-structuralist view, Vickers, in his study, closely examined how native speakers of English gained their status as experts and second language learners took on the status of novices. Vickers found that the native speakers of English in his study gained their expert status because they had prior access to opportunities to engage in the local practice and forms of interactions. The language learners in the study, however, did not have these
opportunities.

Indeed, the structure of expert and novice relationships involves negotiations between both parties. In a study done by Talmy (2008), the distinction of experts and novices became so blurred that the direction of socialization became contingent and multi-directional. Talmy investigated ESL classes at a multilingual public high school in Hawaii and found that school sanctioned routine activities were continuously subverted by ESL students. Teachers’ efforts to socialize these students constantly failed. Furthermore, the teachers had to extend assignment deadlines, cancel homework, and offer study sessions. In such a case, Talmy claimed that it was hard to distinguish whether the teachers or the students were the “experts”, as well as determine the “target community”, and who was being socialized into whose community. Talmy therefore argued that socialization is inherently a contingent process.

Another interesting finding about expert and novice roles is proposed in studies done by Rymes (2003 & 2004). Rymes found that when language learners drew on their prior knowledge to temporarily take on an expert role, it was an important opportunity for language acquisition. In her study, Rymes traced the language learning of a kindergarten boy from Costa Rica called Rene. Rene was very active in personality and popular among his classmates. However, during reading activities, he became very “shy”. Rymes later found that his “shyness” was co-constructed by teachers’ talk and other students’ active participation. However, in one class when the teacher was helping him to sound out the word “chancy”, Rene learnt it quickly. He was able to connect the word to his prior knowledge gained from pop culture, Chansey and Pokemon. He also initiated talk immediately with his classmate who shared the knowledge. Rymes argues that there are many moments like this in class when teachers’ discourse is undermined while students’ competence is revealed. Recognizing these moments and letting students take expert roles can be productive for both students and teachers.

**Learners’ Identity and Agency**

An underlying assumption of the Language Socialization Theory is that language and culture have an intertwined relationship. When learners acquire a language, they also acquire the culture, values and beliefs of the local community. Personal transformation
and the acquisition of a new identity are assumed as inevitable. However, second language socialization is more complicated than first language socialization because learners have been socialized into their home values and cultures before they came to their new second language community (Shi, 2010). Therefore, learners may experience conflicts in values and beliefs. In some cases, they successfully develop new identities as they become competent members of the second language community. In other cases they may resist internalizing certain aspects of the local culture and struggle with multiple identities.

McKay and Wong’s (1996) research study focused on 4 Mandarin-speaking immigrant adolescents reveals the tensions that exist among the multiple discourses which are imposed on second language students and the multiple identities with which the students are struggling. A student in the study, Wang, who came from Mainland China, is a typical example. When Wang came to the U.S., his parents were unskilled and found that they had few employment options. At school, Wang found himself in a powerless position. Compared with his Taiwanese peers, he did not have affluent parents who could afford cars to pick him up after school or buy him expensive toys. Although Wang went to a key school in China, this previous experience as an elite student was not recognized by his American teacher. Therefore, Wang did not enjoy a favorable position in the model minority discourse to which Asian students are normally ascribed. In addition, a negative racial stereotype was also imposed upon his entry into the ESL school. His teacher considered him as morally dishonest and disruptive when he constantly spoke out of turn and said “yes” to the questions he did not understand. The Chinese cultural nationalist discourse seemed to be the only area where Wang could hope to fight against his powerless position. As a mainlander, he considered himself as the “real Chinese” and made fun of his Taiwanese peers as inferior. He also picked up Cantonese phrases quickly as an attempt to keep his status in the Chinese community. However, these strategies were not very helpful. On several occasions his teacher saw Wang being bullied by his peers. Wang’s initial passion for learning English was destroyed, and he finally gave up on himself and “looked dispirited and did not speak much even when approached” (p. 600). He finally left the school at the end of the first year. As McKay and Wong claim, Wang represents students who are “caught in the demands made by multiple discourses in [the]
environment” (p. 598) and “[fail] to develop identities that would allow him to feel competent, appreciated, and valued as a social being” (p. 600).

The identity aspect in language socialization also offers an alternative explanation for the situations in which second language learners are silenced or resist participating in the local community. Norton (2001) analyzed the non-participation of second language learners based on the data she collected from her 1993’s groundbreaking work on social identity and investment. One of Norton’s participants in the study was a Peruvian woman, Felicia. Felicia had an unpleasant experience in her ESL class. One day, her teacher required all the students to share with the class some information about their countries. After the class, the teacher listed the main ideas that were brought up. However, the teacher neglected what Felicia mentioned about Peru. Felicia was angry and asked her teacher why she ignored her country on purpose. The response that she got was that Peru was not a major country. After this, Felicia never came back to the class. Norton explained that what Felicia did could not simply be seen as an overreaction. Instead, her life experience in her county and in Canada provided a context for the understanding of her reaction. Felicia was very unwilling to leave her country. In Peru, she had an identity as the wife of a wealthy businessman. She left Peru only because of the increasingly unstable social situation there. In Canada, her husband was unemployed. The family was deprived of the privileges they used to enjoy. Their living standard decreased and Felicia needed to work at a recreational center (Peirce, 1993). According to Norton’s explanation, this experience made Felicia value her Peruvian identity more strongly and made her engage in a Peruvian community in her mind, namely an “imagined community” (Wenger, 1998). However, this imagined community was not accessible to the teacher. The teacher’s marginalization of Peru created more serious conflicts than what the teacher could know. Felicia’s extreme non-participation in the local community was a bid to align with her Peruvian identity.

Identity construction is an important dynamic that drives second language learners to engage in or withdraw from the local community. Identity construction is not a smooth process as the insights revealed by the two above studies demonstrate. It is instead “multiple, a site of struggle and changing over time” (Peirce, 1993, p. 14).
Second Language Socialization in Western University Contexts

Very few studies of second language socialization have been completed in Western university context. In addition to Morita’s (2004) study that has been reviewed above, other studies include Shi (2010), Morita (2009), Vickers (2007), Zappa-Hollman (2007), and Morita (2000).

Shi (2010) investigated how a Chinese MBA student, Cai, socialized into an American negotiation course. The author recorded and analyzed the episodes of the negotiation class and identified some key stages in Cai’s socialization process. According to Shi, at the beginning the student adopted a “rather aggressive and persistent negotiation approach” to engage in the classroom negotiation activities with her classmates (p. 2478). This approach was what Cai had been socialized into in her prior education and profession. Her quality of being competitive was what enabled Cai to stand out amid the fierce competition in China and come to the MBA class in the first place. However, this approach did not conform to the win-win negotiation strategy that the course valued. Realizing the local expectations and values, although reluctant to embrace them, Cai made adjustment. She hesitantly compromised at the behaviour level at first and then became more and more receptive to the win-win strategy. In the analysis, Shi took a cross-cultural transfer perspective and focused on how the Chinese culture impacted Cai’s socialization.

Both the Morita (2009) and Morita (2004) are based on the findings of her PhD dissertation research. While the article in 2004 reports on 6 female Japanese students’ socialization experience, the article published in 2009 focuses on a male Japanese student. Findings suggest that in addition to language and culture, gender discourse also plays a role in socialization.

In Vickers’ (2007) study, he reports on a group of electronic and computer engineering students who met regularly and cooperated on designing an electronic device. Vickers found that some features in the interactional process defined the non-native speaker as a novice and the other 5 members of the group who were native speakers as experts. Vickers studied combined both qualitative and quantitative data. In his qualitative data, Vickers examined features such as topic establishment, topic control, seeking information, providing information, etc. In his quantitative data, he used
conversation analysis to analyze the frequencies of certain sequences.

Both Zappa-Hollman (2007) and Morita (2000) investigated the academic presentations of graduate students. Zappa-Hollman’s study placed great emphasis on the challenges second language students encounter in doing presentations and the strategies they developed to cope with the challenges. The challenges were linguistic, sociocultural and psychological in nature. Students, however, were aware of these difficulties and held positive attitudes towards presentations perceiving them as opportunities to improve their oral academic speaking. They also developed a wide inventory of strategies, including seeking help from more experienced classmates, choosing familiar topics, preparing outlines or scripts, rehearsing, choosing to be among the first presenters, etc. Another interesting finding mentioned in the study is that native students were also aware of their less proficient peers’ difficulties, and thus avoided challenging them by only asking very simple questions that non-native speakers could easily elaborate on.

Morita’s (2000) study led to findings similar to those of Zappa-Hollman’s (2007) study regarding the challenges and the strategies of non-native speakers. However, she also revealed that presentations offered students chances to be experts for one day and to become sources of knowledge for others. In this sense, the oral academic presentation, instead of being a straightforward activity, is a “complex cognitive and sociolinguistic phenomena”, which can contribute to the potential conflictual negotiations of academic classrooms.

Summary

As the above review shows, second language socialization is a complex process, in which negotiation of access and participation is involved. At the same time, second language learners, instead of being passively positioned, may also exercise their agency to change the dynamics of power relations. The identities constructed and negotiated during the process are potentially full of conflict and sites of struggle.

The language socialization framework is suitable for my study because of its emphasis on the role of environment in language learning. Socialization is not considered independent of context, but involved how individuals interact within a given context. The context of socialization can include both material resources that impact learning and the
social relations that learners find themselves in (Young, 2008). My study focuses on the
textual content extracted for it.
language learning experiences of 4 Chinese graduate students in Canadian classrooms. I
explore the affordances and constraints of their classrooms that impact their learning as
well as the way these students interact with these environmental factors. Therefore, the
Language Socialization Theory provides me a useful lens for this study.

At the same time, there are very few studies that investigate learners’
socialization at the university level. Therefore, it is also my hope to help fill this gap.

That I refer to these 4 new students as novices in the Western classroom does not
mean that they do not have prior experience in classroom discussions. As my data shows,
1 of my participants has more knowledge and prior experience in classroom discussions
than the other 3. The difficulties the 4 students experience may also be shared by other
native speakers of English. However, these students are not only new to the Western
classroom, but also new to the language and culture. Therefore, they can be considered
novices in two areas and may experience a “double socialization” process (Li, 2000, p.
62).
Chapter 3: Issues Related to Chinese Students in Western Universities

In this chapter, I review studies related to Chinese students in Western universities. As the review shows, in response to the increasing number of Chinese students in Western universities in recent years, there is a discussion in the literature about Chinese students’ academic competence and its relation to Chinese culture. There has been a call among researchers to examine Chinese students’ classroom behaviour from a biological perspective instead of looking at it solely through a cultural lens.

The surge of Chinese students in Western universities in the few years has generated discussions among researchers. For example, Jin and Cortazzi (2006) in their study mention the demographic changes of Chinese students in the West. As they explain, Chinese students studying abroad in recent years are more diverse in terms of their academic competence. While in the mid-80s, most of them were considered as the elite group, selected and funded by the Chinese Government for their overseas education, more recently, many of them are from single child families in which the parents did not in most cases receive quality education due to the Cultural Revolution in mid-60s. These students are self-funded and have more diverse motives for studying abroad as well as a wider range of academic abilities. Due to the social-academic shifts, Chinese students are more likely to face academic challenges.

Edwards, Ran and Li (2007)’s study revealed the concerns of Western educators regarding Chinese students’ academic literacy. As their focus group discussion data shows, there is high level of concerns among teachers about Chinese students’ academic writing and reading. Limited writing skills force students to rely greatly on editors. However, the ethical issue for the editors – or even some university professors – is that they find it hard to draw the line between editing and substantially rewriting the papers. In addition, the substantial amount of reading required in university-level courses also causes tremendous difficulties for Chinese students. It is reported that although some students achieve IELTS (International English Language Testing Systems) scores of 6.5 or even 7, they can only get through a few pages of academic reading at a time.

While many of the challenges faced by these students are attributed to linguistic problems, other difficulties are said to result from differences in learning strategies and
skills. A common observation is that Chinese learning styles emphasize rote memory or surface learning. Instead of learning to think creatively and critically, students are well-trained in memorization for taking exams (Biggs, 1996). It also appears that instead of finding answers themselves by independent learning, they expect to be told what to do (Coverdale-Jones, 2006). Skills -- such as using library resources or choosing what to read -- are often seen as inadequate.

Some Western educators have sympathy for Chinese learners’ struggles in Western classrooms. At the same time, they are also concerned that accepting students with low English proficiency will lead to a deterioration of admission standards, since many educators later find themselves compromising the value of university credentials (Edwards et al., 2007). Others, however, argue that having the same expectations for second language learners as for the native English speakers is problematic. Native English speakers and second language learners are on an “uneven playing field” (Clark & Gieve, 2006). While students must work to fit into a Western education system, the system also has the responsibility to adapt and meet the special needs of these students. Since Western classrooms are increasingly filled with international students, it is important to view international students as contributors to multicultural classrooms rather than as a group of students with deficiencies and limitations (ibid, 2006).

**Chinese Students and Chinese Culture**

To better serve students’ needs and to increase mutual understanding between Chinese students and Western educators, a growing body of literature is devoted to explaining Chinese students’ behaviours from the perspective of Chinese culture, or to be more specific, the philosophy of Confucianism. Most of the studies are framed by this culture of learning. That is to say, there is a cultural dimension for the problems of a homogenous group. For example, it is explained that in the Chinese culture, teachers hold absolute authority. Asking questions in class can mean questioning the teacher’s authority. In terms of relying on rote memory in learning, as Jin and Cortazzi (2006) mention, rote memory in Chinese culture is the means but not the ends of learning. Reciting a text is a necessary process to achieve understanding. To provide evidence, Jin and Cortazzi (2006) also cite the doctrine of Zhuxi (1130—1200), an ancient Chinese philosopher:
In learning we have to read for ourselves so that the understanding we reach is personally meaningful. Nowadays, however, people read simply for the sake of the civil service examinations... reading must be an experience personally meaningful to the self... in reading we must first become intimately familiar with the text so that its words seems to come from our own mouths. We should then continue to reflect on it so that its ideas seem to come from our own minds. Only then can there be real understanding.

(Jin and Cortazzi cite Gardner’s translation: Gardner, 1990, 17, 148, 43)

In writing, the values and rules between Chinese and Western culture are even more distinct. For example, Confucian heritage values the use of well-documented and extensive citations in writing, especially from well-known writers. However, the sources do not need to be mentioned because any well-educated reader should be able to recognize them. In addition, due to cultural influence, Chinese students tend to organize writing in an inductive way by providing background information before main points (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). However, this pattern of organization does not conform to Western academic conventions and tends to confuse readers (ibid, 2006).

While an understanding of the Chinese culture of learning may help to explain some of the learning styles and behaviours of Chinese students, this perspective has also been criticized in recent years. There are a few drawbacks of this “large culture” (Holiday, 1999) perspective that should be pointed out. First of all, this perspective sees culture as fixed and rigid instead of evolving and fluid. In these studies, Chinese culture is perceived as equal to ancient Chinese philosophers’ doctrines. Thus, citations of Confucius’ words or some other philosophers are used as the proof of Chinese culture. However, as culture is changing, what is understood and practiced in contemporary China is dramatically different from what was taught via Confucian doctrines in the past. This is especially true in the past 30 years as China has gone through a period of great social and economic change. As Clark and Gieve (2006) point out:

The possibility of cultural change associated with social, political and economic changes in China in the recent past is not usually discussed within applied linguistics...issues as the impact of the one-child policy on parental pressure on children and education providers alike, the effects of ‘diploma inflation’, the consequences of urbanisation and wealth inequality, and the effect of entering the global economy on opportunities for cultural critique; and the impact of ICT on east Asian cultural approaches to learning...(p. 58)
A study undertaken by Shi (2006) provides some empirical support for this view. Shi administered a large-scale questionnaire with 400 Chinese students who intended to study abroad. Based on her results, Shi claims that contemporary Chinese students are very different from Chinese students in some previous studies. Chinese students demonstrate many similar characteristics to their Western counterparts. Although some traditional features still persist, Chinese students now place more value on being “active learners” and prefer “more interactive relationships with teachers”.

Second, the causal relationship between Chinese students’ behaviour in Western academic environments and Chinese culture may be an overly strong assertion. As Kumaravadivelu (2003) claims, second language students’ classroom behaviour can result from multiple factors, ranging from economic and social reasons to institutional and individual reasons. In fact, a study conducted by Kumaravadivelu (1990) shows that situational reasons including “teachers’ pedagogic orientation”, “practical management of turn allocation”, and “learners’ disposition and motivation” can also be powerful in shaping classroom interaction.

Furthermore, attributing Chinese students’ behaviours to Chinese culture may also risk essentializing Chinese learners and blinding us to individual differences. This perspective tends to consider Chinese students as a homogeneous group, ignoring the diversity of age, gender, social status, and economic and regional cultural backgrounds. China, after all, has more than one billion people; to assume that this is a homogeneous group stretches the boundaries of credibility. As Littlewood (2000) mentions, the differences within a cultural group could be greater than differences across cultural groups. In fact, some researchers have even questioned whether there is such a phenomenon as “the Chinese learners” (Coverdale-Jones, 2006), suggesting that it is actually more of a stereotype that educators feel hard to avoid. It is somehow appealing to blame the problem on cultural attributes which are hard to work on and change.

It seems obvious from the literature that there is a conflict between maintaining Western academic standards and embracing cultural diversity. Explaining Chinese students’ behaviours from the perspective of Chinese culture can help to enhance the understanding of Chinese students. The perspective is, however, inadequate on its own. Some serious inadequacies include a lack of understanding of individual differences
within the Chinese cultural group and of local contextual factors that also significantly contribute to Chinese students’ classroom participation.

**Learners’ Own Voices**

Instead of interpreting students’ behaviour in classrooms, some researchers are interested in obtaining first-hand explanations by investigating students’ opinions about their cultural beliefs and values. Many of these studies employ large-scale surveys or questionnaires. The results are often inconsistent with the usual impression that Western educators have of Chinese students (Littlewood, 2000; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Kember & Gow, 1991). It seems that Chinese students in these studies are either quite active learners who prefer class discussions and value deep learning strategies or hold very similar study-related beliefs to their Western counterparts.

There are also a few qualitative case studies that involve multiple data collection methods such as interviews, long-term classroom observation, and informal meetings. Compared with the survey studies mentioned earlier, these smaller-scale qualitative studies lead to richer data and are more effective in capturing students’ voices. Among the few studies of this type is Liu’s (2001) study on Asian students’ classroom participation patterns in the US.

Liu’s qualitative case study is a good example of this in that its findings highlight the individual differences among second language students. The 4 students from Mainland China in Liu’s study display different classroom participation patterns. Although none of them, according to Liu, are active students, they keep silent to various degrees and for various reasons.

One of the participants is a Chinese geology scholar who used to be a visiting professor in a German university. According to Liu’s description, the geology scholar always carried “mysterious smiles” and was very “persistent and inquisitive”. In class, he was very concerned about the quality of his contributions. He only spoke up when he was fully confident about his knowledge and viewpoints. For him, asking low quality questions would not help to build meaningful discussions. As the scholar put it in an interview:
I would think that students should not ask a certain question of low quality. But I would say that some of my classmates, especially some American classmates would not care about classmates’ feeling when they want to ask questions… (p. 89).

The questions I raise will often initiate a heated discussion in class… So they think high of my questions, and they think that my good quality questions are often a step further of the class content (p. 41).

According to the scholar, “it is sometimes worth waiting if you have questions because someone in class will probably ask the same questions you have in mind” (Liu, 2002, p. 42). Thus, although silent, he still benefited from class discussions and could avoid making mistakes. For the geologist, seizing the right moment to participate was crucial. It was the time to demonstrate his knowledge as well as to gain mianzi, the public face, a Chinese concept that refers to honor and reputation. However, it was not easy to do so, as the scholar, like many other Chinese students, often rehearsed his speech in his mind first. For various other reasons, many questions which he intended to ask in class had to be asked after class.

Another case is an ecologist who held very negative viewpoints about the Chinese education system and, therefore, greatly treasured his opportunities to study abroad. He is a “very eager learner” and “receptive absorber” in the US class. Unlike the geology scholar, the ecologist was more influenced by contextual factors such as class size, teaching methodology and the accent of instructors. He also paid great attention to textbooks and usually asked questions relating to them. However, he could not relate to the jokes and small talks heavily grounded in American culture. The interview data below shows his challenges:

Sometimes I really cannot follow some instructors when they talk a lot of things beyond the textbook, so they will talk about daily life and some other things which I cannot understand. Sometimes, I will try to understand, and sometimes I will just read the textbook, I know it is not related to the textbook (p. 95).

Jian and Nan, the other two cases Liu reports on, were very anxious about their English competence. Asking professors questions about things that they did not understand was their last choice. As Liu observes, to avoid embarrassment due to their
limited English, they would be very careful and always turn to their textbooks first for answers before asking classmates or professors.

The study conducted by Tran (2008) indicates that Chinese students are highly conscious of cultural influences and are capable of employing a variety of strategies to unpack assignment expectations and meet disciplinary requirements. Among the 4 students on whom Tran focuses, five patterns of coping strategies emerge: consulting writing guidelines, asking teachers questions, seeking support services at the university, closely following model examples, and observing lecturers’ personal preferences.

One of the students compared her past educational experience with Western norms:

In China, the teachers will give you specific guidance about how to write, very detailed one..., so before you start writing you already have an idea, an outline of it…. But here I think the difference is the students have more authority, more freedom [by] the teachers, unless you come to them. I came to A [the lecturer] one week before the deadline because I am too frustrated, I do not know what to do. I do not know if I could come up with the article before the deadline. But if you do not come to them, they do not come to you and offer any guidance in terms of your writing, so the students are encouraged to struggle by themselves… (p. 251).

Another student in the study illustrates a different technique in coping with the difficulties:

According to my own experience in their classes, I think you know what kind of person [the lecturer is] and what you are supposed to be. According to your understanding I think. It’s hard to describe but you have your feelings towards different lecturers, what kind of person she or he is and what kinds of things she or he will expect (p. 254).

Studies examining students’ voices capture the struggles that each specific individual has and the agency they are able to mobilize to negotiate their participation in Western academic discourse. The findings imply that the difficulties and coping strategies of second language students are locally constructed rather than culturally preset. As Clark and Gieve (2006) claim, instead of generalizing an identity for all Chinese learners, we
can also understand learners as individuals who hold certain values and beliefs. When they encounter the Western academic environment, they might hold on to some of their beliefs while giving up or modifying others. Their experience is constructed by the specific context, and at the same time, these learners also contribute to the specific contexts.

To respond to the call in the literature, the present study looks at students’ identities as fluid and evolving (Norton, 1997) rather than predetermined by the Chinese culture. I examine how each student constructs his or her identity and how their collective cultural and historical backgrounds interact with the classroom environment instead of imposing the identity of “the Chinese learner” on them.
Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter, I explain and provide a rationale for my research method. I also describe my research design, the participants, data collection methods and data analysis. My position as a qualitative researcher, my relationship with the participants and ethical issues are also addressed.

**Qualitative Methodology and This Study**

This study employs a qualitative methodology. According to Creswell (2007), a series of philosophical assumptions determine the choice of qualitative methodology. Qualitative research studies human beings and the social society. It embraces the idea that multiple realities exist among different individuals. Researchers strive to “get as close as possible to the participants being studied” (p. 18). They immerse in research fields so as to capture the realities from research participants’ perspectives. Qualitative inquiry also assumes that knowledge is value-laden. Researchers’ backgrounds and positions shape and influence their studies. Therefore, researchers actively inform readers about their relevant history and perspectives. This is also considered to add validity to qualitative studies. The imbedded methodological assumption means research designs are inductive and emerging, developing as a study evolves.

Creswell (2007) also lists a range of reasons for conducting qualitative research. According to him, qualitative research “explores” issues that relate to human beings and intends to give voice to certain groups of people; it pursues a “complex” and “detailed” understanding of the issues and pays close attention to contexts and settings where participants are situated; it also takes measures to minimize the power hierarchy between researchers and participants (Creswell, 1998).

This attempts to describe 4 Chinese students’ experiences in classrooms at a Canadian university. I explore what it is like for them to study in a different country, negotiate their views in multicultural classrooms while they are speaking English, a second or additional language. I assume that while their historical, cultural and social backgrounds influence and shape their classroom practice, reality for them is also co-constructed by their interlocutors when they are engaging in social interaction (Duff,
I attempt to provide a detailed and complex understanding of the underlying meanings in the classroom contexts and give voice to the 4 participants and allow them to describe their lived experiences in their own words.

While a researchers’ philosophical orientation determines whether or not to use a qualitative design, the research questions they propose shape the research methods being employed. Due to the focus of my research and the questions proposed, among the various approaches that fall into the category of qualitative research, I chose to design this research as a multiple case study.

**Case Study Approach and Research Questions**

As Merriam (1998) explains, case study design focuses on the understanding of the context and the meanings for participants in the contexts. It is process-orientated with an interest in discovery. It emphasizes the context as a whole rather than a specific variable in the context. The researcher aims to “uncover the interaction of factors characteristic of the phenomenon” (Merriam, 1998, p. 29). Yin (2003) also observes that case study is suitable when the phenomenon’s variables cannot be separated from their contexts.

Merriam further defines the special features of qualitative case studies by proposing its three characteristics: “particularistic”, “descriptive” and “heuristic” (p. 29). It is “particularistic” in that the choice of research subject is unique. It is “descriptive” because the final report features thick description of the cases. It is “heuristic” due to the new meanings researchers attempt to bring about.

In addition, Braine (2002) emphasizes that case studies are most suitable for investigating second language students’ academic literacy – because of its descriptive and dynamic nature, it can capture students’ voice, their coping strategies and how their individual characteristics interact with the learning environment.

The central issue in the case study approach is to define the case and its boundaries. A case needs to be “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). The boundaries can be defined by the time and the place of data analysis (Creswell, 2007).

The “cases” in my study are defined as each of the 4 newly-arrived Chinese
students. I look at each individual as a single unit. The cases are also bounded in that the 4 participants were studying at a same school in a similar educational program and the data collection period of the study lasted for 4 months. It is a multiple case study of Chinese international students who first encounter Western classrooms. In this study, I explore the interaction of different factors that shape these 4 students’ classroom participation. I seek to portray the cases comprehensively. I also conduct a cross-case analysis by looking for commonalities and differences across the 4 students’ experiences. Although I do not intend to generalize my conclusion to a larger population, the comparison is useful for achieving a more in-depth understanding.

**Research Contexts**

In this study, I describe the academic experience of 4 international students from mainland China who study at an educational department in a major university in Canada. The department in the university offers a series of graduate programs in education. The school is also considerably multicultural with students and faculty from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The past few years have seen an increasing number of Chinese students being accepted by the department, particularly in programs at the Masters’ level. Many of the Chinese students admitted are younger than the average of students admitted to these programs. Many of these students are international students and usually their families are the main financial supporters. Compared with other departments at the university, the Education Department has far fewer Chinese students. In undergraduate programs in departments such as business and engineering, Chinese students sometimes dominate. However, the department does reflect the demographic changes in the school and university population in many large cities in Canada (Jun, 2010).

One of the reasons for choosing this department is that classroom discussions are widely used in their graduate programs. In addition, because my study focuses on the participation and socialization of Chinese students in discussions in multicultural classrooms, it was important to locate the study in a department with some Chinese students rather than one where this group dominates in terms of enrolled students. Compared to other departments, the number of Chinese students in this department is
appropriate: it is big enough to allow me to conduct a multiple case study of newly arrived Chinese students; and it is small enough that Chinese students are not the majority. In addition, because of my background in education, I feel that I can draw on my tacit knowledge to acquire a better understanding of the research context.

I am interested in Chinese students’ English learning and socialization experiences in Western universities partially because of my background. I am a Chinese international student and had similar experiences to those of my participants before I came to Canada. When I was a middle school student, studying abroad became very popular in some major cities of China, including my hometown, Hangzhou, located in the southeast of the country. Many of my classmates and people in my circle of friends went overseas for their high school or university education. At that time, the idea of going abroad and seeing the world grew in my heart.

Just as with 2 of my participants, I studied English as my undergraduate major. During these years, I developed a keen interest in the English language. However, I found the opportunities to practice and use English very limited. Most of the students in our department watched the same American movies or dramas over and over again in order to expose themselves to authentic English. The few native English speaking teachers in the department always found themselves overwhelmed by warm and needy invitations to students’ activities. My interest in the language and the limited opportunities to practice it increased my hope to go to an English-speaking country. At the same time, more and more people who studied abroad returned to China. They brought back their stories from the other side of the world. Some of them were stories full of joy and rewards. Others were filled with tears and regrets. I was finally determined by the mixed messages to explore the world and find the answer on my own.

In 2008, 1 year after I graduated from my university, I came to Canada. My first year in Western classrooms was particularly challenging, but I also experienced opportunities to grow and reflect on the phenomenon of studying abroad and learning English. This process of self-reflection inspired me to record and explore other students’ voices and their experiences in Western classrooms.
The Participants

As the literature review in Chapter 2 indicates, there is a general gap in the research addressing second language students’ participation in classroom discussions in a mainstream classroom. Research examining academic oral discourse at the graduate level is even rarer. To fill this gap, I recruited 4 participants who were all graduate students from Mainland China. I also selected students who were new to Western academic culture (i.e., have not studied in an English-speaking country before coming to Canada) in order to see how they experience and negotiate the new system. As I had planned to recruit only a small number of participants and the department only admitted a few new Chinese students to begin their graduate program in 2009, I approached these new Chinese students personally at the department orientation and also at the welcome party organized by the Chinese student community at the department in September, 2009. I approached them individually and informed them of my research plan. Three of them, Zhiling (pseudonym), Ziyi (pseudonym), and Yao (pseudonym) showed interests in my research. Ming (pseudonym), Ziyi (pseudonym), and Yao (pseudonym) showed interests in my research.

I began formal recruitment and data collection in February 2010. At that time, I approached these 3 students again and also emailed them the consent form (Appendix A) and the background questionnaire (Appendix B). After they officially agreed to participate in this research, I contacted their course instructors. At this point, Yao’s instructor introduced me to my 4th participant, Ming (pseudonym). Ming was in the same class as Yao. Different from the other 3 participants who had completed one semester of their programs by that time, Ming had just arrived in Canada. He was a PhD student in China and came to Canada as a visiting scholar for 1 year. Although I had planned to investigate only three cases, I recruited Ming in case of the other participants dropped out. With all 4 students agreeing to see the research through to completion, this study reports on the experiences of the 4 participants, all of whom are in their mid 20s.

Data Collection

As Yin (2003) claims, the major strength of a case study is the opportunity to integrate many different sources of evidence. In this study, multiple data collection methods were used to explore different facets of the research questions and also to triangulate evidence. The methods I used included: classroom observation, field notes and
audio recordings, individual and focus group interviews. Some class materials such as syllabi, discussion questions and readings were also collected. The following table (Table 1) summarizes the data collection methods and their purposes.

**Classroom Observation**

The major advantage of direct observation is that it can provide first-hand information about the topic being studied. I observed the 4 participants in one of the courses they took from January 2010 to the end of March 2010. I planned to start the observation from the beginning of their courses. However, due to a delay in getting approval from the Ethical Review Board, I started observation in Week 6 of their courses. I observed Zhiling in a course in the area of second language learning, and Ziyi in an introductory course in adult education. Yao and Ming were taking the same course related to knowledge media, so I observed both of them together in that course.

The anonymity of the 4 participants was protected. The focus of my observation was not identified. To avoid singling out the participants in their classes, the title of the research used on the consent form distributed to the course instructor and all the students in each class was less specific than the current title. I used a title that did not indicate I intended to focus on Chinese students, but rather second language students. The core participants did not appear to be anxious when I was present in their classrooms. This could partially be because of the relationship we had established before I entered the field or because of the fact they were graduate students and had been exposed to and had likely engaged in research before. I found students in these courses were also very relaxed when I was present. Occasionally, we would talk before class or during breaks. I did not feel that my presence was disruptive or disturbing for them.

I observed each of the three classes six times between mid February until the end of March, 2010. My research questions and the theoretical frameworks provided me with a lens during the observation. My focus was mainly on the participation patterns of the 4 Chinese students. This included when they contributed, what they contributed, the way their instructors and other students responded to their contribution during classroom discussions, and the general classroom contexts.
Table 1  
Data Collection Methods

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<tr>
<th>Data Collection Methods</th>
<th>Purpose of Data Collection</th>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom observation</td>
<td>• The nature of Chinese students’ classroom participation</td>
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<td>• Dynamics of classrooms</td>
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<td>• Classroom discourse</td>
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<td>Field notes</td>
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<td>Group interviews</td>
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<td>Individual interviews</td>
<td>• Students’ classroom experience</td>
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<td>Course materials</td>
<td>• Course expectations</td>
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<td>• Course descriptions</td>
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I took field notes on the spot and organized my handwritten scrawls into typed documents after the observation. The field notes included the things I saw and heard, as well as my comments and my reflection. Among the six classes I observed in each of the three courses, half of them were also audio-recorded. With the agreement of the course instructors, I was able to choose which courses to record. Therefore I randomly selected three classes for recording.

**Individual and Focus Group Interviews**

While the observation helped me acquire the contextual first-hand information, the advantage of interview data allowed me to “move back and forth in time” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 p. 273). I conducted individual in-depth interviews with the 4 participants when the class observations were nearly complete. Some of the interview questions were based on the observation and my field notes. The purposes of the interviews were to elicit participants’ thoughts and reflections about their classroom performance and to voice their positions and opinions.
The individual interviews were semi-structured. The interview questions (Appendix C) were sent to them in advance so that the participants could prepare and be more relaxed during the interview. Except for the interview with Ziyi, who preferred speaking in English, the other three interviews were all in Chinese. I let my participants choose the location of interview. The interviews with Ziyi and Zhiling took place at my apartment, while the interviews with Yao and Ming were in a quiet interview room at their university. I started the interview with some general questions about their background and then gradually moved to more specific questions about their classroom participation. I did not control the duration of the interview. I tried not to interrupt the participants and instead let their narrative flow. The interviews were also audio-recorded. After each interview, I kept in touch with 3 of my participants through email and online via instant messaging, whereas with the 4th participant Ziyi, I had a short face-to-face follow-up conversation which was recorded with her agreement. I followed up to clarify information from the interviews as necessary.

I also conducted a focus group interview (Appendix D) with these 4 participants in May, 2010. The focus group interview took place one month after I had finished transcription and some preliminary analysis of the individual interview data. The purpose of the focus group interview was to allow the dynamics of group interaction to enrich data. Based on the previous individual interview data, I further refined the interview protocol. I kept some core questions about class discussions, but eliminated factual questions that participants had already responded to such as “Are classroom discussions often used in the courses you have taken?” I also added some questions that I felt deserved further exploration. For example, in the previous individual interviews, all my participants alluded to their life outside of the classroom. I felt that their activities beyond the classroom and specifically, their socialization with classmates outside of the classroom might affect their participation in class. So in the focus group interview I added questions such as “Could you tell me about your typical day/ typical week?” The setting of the focus group interview was a quiet interview room. Because some of my participants already know each other, they seemed to be very relaxed during the interview and the interaction between them was very active.
Data Analysis

I did most of my data preparation and filing during the data collection period. This included transcribing, translating, writing up my field notes, and establishing files for each participant. I also did some preliminary data analysis by reading through the data and jotting down comments in the margin. The preliminary analysis helped me refine my interview questions and also narrow down my research focus. The more in-depth data analysis stage started when I finished the data collection. I pulled together the data collected from different sources, reduced and categorized the data, and looked for codes and categories to point to emerging themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I then described each case by crafting portraits based on the themes. The data interpretation seemed intertwined with the data analysis. As I wrote the portraits, some compelling themes emerged. Also, I was able to develop more detailed codes to further categorize the data and then interpreted the data in a more in-depth and focused way.

Transcribing and Organizing

I transcribed all the interview data including the four individual interviews and the focus group interview. Altogether there are about 8 hours of interview data. Except for the individual interview with Ziyi, all the interviews were in Chinese. I did not translate the entire Chinese transcript into English. I only translated some excerpts to include in this final report.

I also have 27 hours (9 hours in each of the three courses) of class recordings. I selectively transcribed the parts where my participants were making a contribution to class discussions and described the relevant discourse context.

I also prepared a data file for each participant. In the file, I organized all the data collected from the same participant, including field notes, transcripts of classroom recordings and individual interviews, course materials and the focus group interview transcript.

Data Reduction and Coding

Before I started coding, I printed the data file for each participant and read through the entire file several times to get a sense of the data as a whole. I then went back
to the electronic version of the file and started to highlight the parts that I found relevant to my research. Mostly, my judgment was intuitive, but I found that my research questions and the literature review I did were informing me and leading me to read the data in a more focused way. I then copied and pasted all the parts that were highlighted and established a new data file for each participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The new reduced file was only about half of the original data file in length.

I openly coded the new set of data by reading through the texts and assigning labels to texts. The codes I assigned were very general and tentative, such as “previous education”, “opinions about class discussions”. My purpose was to put together the parts that were relevant so as to facilitate the writing of a coherent portrait for each participant.

**Description and Interpretation**

I further organized and made sense of the data by writing portraits for each participant. Crafting portraits helps open up one’s material and facilitate analysis and interpretation (Seidamn, 2006). It is a way to “find and display coherence in the constitutive events of a participant’s experience”, “share the coherence the participant has expressed”, and “link the individual’s experience to social and organizational context within which he or she operates” (Seidamn, 2006, p. 120).

I tried to describe the classroom contexts and my participants’ views and lives in detail. Special attention was paid to the repeated ideas, surprising data that help the understanding of the complexity of each case. I identified a few key issues in each case and then proceeded to make comparisons between the four cases. The stages of data collection and analysis were not linear. I found myself moving between different stages when I was reading and managing data. Describing, reflecting and consulting literature helped me bridge the data and my theoretical frameworks.

**The Researcher and the Participants**

In qualitative studies, researchers strive to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied. They try to understand their feelings and make sense of how reality is constituted for them. The intent is to capture the realities from research participants’ perspectives. As Lofland and Lofland (1995) claim, to “grasp these seeings, feelings, and
actings fully and intimately… only through direct experience can one accurately know much about social life” (p. 3). Therefore, “to use [the researcher’s] current situation or past involvement as a topic of research” would be easier to convert the stance of a researcher to the stance of participants (p. 3).

I am interested in Chinese international students’ lives partially because of my life experience of studying in Canada. As an international graduate student from China, I share a similar background and life experiences with my participants. Having experienced socialization in Western classrooms, I also experienced difficulties and enjoyed opportunities to accomplish personal changes. I believe my experience provided me easy psychological access to an understanding of these 4 students. In this sense, I can be an “insider” to their life experience. In addition, I am of a similar age to these students, which helped me build a rapport with them. Because I came to Canada earlier than these students, I found sometimes they saw me as a senior in both academic and everyday life in Canada. They sometimes came to me when they encountered difficulties at the very beginning. We engaged in face-to-face casual interaction many times before the study officially started.

However, in some sense, I am also an “outsider” to their lives. I did not participate in the courses they were taking. In the classes that I observed, I only sat as a complete observer. I tried to distance myself in their classrooms.

At the same time, I admit that my personal, historical and cultural background largely influenced this study. Just as Merriam claims, researchers bring “a construction of reality to the research situation” and it “interacts with other people’s constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied” (p. 10). I want to contribute to the knowledge about the experiences of the Chinese international students. I hope by examining their perceptions and their experiences, educators can rethink their current approaches in multicultural contexts. My point of departure is to look at the 4 newly admitted Chinese students. The conclusions are tentative, and I recognize that I am interpreting issues from my own perspectives.

Trustworthiness and the Ethical Considerations

A series of validation techniques were employed to enhance the validity of this
study. Strategies include triangulation, member checking, and debriefing. As discussed above, I used multiple methods in data collection. I kept the field notes in class observation and also audio recorded and transcribed the class meetings. Findings from interview data and classroom observation also triangulate with each other. Sometimes, findings converge while other times they contradict, which creates opportunities for more in-depth analysis. In addition, I also sent the individual portrait to each participant for them to review and check. Their opinions on my description provided some validation and also added layers of meaning to my interpretation. During the data collection and analysis, I also talked about my study with my professors and colleagues. Their suggestions and opinions helped me monitor my own bias and subjectivity. In addition, I was able to immerse in the research field and build strong rapport with my participants before my study officially started. The prolonged immersion helped me understand the school culture and the context in general.

**Ethical Consideration**

All the participants, both Chinese graduate students (Appendix A), department chairs at the university (Appendix E), course instructors (Appendix F) and any students that are involved in the audio recording of class sessions (Appendix G), were asked to sign a consent form. In the consent form, I stated clearly the nature of the research, the responsibility and the risk of the study. The anonymity of the participants was protected. As mentioned above, I changed my thesis title during data collection to avoid potential identification of my core participants. Pseudonyms were used in all my data files and reports. I only used initials to refer to names mentioned in interviews and class recordings.
In this chapter, I describe the following: 1) the contexts of the socialization of each of the 4 participants and, 2) how they exercise their agency to co-construct their socialization experience and their evolving identities in classroom communities. I organize the chapter in four parts that correspond to the 4 participants. The description of the classroom context and experiences of each participant is further divided into three sections. In the first section, I introduce each participant by describing his/her background, goals, investment in English learning and previous experiences with classroom discussions in China. The second section of each description provides the context and is based on the data collected from classroom observations, including my field notes and classroom recordings. As I explain in the methodology chapter (see Chapter 4), I observed each of the 4 participants 6 times in one of their courses from February to the end of March, 2010. Through the detailed description of the classroom contexts where my participants socialize and are socialized, I answer my first research question related to the context in which the participants socialize and are socialized. I respond to my second research question in the third section of each description, which is devoted to the participants’ perspectives and viewpoints. In this section, I report data I collected from individual interviews and a focus group interview. My focuses include their perceptions towards classroom discussions, their agency in coping with challenges, and their membership identified in the social relations in classrooms.

**The Case of Zhiling**

*Portrait of Zhiling*

*Background, goals and investment in English*

Zhiling is 28 years old. She is from the northern part of Mainland China. Before she came to Canada, she worked as an English translator for a Chinese governmental organization and later a German company for 3 years. Zhiling started learning English when she was very young. From elementary to high school, English was always her strong subject. At university, she also took English as her major. The university Zhiling
attended receives many international students from English speaking countries every year, and Zhiling found herself in a very supportive English learning environment. In these years, she also had a chance to tutor a British man in Chinese and improved her English further through her part-time job as an English professor.

After graduation, her work as an interpreter required her to speak English most of the time. However, Zhiling soon found the translation tasks repetitive and unchallenging. In came to the point that she could often predict what her bosses wanted to say and did not feel the need to wait until they finished talking in order to know what needed to be translated. In order to further improve her English, Zhiling quit her job and came to Canada. She hoped she could become very confident in her expertise in English by living in Canada. Although she was enrolled in a graduate program at a Canadian university, her reasons for coming to Canada lay not so much in academics as in getting more exposure to the real English world.

Zhiling was very critical of her English proficiency. During my interviews and casual conversations with her, she constantly criticized her lack of commitment to English learning. After more than 6 months in Canada, Zhiling did not feel that her English was improving. Besides completing the required readings and having classes at school, she found that there were very limited opportunities for English learning in Canada. Compared to the access to English she had in China, she did not feel that living in Canada offered her more exposure. Although she sometimes went to parties with her English-speaking classmates, the casual activities did not provide her with the constant and stable learning opportunities that she was seeking. Zhiling blamed what she perceived as her limited improvement in English on herself. She thought that she should stop learning English by relying solely on talking to others, and take the initiative to invest more time on her own to learn the language.

**Previous experiences with classroom discussions**

In her undergraduate years, Zhiling had some access to authentic English in class. In fact, half of the university courses were taught by native speakers of English. However, she reported that the student centered teaching style did not work very well in class. Foreign professors, therefore, adapted their teaching style and generally lectured in
The foreign professors were afraid of using it [classroom discussions]. For example, the professor planned to do some group discussions in this class. In the first 1 or 2 minutes, the class was very loud. And then, after 2 minutes, there’s no noise at all. It never worked out as the professor expected. The discussions never last long enough, for 5 minutes or 10 minutes. Our Chinese classmates were like that, if you give them a question, they answer it. They give a one-sentence answer. That’s it. We won’t say anything more than that. We target at the question. After we finish, we finish. There won’t be any more discussions. So the foreign professors didn’t want to use classroom discussions. So there was always professor’s talk even in foreign professor’s classes. I think foreign professors also enjoyed the classes, because no one would challenge him/her. He/she just needs to talk about the textbook. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, translated by author from Chinese)

Before Zhiling came to Canada, she imagined that classrooms in Canadian schools would be very student-centered. She got the impression from movies and also from the increasingly fierce critique of Chinese education in recent years in China. Contrastive distinctions between Western and Chinese classrooms have been emphasized constantly in public discourse when talking about how to reform Chinese education. This discourse helped to shape Zhiling’s perception of students in the West as full of imagination and creativity. This led to her desire to experience “real” English classrooms. However, she anticipated that this learning environment would be very intimidating. Before she came to Canada, she expected that it would take her a long time to be able to keep up with her Canadian classmates.

**Zhiling’s Participation in the Classroom**

In this section, I report how Zhiling participated in a graduate course at the Canadian university. I first introduce the classroom context and then provide a detailed description of her classroom experience.

**Classroom context**

Zhiling’s class was about second language education. The course was taught by a female professor. She was perceived as a humane and approachable professor. Between
and after classes, she sometimes would walk around and engage in small talk with her students.

The course took place at a small classroom. The 21 students taking the course had to cram into the space. Some of them had to sit on windowsills or back against the wall. Tables in the class were set up in a circle. There were 4 Chinese students and 2 Canadian born Chinese students in this class. All of them became Zhiling’s friends in other social settings. The large majority of students were in the same program. Most of them had known Zhiling in previous courses. Zhiling was always seated at the right side, usually with her 2 Chinese girl friends and sometimes with 2 native speakers of English who also took other two courses with Zhiling and became friends with her.

The course met 3 hours a week for 12 weeks. Classroom discussions in this course grew from two regular classroom activities: mini-presentations and formal presentations. The mini-presentations involved students taking 2 to 5 minutes to introduce a theoretical concept mentioned in their reading. The formal presentation involved a group presentation of a research paper along with activities to generate discussion after the presentation.

The classroom atmosphere seemed very relaxed. Typically, the class started with the professor assigning mini-presentation topics to students for the following week, and then continued with a couple of mini-presentations and then a formal presentation. The constant interaction between the professor and the students during presentations also seemed to contribute to the relaxed classroom atmosphere. The professor would jump in from time to time during students’ presentations, asking for clarification or highlighting important points to the class. After the presenters finished, the professor would further elaborate on the topics, ask students questions, and generate questions for further discussion.

The professor spoke slowly and seemed easy to follow. The readings for the class, as most students felt, were very practical and accessible. The quantity, according to Zhiling, was not overwhelming. Sometimes a particular reading was used in several classes. Classroom participation accounted for up to 30% of the course grade. This 30% was tied directly to the three mini-presentations students were expected to conduct.
**Zhiling’s participation**

In class, students were often required to discuss issues in pairs or in groups. Zhiling usually found herself in a group with other Chinese students. In this setting she communicated in Chinese with the members of the group. The instructor seemed to offer them more support than other groups. There were multiple strategies she employed to accommodate the Chinese students in the class. During group discussions, she came to the Chinese group to offer help and answer their questions very often. During her instruction, she frequently referred to research on Chinese learners or Chinese language systems. The following quote from one of the classroom recordings is an example of how the instructor used Chinese-related content to engage Zhiling.

Professor: So people have seen how, a lot of students who come from Chinese-speaking countries have list of words for the TOEFL, and they take these words out on the bus and everywhere, memorizing them all the time, and there is new research that says that for basic learning, that’s a good method for people who are used to that method, you know, the rote learning method, and it doesn’t mean that you are going to get rich knowledge of the word but it will give you enough to function and pass the TOEFL. What would you say to that? Do you think it does help to learn some things by rote?

Zhiling: I think for me, rote learning is kind of quicker process for me. If I want to learn a bunch of, because before I was in China and I worked for [XXX] (A company’s name) There is, a lot of, kind of technical words there, and when I just in the, yeah, I just, as a kind of bilingual translating assistant and translator there, so I have to know the meanings of all those kinda of technical words there. And it is very difficult for me and I just used the rote memory there. I did not employ this kind of key word thing there, because I have no imagination on these kind of, yeah, that kind of things.

(Classroom recordings, Zhiling’s class, Feb. 25th 2010)

There were multiple times when Zhiling was engaged by her professor to participate in discussions. The professor often asked “what are things like in other contexts?” or “Do you have any examples from your prior teaching or learning experience?” However, instead of calling on students individually, she always looked at Zhiling and her Chinese classmates, signaling to them that she intended to elicit contributions from them.
Zhiling was usually silent in the class. During my observations, she seldom responded to questions. However, when the professor intended to engage her like this, Zhiling was very willing to contribute:

I will talk if I have to talk. And also, if instructors are interested in your background and imply that they really wanted to know about what things are like in other contexts, or whatever, if they drop this kind of hint, I will cooperate, because I want to please the professor and cooperate. So I will pick up the hint and then participate. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March, 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Zhiling could easily relate to the questions the professor asked and handle this kind of interaction. She drew on her prior experience and could provide interesting answers. In several instances, her answer made the whole class burst into laughter. For example, in one class, after group discussions, Zhiling represented her group to share the result of their discussions with the whole class. She talked confidently for about 2 minutes, and then the professor asked:

Professor: “Do you have any example in Chinese contexts?”
Zhiling: “Actually, there’s a very stupid way in China to teach vocabulary.”
Professor: “The Crazy English?”
[The whole class laughed]
Zhiling: “No, that was not stupid enough!”
[The whole class laughed]

Zhiling further explained how she was taught to remember the word “pest”. In Chinese the phrase for the action of killing a bug by hand is phonetically similar to the English word “pest”. While Zhiling was explaining, she was also using her body language to perform the action of killing a bug. The professor mentioned “the Crazy English” in their interaction. That was Zhiling’s answer in an earlier class. Zhiling introduced to the whole class a private Chinese English training company, Crazy English, which was famous for using very unorthodox way to teach English.

Zhiling’s Chinese examples were appreciated by her professor and her classmates. The class sometimes found her examples amusing. In another class, she talked about how to remember the English word “sentimental” by connecting it phonetically to the Chinese phrase of “a crying cold stuffed bun”. Several weeks after,
her classmates were still talking about it with her in casual conversations.

Zhiling felt that she was comfortable in the class because it provided a very familiar environment. For her, it was important to have classes with students she knew. She also found the class content accessible and she could easily relate the class to her prior knowledge.

However, in classroom discussions, except the times she was engaged by her professor, she never initiated oral participation during my observation period. According to my interview data, which I show in the next section, her perception about classroom discussions may play a role in how she engages in the practice of classroom discussion.

**Zhiling’s Voice**

In the previous section, I describe one of Zhiling’s classes and her participation in that class. One noteworthy aspect is that Zhiling is often engaged by her professor. Zhiling mobilized her knowledge about China and Chinese to handle interactions in the classroom. However, she rarely participated in open classroom discussions in that course. In order to further understand her participation in classroom discussions, in this section, I report the salient themes that emerged from interview data, which includes: her viewpoints towards classroom discussions, her responses to professors’ and classmates’ accommodations and her experiences with classroom discussions at the university.

**“Classroom discussions: The blind leading the blind”**

My interview data demonstrate that Zhiling has multiple and sometimes ambivalent perspectives about making contributions. First of all, she thinks class time is very valuable. Contributions should be meaningful and benefit everyone in the class. She does not appreciate students who speak up all the time. She thinks that these students “just want to show off” or “impress professors”. These students should be more concerned about the quality of their contributions.

Second, in the same vein, she is greatly concerned with the quality of her own contribution. For her, it takes a great effort to approach questions thoroughly and prudently. Zhiling constantly questions herself, worrying about whether her questions are constructive, how she will be perceived, and whether her contribution will be useful for
the whole class. As she has also understood that critical thinking is highly valued in her classrooms, she pushes herself for more critical ideas.

Also, sometimes, in order to show you can participate well, you will force yourself to do some critical thinking. I don’t think I have critical thinking skills, but I am trying to train myself, because professors and students expect you to have a different voice. They think critical thinking is high-level thinking. I don’t know whether my thinking is just low-level thinking. I am trying to train myself. So when I do the readings, I will try to think critically. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

I am kinda of lazy. Sometimes, I don’t want to think things thoroughly. And when you don’t think things thoroughly, you don’t talk. I always believe this traditional value. If you are not absolutely ready and have considered all the aspects of the problem, you should not talk. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Thirdly, Zhiling believes that professors’ perspectives are the most valuable. In another course she took, many students were dissatisfied with the course because they thought the instructor talked too much in class and allowed very little time for discussion. Zhiling, however, had a different perspective:

I like the professor’s way of teaching very much. She gives us lots of information. Because this is an introductory course, I think this way is the best. The professor gives me lots of information, and I can learn lots of knowledge. I think this is great. But some students asked the professor to give them more time for group discussions. But I think, comparing with listening to professors, discussion is meaningless. Because I think, as I wrote there, it is blind leading blind. Because all of us are, you are not, I won’t acknowledge that you are the authority. I only acknowledge that you might have some experience, yes, you can say your opinion, but what I expect more is to get some knowledge and information from professors. So I don’t value this kind of group discussions. Usually I think discussion is not valuable. Of course, there are some values. Sometimes when you are talking, you are inspired. But sometimes you just feel it is a waste of time. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

When Zhiling has questions or when her opinions are different from her professors’, challenging professors is her last choice. According to Zhiling, asking her instructor questions makes her most uncomfortable.
I am still not used to this, to be honest. If I have things that I don’t understand, I will write them down and try to figure them out later by myself. If I still don’t understand, I will ask my classmates: what did the professor mean by this. If what the professor said is different from my own opinion, I dare not ask at all. Because it is better to take in what the professor says. The professor is the authority in her/his field. I am always like this, no matter where I am, in China or in Canada. I think professors read so much more than me. He/she must have considered the counter arguments as well. Her/his opinions must be valuable. I just need to take in what she/he said. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

This view of teachers as authority may also make it an imperative to cooperate with her professor’s attempts to engage in class discussions. Zhiling thinks students have responsibility to cooperate with teachers to create a lively and supportive atmosphere. The classroom should not be too “cold”. If nobody answers the teacher, she feels that she is obliged to contribute. However, she believes students should be careful with their contribution and not waste valuable class time. At the same time, she thinks it is to her benefit to have some active students in class so that she does not need to speak up as frequently.

Fourth, Zhiling believes her view about classroom discussions continues to evolve as she becomes more accustomed to classroom environments at the Canadian university. She has begun to recognize the importance of participating in classroom discussions. She identifies some of the advantages in having classroom discussions. As time goes by, I think my perception of group discussions has changed. I did not really value this kind of classroom discussions. But as time goes by, I start to feel that it is sort of a good activity, if it is used appropriately. First of all, you can learn something from your peers, the way they think, you can learn from them and improve yourself. Also, many discussions are based on readings. Sometimes, you don’t understand certain parts of your reading. But your classmates probably understand it, from a different perspective. Also, you will find that in some classroom discussions, some students are very clear and logical. This inspires me too. I hope I can be like them, first point, second point, third point, very clear. You hope you follow the same way when you are doing readings. So no matter whether it is content or methods, you will gradually change yourself, more or less. So I think, I do not really value this kind of discussion, but somehow, I still benefit from it. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)
“I have foreign language anxiety”

Another theme that stands out from my interview with Zhiling is her very harsh criticism of her English proficiency. Zhiling identifies herself as having “foreign language anxiety”. She constantly mentions her weakness in English, criticizing that she cannot manipulate the language or fully understand the meaning of her peers’ or instructors’ contributions. In classroom participation, she also experienced some challenges due to her language.

When I speak, I just feel nervous without any reasons. You are so well-prepared, but your brain will just have short circuit. And then you speak faster and faster, your brain can not keep up with your mouth. Then you start to talk nonsense. This happens to me in such an obvious way. Because I always feel that things are very well-organized in my brain, but when I start to speak, it doesn't sound that well-organized. So I think it is definitely related to my language barrier. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Her perception of her low language proficiency combined with her value of class time seems to prevent her from fully participating in classroom discussions.

When I have an idea, I want to explain it in a clear way. For others, they only need two sentences to explain it, but I probably will have to use ten sentences. I can make myself understood. But the way I deliver my ideas is problematic. Sometimes, the reason why I don’t want to share my opinions in class is because I don’t want to waste other people’s time, because, for me, class time is very valuable. There are so many students in the class. Probably all of them will have some useful ideas. If I take up so much time just to make myself understood, it is not fair to other students. I always have this thought. I don’t want to waste anyone’s time. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Interestingly, Zhiling explains that her opinion regarding her English proficiency and her participation are linked to the environment she finds herself in. She says she is more relaxed about her English proficiency when she is surrounded by her friends, because her friends already know her English level. As a result, she is less concerned about the quality of her contribution. She knows that her friends will be understanding.

If it is a familiar environment, it would be better. I know these people anyway; they know my [English] level; they know my English is like that; my background
is like that. I am talking whatever; they will show their understandings. …And they won’t think that I am wasting their time. Because they are my friends, we know each other. But if it is a totally new environment, you probably will think “will they think I am really awful. Why is she talking about this kind of stuff? It is so unnecessary.” (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Sometimes after small group discussions in class, Zhiling is chosen by her group to present. In these cases, she tends to stop concentrating on the ongoing class discussions for a while, and takes time to rehearse her speech in her mind in spite of the fact that she has just made her point in a spontaneous manner in the small group discussion.

Sometimes, people in my group want me to present. Then I have no ideas what the other groups are presenting, because I am thinking. I haven’t achieved to the point that I can be so in control and relaxed. I just talked about my ideas in group discussions. I just need to repeat it in front of the class. But I can’t do that. I have to think about it, the first point, the second point, and the third point [I need to say]. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

“Because I am a non-native speaker of English”

Zhiling also holds complex views about being an international student from China. She enjoys being a non-native speaker of English, because professors tend to provide her with extra support. Zhiling associates her professors’ help with the fact that she is a non-native speaker of English.

You know, just because you are not a native speaker, so the professors, in my opinion, are more tolerant. For example, when you are answering questions, sometimes, even you yourself don’t know what you are talking about, but they will still nod at you and help you out, they will tell you the word you want to say, or whatever. They will also save you from embarrassment, saying that the word is very hard to pronounce. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

I think just because I am a non-native speaker, they will talk to me more about their thoughts and ideas. If I was a native speaker, they probably wouldn’t have written those long emails to me and offered me that much help. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

For some professors, they think you are too quiet, so they will try to figure out
something to engage you. They actually do that just for you. I don’t know if I read their intentions in the right way, but I think some of them really do things for you on purpose. They think that students have complex backgrounds. They need to consider students from different backgrounds. (Group interview, May 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

However, sometimes this privileged status as a non-native speaker of English also makes Zhiling wonder how she is perceived by her professors. She questions whether the extra support is related to her instructors’ low expectations. This is especially true when she receives praise from her professor after completing what Zhiling refers to as ‘very easy tasks’.

Yesterday when I finished the presentation, she (the professor) gave me immediate feedback. She told me, you did a good job, you got the point, the part you chose to emphasize was very important. And then, I was thinking, actually, these things, everyone else would just do the same. Probably she thinks that, because you are a non-native speaker, if you can reach this level, it is time for some encouragement. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

On another occasion, the instructor’s accommodation affected Zhiling more and led to greater self-doubt related to her competence in English. In one of the classes Zhiling took, students were supposed to choose from a list of articles and sign up for a presentation date. Because all the other articles were taken, Zhiling and her Korean co-presenter had to take the last article available which was very theoretical and abstract. Although Zhiling had not planned to present this article, as there were no other options, she and her Korean classmate were willing to try their best. The professor showed great concern at this point. She came to them and told them that the article they had to present was very difficult. She further made some special arrangement for Zhiling’s group. She replaced the article with a more accessible one, which was about the Chinese language.

At first, Zhiling was not very comfortable with the professor’s special arrangement. She felt that the professor’s expectations of her were very low. But later, she tried to understand the professor’s arrangement.

… I was thinking at that time, at the very beginning, I was thinking, why others
can present this paper but we two can’t. But later after I had my second thought, I think the professor was right, because it won’t be fair to other students. If we present the article and we don’t understand it fully or we are not clear about it, we are wasting others’ time. Later, the professor gave us an article about Chinese language. I think it makes sense. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

As a non-native speaker of English, Zhiling appreciates the accommodations made but also feels some discomfort as being perceived as such. Zhiling finds it confusing to realize that within the same institution, different professors have different ways of dealing with students from other backgrounds. Her identity as a speaker of Chinese who possesses an understanding of Chinese culture which is legitimated in one classroom may not necessarily be acknowledged in another.

One course she took during her second term in Canada was taught by a professor new to the university. In one of the classes, the topic discussed was multicultural curricula. The professor raised a related issue as she walked toward Zhiling and then stood beside her. Zhiling was ready to make a contribution but it turned out that the professor had not intended to elicit a response from her and was not receptive to a contribution at that moment.

She is teaching us to be careful with a multicultural classroom and pay attention to every student. She was mentioning this, and she was looking at an Asian student, sitting there, but she did not go further to ask me. It would have been a very natural thing to do in that situation. Just ask me. Other professor would have asked me. I almost prepared what I should say to help her. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Later during that class Zhiling expressed her views on multicultural curricula during a small group discussion. Some of her discussion partners were also surprised that the instructor did not ask Zhiling to contribute earlier during the class.

I just feel that her theory is different from her practice. But we also admit that this professor has little North-American teaching experience. And we have been used to professors who know about multicultural environments, they try to integrate every student. For this professor, probably she needs more orientation.…. I don’t mean that she should give me special attention, but she should notice there are students from different backgrounds. (Individual interview, Zhiling, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)
**The Case of Ziyi**

**Portrait of Ziyi**

**Background, goals and investment in English**

Ziyi is 24 years old. She is from a city in the southern part of Mainland China. After she completed her undergraduate degree in China, she came to Canada for graduate school. She planned to study abroad since she was a middle school student. For her, studying abroad offered an added bonus – not only could she learn a subject area, but she could also become proficient in English. Originally, Ziyi planned to come to Canada for high school. However, because the top high school in her city accepted her, she postponed her plan. At university, her relationship with her former boyfriend also pushed her to carry out her studying abroad plan. To prove his judgment and underestimation of her ability wrong, she decided to apply to the most recognized universities in Canada.

Ziyi was very passionate about learning English. She started learning the language in grade three as an extra-curricular course. Her father greatly influenced and was committed to her English studies. He arranged many opportunities for her to speak to native English speakers in informal settings. At school, unlike many other Chinese students who had to study very hard for examinations, Ziyi’s classes were very communicative. She was constantly put into innovative and experimental classes throughout her education and taught by professors who promoted non-traditional teaching methods.

Ziyi’s passion for learning languages extended beyond English. During her undergraduate studies, she majored in English with minors in German and Korean. She was very proactive throughout those years, involved in many language-related activities, such as language learning partnerships, welcoming foreign visitors to the school, the English Corner (an event where English learners get together to practice speaking), and establishing close relationships with her native English-speaking teachers.

After arriving in Canada, she was very active in adapting to Canadian society. To improve her English, she took many language support classes provided by the university. She also went to various workshops available on campus, in order to observe communication between local people and look for opportunities to converse with them. The job she took at the school library also created many language learning opportunities. Ziyi was also very interested in research. At the end of her first year in Canada, she
transferred from a course-based master program to a thesis-based master program, hoping that the thesis-based degree would increase her chances at being accepted to a PhD program.

Ziyi planned to work in Canada after graduation. In preparation for her future career, she got involved in many volunteer jobs. She had two volunteer jobs on a weekly-basis. The first involved community development at a civil rights organization and the second was at a day care as a storyteller.

…I am very clear that what kind of job I am going to find, and I get prepare for it. Cuz I remember when I was very young, my dad always told me that you cannot learn all the things from the classroom that you will be use in the workplace. So I never expect that I can learn everything that help me to find a job. what I think what I learnt [at school] is like understanding about Canadian culture and systems, understanding the society, understanding the basic theory about that particular field I am going to work with, and understanding what is critical thinking, and I think what really practical ability I should prepare for work should be really developed during the work place. that’s why I get involved in many various volunteer kind of work, because I define myself to be a social worker later, so I think I should learn how to care about, how to communicate about that kind of things really in a communicative center, or really in one real workplace instead of at school. (Individual interview, Ziyi, February 2010, Original in English)

**Previous experience with classroom discussions**

Although Ziyi studied English in very communicative classrooms in China, it was different from participating in discussions in a subject area. Before she came to Canada, Ziyi expected the classes to be mainly lecture-based like many in China. She was very surprised on her first class when she saw a syllabus that listed readings with completion dates. Ziyi asked the student sitting next to her whether the readings should be read before or after each class. She did not expect classes to be based on the discussions of the readings.

**Ziyi’s Participation in the Classroom**

In this section, I report on a graduate course that Ziyi took at the Canadian university. I first describe the classroom context and then focus on her participation in this course.
**Classroom context**

Ziyi’s class was an introductory course for adult education. The course was taught by a female professor. She spoke slowly and was gentle in manner. There were 30 students in the class. The majority spoke English as their first language. Others identified themselves as bilingual or multilingual and were comfortable with English. Ziyi was the only Chinese student in the class and had very little communication with other students in the class.

Classroom discussions were a large component of this course. It constituted 40% of the final grade and took up the first 2 hours of each class meeting. Before class, the 30 students were divided into two groups. The first group remained in the original classroom, and the second went to a smaller room next door. Tables in both rooms were set up in a circle. Each student took her/his turn to answer discussion questions that were posted online before class. After everyone finished, students then followed up on each other’s contribution. The students who generated discussion questions were known as discussion facilitators for that week. The professor did not participate in the discussions, but walked between the two classrooms, listening and taking notes. The arrangement for the last hour of the class was flexible. Sometimes, the professor summarized the discussions in both groups. Other times, she answered students’ questions on assignments.

**Ziyi’s participation**

Due to the nature of the discussions, Ziyi took her turn and contributed as everyone else did. Sometimes, she prepared a script and read her answers to the class. Most of the time, she began to deliberate for a bit as her turn at talk was about to come up. She would jot down some key words and then elaborate on them after. In the class, it was very common for students to talk for longer than 5 minutes. Compared with other students, the length of Ziyi’s contributions was relatively short, usually lasting for 1 to 2 minutes.

Ziyi’s answers were usually based on the readings. Sometimes, she could build on others’ answers when she could relate them to her own experience. For example, in one class, the topic being discussed was immigration and marginalization. One student mentioned the point system for immigration purposes in Canada. Since Ziyi was planning
to immigrate to Canada, she could apply her own experience to the issue at hand. She also connected the student’s answer to Canada’s immigration policy towards Chinese applicants and provided a long talk:

As talking about point system, I think lot of people now in Canada, the point system actually, well, bring a lot of well-educated specialists and experienced worker in other country, and to Canada, and I think the government realized a little bit, but I am not sure it but I think they realize that they actually doing not a very clever job, because as far as I know, in China, they actually close the door to specialist to experienced worker for like 40 kind of jobs, now they are open the door to Chinese people only to 2 groups of people, first one is very rich people, we are talking someone who has 500,000 Canadian dollar, then they are allowed to come to Canada, another group is like very young students go to Canada for their education and after that hopefully they will stay there and work for the Canadian society. So in the two cases, the very rich people came to Canada they don’t need to work for survival, they don’t need like to find very hard for the credential something. They came here only for vocation. They are going to spend their money, and for another case, for the young students, they are going to Canada to receive the formal education during the several years in the university. They are adjusting to the culture, adjusting to the societies, so they probably will face that problems as experienced workers, so I think what I see their policy to China, I think they realize some problem of the point system.

(Classroom recordings, Ziyi’s class, Feb, 17th, 2010)

The pressure to make contributions was high. Sometimes, Ziyi became very nervous during her talks and was not able to cover all the points that she planned to contribute. When Ziyi did not know what to contribute, she had to skip her turn by saying that she would like to pass her turn to others with better answers.

The free-run discussions were especially challenging for Ziyi because of her perceived English language proficiency and the theoretical and inaccessible content of the course. She seldom participated in these discussions. During my observation throughout the term, I noticed that she participated twice in these free-run discussions. Once, she connected a student’s contribution to her planned thesis, which was about program evaluation:

I just want to follow what you have said, I think, like, as a adult education student here, what we learned is like more focused on theoretical things instead of like practical things. So I think what we can do after we graduate, in stead of doing really practical social entrepreneur program or training whatever, we can actually
writing articles theoretically, and analysis the program they are doing, and like evaluating the program and try to do a sort of advocacy things, and like let more people outside of adult education system to know that like conventional business can also take social responsibilities and it will do good to the society. So I think that is one thing we can do, to write articles. (Classroom recordings, Ziyi’s class, March 11th, 2010)

The other time, she followed up on what a student said about China and copyright issues on Facebook. The student mentioned that MSN software was once shut down in China. This student also said that Internet users immediately lost their copyright privileges after uploading their pictures onto Facebook. At this point, Ziyi raised her hand. She first acknowledged the student for telling her about the loss of copyright on Facebook. Then she said that adult educators could do very little to solve these problems. The only thing they could do was to give suggestions.

My observation was that the free-run discussions were usually dominated by several local students who spoke English as their native language. However, Ziyi enjoyed listening to the heated discussions among them. She thought that these students had much more work experience than she did and could provide insightful understandings of many issues based on their experience.

Ziyi was not satisfied with her participation in this course. It was challenging for her to manage the quantity of the readings every week. At the same time, she believed her investment in the course was not sufficient when she had to deal with many other social activities in life. Every week before this course, she went to an intense volunteer job and had to rush into the class without having dinner. She thought her answers to the discussion questions were not in-depth because she could only arrive at partial understandings of the readings and had limited prior experience to draw on.

**Ziyi’s Voice**

In the previous section, I describe Ziyi’s participation in one of her graduate courses. Ziyi seems to be a silent and peripheral participant in that classroom. In this section, I show Ziyi’s voice behind her silence through a thick description. My interview data highlight her personal agency she exercises to negotiate her participation and her changing view of herself as an English learner in the classroom. In this section, I first
focus on her perception of classroom discussions and then show Ziyi’s coping strategies in dealing with difficulties. Finally, I report her evolving identity in classroom communities.

“What professors want to avoid bias”

Unlike Zhiling, Ziyi has a high opinion of classroom discussions. Her opinions can be summarized as follows. First of all, classroom discussions offer her opportunities to be exposed to academic English. Second, they enable her to better understand Canadian culture, systems and values. Third, Ziyi believes that it is important for professors to include classroom participation as a component of the final grade. She thinks it helps international students understand classroom expectations and pushes them to participate more frequently.

Ziyi also holds different views on having professors’ input in class. While Zhiling sees professors’ opinions as authoritative and valuable, Ziyi believes that professors have good reasons for keeping their own viewpoints aside and letting students’ perspectives dominate classroom discussions.

I think professors may want to avoid bias. Because they have their own academic positions, they don’t want their academic positions to influence their students. Professors have their [academic] preferences. Because I am studying adult education, it is a very biased field. Some problems can be very sensitive, such as social justice. Professors don’t want their viewpoints to influence their students, but their viewpoints can always be reflected in the reading materials they select. (Group interview, May 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Ziyi also thinks that class time is valuable. When other students are overly active in making contributions, she usually does not follow up on these comments, even when she has good viewpoints to contribute. She believed that creating a dialogue with these students would further extend their already long turns at talk.

“Language cannot stop me”

When Ziyi first started her program at the Canadian university, she experienced language barriers and had difficulties in comprehending the content of her classes. She
was not confident in her English when she had to follow fast-paced discussions or deal with different accents and unfamiliar content areas. From the puzzled look of her classmates, Ziyi knew that she did not make herself understood. She kept quiet most of the time, but tried to be visible to her professors by nodding and smiling.

Ziyi found one of the courses particularly challenging. The course was about political participation, involving topics about Canadian and Latin American political systems. A lack of background knowledge, the instructor’s accent, and his fast-paced speech made Ziyi feel that her language level was too low to deal with this class.

I feel frustrated. I sit there for 3 hours and I cannot give a word, I mean, I am a very active person when I was in China, no matter in classroom settings or other school organizations, volunteer and student associations, I am quite active, and I pay great attention to politics, but at that time I normally pay attention to the Chinese politics, so it is a little bit narrow, I am not familiar with the Canadian system. So I know they are talking about which I really interested in politics, in policy, government, something, but I cannot getting anything, so it is very frustrated. (Individual interview, Ziyi, February, 2010, original in English)

Ziyi almost decided to drop the course. However, after the first class, a student sitting next to her also felt very distressed and started to complain to her about the course. He told Ziyi that he could not understand the course at all and was going to drop it. The “very emotional complaint” from a native English speaker, instead of justifying Ziyi’s decision to quit, motivated her to stay in the class and face the challenge. She was prepared for a difficult time in the course and was determined to try her best. She decided to draw on the resources at her disposal and employed strategies such as consulting other students and doubling her efforts after each class.

…And at that time, I just said to myself, I think language could not stop, stop me from thinking. So at that time what I tried to do is whatever I have, a, like opinion, I will take my laptop with me and I will type it…I will [use] very very simple English, I don’t care about grammar, I just want to record what I think at that moment, and after school I will try to google some of the terms and to get a better understanding about background knowledge, and, yeah…Like sometimes, I feel like I cannot be quiet for the whole class, so I will choose one point that I understand to response for one or two sentence, and that’s enough. (Individual interview, Ziyi, February, 2010, original in English)
I try to ask my classmates during the break. It’s like the 10 minutes break, and it is very very pressures for me. Because when I have lots of questions I can try to write down in my laptop, and during my break, I am going to ask other students and I also try to, after I write these terms, I try to read related articles which includes this terms, so, but it is time-consuming. (Individual interview, Ziyi, February, 2010, original in English)

In one of the classes, she was asked by the professor to share her opinion about civil engagement. Ziyi found it very hard to answer the question, so she voiced her frustration.

There was one time, the only time, I just couldn’t help it. So I said it in class. I said: “I just came here. I don’t really know much about the communities here. All I can think of is the Chinese community. I don’t have any resources. I am very frustrated.” So I just complained. (Group interview, May, 2010, translation by author from Chinese)

What she said in that class turned out to be helpful and opened up new opportunities for her. After that class, one of her classmates came to her and offered her contacts with a local Chinese organization which was engaged in promoting civil rights. The classmate also wrote an email to the organization to introduce Ziyi. After that, she started volunteering for the organization and found it very beneficial in terms of gaining understandings of local Canadian communities. The instructor of the course also recognized her background and provided her with more help. When the course was exploring a difficult concept, the instructor emailed Ziyi some research that was conducted in Chinese contexts to help her understand.

The experience in that class greatly influenced Ziyi, making her take note of the importance of articulating difficulties and gaining help from others.

We Chinese always have this mindset, if we have some difficulties, we first blame ourselves, and we try to figure things out on our own. … but actually asking for help is not a bad thing. (Group interview, May 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

With the help from her professor and classmates, Ziyi believed that she made progress in the course. However, compared with her classmates, she felt she was still
below average, particularly in her knowledge about the Canadian political system. In her final assignment, Ziyi decided to write about the civil engagement in the Chinese community, which would allow her to draw on more background knowledge.

Because of, first of all, my language ability is not enough to get involved in, I mean politics is a very high standard of language skill, if you want to get involved in. and another reason is that I still not familiar, it’s not, like I google some task, I can get very very broad idea of what Canadian government system is about, what civic engagement is about, so it really needs time to get the understanding. And because I am an international student, I only get involved in the classroom settings. It means that I am not immigrants, I do not, like [My] home here so that I can get a lot of involve in election, voting, something, which what civil engagement is about, I lack this kind of experience, so it depends, that, so I cannot have very high standard of the discussion of the specific topic. So finally, I remember my final paper for that course is Chinese community’s engagement in the civil society, I just try to analyze Chinese, less Chinese people participate in the voting, something, because I am more familiar with the Chinese community. (Individual interview, Ziyi, February 2010, Original in English)

“They won’t focus on your language”

At first, Ziyi saw language as her greatest difficulty. As a keen language learner and an English major, she thought highly of her language skills. She also believed that her ability to speak English well played a major role in how she was perceived among her classmates.

And also, another one is that I study English, as I mentioned before, as my background. So, I thought that English student should really behave, like, they are really study for 4 years. they are not wasting their time when in China, so I think if I, like, speak English very fluently, they will thought, well, English education system is quite good. At least, the girl, study English for 4 years, can communicate fluently with us. (Individual interview, Ziyi, February, 2010, original in English)

However, Ziyi found people at the university to be very considerate when talking to her. She was accepted as an English learner. Administrative staff at the university slowed down when they conversed with her. Classmates encouraged and assisted her participation in classroom activities. In addition, when she first started the program, her faculty advisor welcomed her warmly. This advisor had a lot of experience working with
Chinese students and offered many valuable suggestions on academic life at the university. According to Ziyi, she “dares to speak” in this friendly environment.

They look at my eyes and nod and smile. And when I feel very nervous, I can not, like, concentrated what I talked about. What am I talking about? Like, my senses flowing this way, that way. They might give 1 or 2 words, like, the topic words I need at that moment, it’s really helpful. I remember in one class, I just very very very passionate about that topic, and I gave like very passionate speaking about this topic. And one of my classmate just help me to, like, correct, like, one, one words that I misused over and over again. Because she thought maybe that word will make my classmates feel confused or something. And she just like very very, at ease to correct it, not very pinpoint at it, it’s like, is it? Oh, yeah, and I continue. Yeah, they are really helpful. (Individual interview original in English, February, 2010)

Gradually, in this accepting environment, Ziyi’s opinions about her language skills changed. She retained her high level of motivation to learn English, but she began to realize that her professors and classmates did not focus on her language proficiency as much as she did during classroom discussions. She felt that she was not judged by her English level. Even when her language was unsatisfactory, her contributions were still encouraged and seen as legitimate.

They are all very considerate. If they know you are second language speaker, they won’t focus on your language. For some other Canadian, maybe they will say “sorry?” [when they can’t understand you] or whatever, but for professors, even if you speak terribly, they are always listening, very attentively, they are listening to what you are saying, they are trying their best to understand you, and they give you lots of positive [feedback]. (Group interview, May, 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

She became more tolerant of her English proficiency. Instead of positioning herself as an English major for 4 years during her undergraduate years, she saw herself more as an international student who was not expected to be perfect in English. She also started to see class discussions as learning opportunities to further improve her language. This change in perspective helped her participate more fully in discussions.

But later I thought I am here to learn, and everyone know I am an international student, and I am not supposed to, like, 100% fluent in English, and did not have
any accents, so I just thought that… no matter, just okay, it just okay, and practice
makes perfect, I just think it will give me free chance to practice my English, so
why not. why I should waste this chance, I will take this chance and practice and,
yeah, it will be okay, if they finally found out their classmate can speak [more]
fluently than before, I think they will also appreciated it, yeah, this is what I
thought. I [am] kinda of nervous at first, but right now I feel more and more
confident, yeah. (Individual interview original in English, February, 2010)

At the same time, Ziyi’s view of her English is also related to the classroom
environment. In classes where there were many non-native English speakers, the pressure
to speak English well was greatly alleviated. She believed that her classmates would
focus more on what she said instead of how she said it.

…I remember one of the class I take before, is that they have a large number of
international, not international students, but non-native students, they are
immigrant but their English have accents or they are not fluent in English. I feel
more confident, to be honest, in that class discussions, because I thought that
students will pay attention to the content we are talking about instead of the
language, instead of pronunciation, whatever… (Individual interview, Ziyi,
February, 2010, original in English)

During my data collection period, I found that two events seemed to strongly
affect Ziyi’s language learning and her classroom participation. One event happened
when I was observing her in the classroom. At that time, she was planning to transfer
from a course-based program to a thesis-based program and experienced great challenges
in getting her professor’s approval. Her professor thought that Ziyi was not ready for a
master’s thesis because her writing was not good enough and her research experience was
inadequate.

Ziyi was very frustrated. According to her, she had taken two courses with this
professor and received very positive feedback on her course assignments. Later, Ziyi
wrote a long email to the professor, saying that she was really determined to commit to
research and would try her best to compensate her inadequacies in English and research
experience by working hard. At the same time, she also proposed a different research idea.
The professor later agreed to supervise her.

When I was conducting the focus group interview with the 4 participants in May,
Ziyi mentioned this experience again and talked about her participation in that professor’s
Zoe: Ziyi, what kind of factors do you think facilitate or constrain your participation in classroom discussions?
Zhiling: For Ziyi, no problem at all. She can just open up and talk.
Ziyi: What Yao said resonates with my experience. Because at that time, I wanted to transfer...so when I was in that professor’s class, I felt that I was really motivated, I thought, I should participate more, and I should make high-quality contributions. I need to give him a good impression… (Group interview, May, 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

The second event that seemed to strongly influence Ziyi’s language learning experience was when she first came to Canada and found it very difficult to meet the expectations she had about herself.

Ziyi: When I first came here, I felt very pressured economically. I am the kind of person who is very hard on myself. When I left China, I told my mom, I said I would definitely not need your support. In the near future, I would stop letting you pay for my tuition, pay for my living expenses. But later, I found, there were so many barriers when I was trying to find a job here, at the very beginning. You don’t know things. You don’t even know when they were kidding you. So, how can I say it, I was very, very disappointed, disappointed with myself. I felt that I had not learnt enough.

Zoe: Does this affect your study?
Ziyi: No, it gave me lots of pressure to study harder. Yes, at that time.
Zoe: Why lots of pressure?
Ziyi: Because I think I paid such a high tuition. If I don’t listen carefully in class, it is a waste. Now I feel less stressed, because learning opportunities are everywhere. When I am working at the library, I can learn. I learn many practical things. I can learn a lot from classes too. So I feel it is great. Sometimes, it is very hard. Making friends is very hard, especially with local people, because they like to have some distance. (Individual interview follow-up, Ziyi, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Ziyi’s experience appears to infer many other social cultural factors outside of the classroom that affect her classroom participation, her motivation and how she sees herself as an English learner. Although my research does not focus on the socialization in other social settings beyond the classroom, Ziyi’s language learning and socialization trajectory should be understood in a broader social cultural context.
The Case of Yao

Portrait of Yao

Background, goals and investment in English

Yao is 24 years old. He was born in a small city in Southwest China and went to a major city for his undergraduate and Master’s degree. He studied Education as his major and planned to establish his career in academia. After he finished his Master’s degree, he came to Canada to pursue his PhD.

As with most Chinese students, Yao started English learning from middle school. Although Yao did not study English as his major, his English level was always outstanding among his peers, especially in listening and speaking. Yao felt fortunate that he had very open-minded English teachers. At university, he was encouraged by his English teacher to write an English travelling journal. Yao felt the writing was very helpful and became very interested in learning English.

It seems that Yao had more chances than Zhiling and Ziyi to practice academic English before came to Canada. His university, as an academic center in China, received many foreign visiting scholars and sometimes held academic events where English was used as the communication language. From graduate school, English further became an important medium for Yao, as he often needed to read English literature. It was also part of his research to translate English scholarly work to Chinese.

Previous experiences with classroom discussions

In his Master’s years, Yao became very familiar with the seminar style of university courses. The classes were very small (several students) and most of the class time was used for discussions. For Yao, the Canadian classrooms were not so different from his Masters classes in China in terms of class format. His Chinese professors mostly had overseas academic experiences and added Western-style elements of teaching into their classes. As his academic interests were in the field of education, he was also aware of the theoretical foundation of many classroom teaching and learning methodologies. In addition, in his Master’s years, he took an online joint course with students from universities in Norway and Holland.

These experiences made Yao very familiar with classroom discussion. He did
not find the class style at the Canadian university surprising. The reason he chose to pursue a PhD in Canada is to access more cutting-edge scholarly work and get closer to where much of the research in his field is conducted.

**Yao’s Participation in the Classroom**

This section looks at a graduate course Yao participated in. I first describe the classroom context and then I report my observations of his participation.

**Classroom context**

I observed Yao and Ming together in the same course. It was an inter-disciplinary course taken by students from different departments, focusing on the area of education technology. The class was taught by a male professor. He was very approachable and built a strong rapport with his students.

The classroom was a round structure, designed for small-scale presentations. Tables were set up in a circle. On the left side of the class, an additional table was set up for snacks that students brought. Yao and Ming were the only 2 Chinese students in the class. Almost everyone brought their laptops to class. Students actively interacted through an online discussion board. Due to the nature of the course, many kinds of advanced technology were integrated in students’ presentations, homework, and in-class activities.

It was also a very student-centered course. Students took the responsibility to design class meetings. The 17 students taking this course were divided into 5 groups. Each group was responsible for two consecutive classes that focused on the same topic. Students were also responsible for selecting readings and assigning homework to the rest of the class. A variety of classroom activities were used, such as video playing, writing on posters, and a jigsaw. Most of these activities involved group work and small group discussions. Class participation accounted for 20% of the course grade and was tied to both online and in-class contributions. The professor participated in all student-designed activities, just as the other students did.

**Yao’s participation**

During whole-class discussions, Yao was a silent student. There were times when
he intended to raise his hand but eventually gave up. Due to the diversity of the students’ backgrounds in the course (as it is an inter-disciplinary collaborative course), the discussions during the class appeared to be very extensive, covering a wide range of topics and perspectives. Yao felt that he had difficulties in competing for the floor with other students. He usually rehearsed his speech in his mind first before. However, as the topics shifted quickly, it was difficult for him to seize the opportunity to participate.

In addition to whole-class discussions, the class was also often divided into small groups. In small group discussions, Yao was more relaxed and engaged in more communication with other students. He asked for clarification and provided backchannel cues during others’ talks. Yao happened to be in the same group as his professor all the time. Sometimes, the professor and other students directed him to speak. For example, in one class, the topic discussed was related to the use of technology in government institutions. The professor and one of the weekly presenters mainly dominated the discussions. The talk involved content that was heavily imbedded in North American culture. Political systems, politicians’ name, and entrepreneurs’ names were mentioned. Every member in the group contributed except for Yao. The presenter at this point started to engage Yao:

Student A: Any, is there, do you have any interesting one, Yao?
Yao: Hum, the first question?
Student A: Yeah the first one.
Yao: hum, I can think, what about the Iran’s election?
Student A: Yeah, I think that’s great a great example.
Yao: The web 2.0 twitter thing is affecting people’s way of looking at, interpreting the effectiveness of lection, which made them predicting the process of election, Iran block the, I don’t know how to interpret it, kind of, permitting this kind of discussion, might be an interesting example.
Student A: Yeah, I think that’s a great example.

(Classroom recordings, Yao & Ming’s class, March 3rd, 2010)

The content of the course was mainly in Yao’s area. He had previously learnt about some of the theories addressed in the course. Although some of the inter-disciplinary content was not familiar to him, he did not find it difficult. Yao also knew some of the students from previous courses. They talked about the course and their learning experiences in it. The pressure to contribute during class was moderate for him.
Most of the time, the pressure was from his uncertainty about his answers and his English.

_Yao’s Voice_

In this section, I present Yao’s goals in learning English, the difficulties he encountered and the strategies he employed to enhance his participation.

_“Language is really a gate-keeping thing”_

Participating in discussions is important for Yao. Given that his career goal is to do research, Yao believes that communication skills in English are a gate-keeping criterion that determines his career in Western academia. He sees the classroom as a venue in which to practice and learning to speak up during classroom discussions as a stage he has to get through. During interview, Yao shared an anecdotal story about a Chinese scholar surviving at an American university. This story seems to encourage him:

He is Chinese, from Mainland China. He finally [gets to the point that he] speaks faster than native speakers, reads faster than them, anyway, he is much quicker than native English speakers. You should reach that level...I feel like language is really a gate-keeping thing. You have to reach that level. Otherwise, you are shut out. (Individual interview, Yao, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Yao also thinks classroom discussions benefit his learning, especially when the classes are composed of students from diverse backgrounds and when discussions are not dominated by a few people. Discussions bring up lots of information for Yao. He is excited by the various perspectives and positions that come up in the discussions, most of which he has never thought about or heard of before. He believes that the context he grew up in was relatively homogeneous and many perspectives were restricted due to political reasons. In addition, he could learn from other students about different modes of thinking and about appropriate ways of speaking.

In terms of his own participation in classroom discussions, Yao believes that he is still constrained by many difficulties, such as language anxiety, his confidence level and familiarity with the class’ content. He thinks it takes time to feel completely secure in speaking English in class.
If grading my comfort level, I would say four out of five. I am not totally comfortable. I still have some concerns. I am worried if I speak well or whatever. Usually, I am worried that my language is not organized well enough, or I don’t express myself well. (Individual interview, Yao, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

In one of the courses Yao took, the professor allowed students do self-evaluations and then compare their results with their professor’s. One of the grading criteria was classroom participation. Yao’s scores were relatively aligned with the professor’s in all criteria except for classroom participation. Yao gave himself 8 out of 10, but the professor told him that he could only get 5. In the professor’s opinion, Yao was almost silent in class. Although the professor confirmed the quality of Yao’s contributions, he expected Yao to contribute more frequently. The mismatch of the score may be also due to the varied understandings of classroom participation. Yao thought participation could refer to both online participation after class and verbal participation in class. Since he was more comfortable making online contributions, he made most of his efforts in online discussions and chose to listen to others in class.

I am the kind of person who likes to listen. I will speak when I want to. I am not that kind of person, well, my personality, several aspects [may influence my participation], my English, my confidence level, my personality. These aspects all influence my participation in classroom discussions. (Individual interview, Yao, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Unfamiliar terms and concepts sometimes can add additional difficulties. Yao remembered in one class, his professor had them think about the following question: “who are you accountable for?” The professor asked all of the students to sit in a circle, close their eyes and reflect on it for 2 minutes. Later, students were asked to take turns to share their thoughts. However, Yao did not understand the word “accountable”. So, he asked the professor for an explanation, but he still could not get the connotation of the word. He was frustrated. He could interpret from the context that it was a very serious question.

I had no idea what the word “accountable” means. I was thinking about it so hard and was struggling. Then I asked the professor. He explained it, and then I kept thinking, but I still didn’t understand. Because “accountable”, I don’t think in our
language system there is an equivalent word. [We have] “responsible”, but “accountable” and “responsible” are still different. So I spent lots of time thinking about this word. In that discussion, I did not say anything. I felt so guilty. And then after I came back home, I wrote a blog about it. … The professor raised this issue. It is very important for every doctoral student. As a professional, it is very important. … I did not say anything, because I didn’t understand the question, even when the professor explained it to me. So I was very depressed. (Individual interview, Yao, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Yao also tends to hesitate even when he has ideas to contribute. He rehearses his speech in his mind first and misses the chance of getting into discussions.

I felt that I have not considered the problem thoroughly enough. I have not reached the point that I could tell others about my thinking. And also, sometimes, when you are about to speak, the topic has changed. Or sometimes, others are very capable of making contributions…. I was going to contribute, but others have started talking. So I don’t feel like I should cut them off the same way. (Group interview, May 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

When confronting difficulties in class, Yao believes that the only solution is to speak more. Being immersed in the community, he finds that sometimes volunteering to participate is more important than the value of the contributions. He notices that many of his classmates do not rehearse their speeches in their minds beforehand. They talk and think at the same time. Yao thinks that he should try to do the same, even slow down his speech.

Speaking and [thinking at the same time], makes you speak slowly. At first, I was concerned about my speed. I wanted to speak fast, now I think, it is okay to slow down, as along as you explain it clearly. And also, when you want to say things, just say it. (Individual interview, Yao, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

I would suggest new students to be more daring, do not care so much about the content. Just speak out. Because the more one speaks, the more likely he/she would make progress. Otherwise, there won’t be much progress. (Group interview, May 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

On some occasions, his confidence level fluctuated. For example, Yao finds that he is more nervous in his supervisor’s course. He recalled an unsuccessful presentation he did. Although he prepared very well and could remember all the points to cover before
class, he was very nervous during the session and very unsatisfied with his presentation.

My professor said to me, although the presentation was like that, she could tell that I had my own ideas. My classmates, sort of, had some feedback, but not a lot. A couple of students asked questions. So, how you say it largely influences other students’ understanding. And some people may not be interested in what you were talking about. The professor cared, because she had to care about every student, but your classmates, they didn’t have the responsibility to care about your contributions. So, they were not engaged in the discussion, because you did not speak well. (Group interview, May 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Familiarity with the class’ content is also intertwined with his confidence level and influences his English proficiency. Yao thinks it takes him much more time to complete course readings than other students. Talking about entirely new topics adds more of a burden to his participation.

It is mainly because of English. There are many English words, probably, I often can’t find the right word. So I go through all the key words in my head first, then when I started taking, it is easier. But sometimes, speaking English is a kind of mode. For example, everyone is talking, the discussions are very vigorous. Then it is your turn, because you are also interested in the content, then you don’t have to go through all the words, you can still speak very well. It depends. It depends whether you are familiar with the content and whether the content is interesting to you, and how much thinking you have done about the topic. If you have thought a lot about it before, then you have your knowledge in stock, and then you can talk naturally, you don’t have to think. (Individual interview, Yao, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

I think confidence is really important, many people do not speak English well, but they are very confident, so they participate a lot. (Individual interview, Yao, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

After Yao came to Canada, he became more comfortable speaking in English, but he did not feel that his English was improving. Upon reflection, he realized that he did not fully take advantage of the English environment. He believed that he used the Internet too often while he did not watch enough local television. On the Internet, he tended to read information in Chinese rather than in English. He also felt that his social network was mostly Chinese. Most English speakers he knew were from his lab and there was no frequent communication between them except for work-related reasons.
The Case of Ming

Portrait of Ming

Background, goals and investment in English

Ming is 27 years old. He is a PhD student at a Chinese university and came to Canada as a visiting scholar for a year. Ming was born in a small village in the northwest of China, but went to two different major cities in southeast China for his Masters and PhD. Since his undergraduate years, he has been studying education, particularly in the area of education technology.

Ming had a plan to pursue his PhD in the US. He used to be very excited about the idea of going to a developed country and lay a solid foundation for his academic career. In 2008, Ming was already a PhD student in China. But the Chinese government offered a chance for obtaining a second degree abroad. Ming therefore took the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). However, because he did not get a satisfying result, he finally gave up his plan for getting a PhD abroad. Thereafter, Ming applied for the visiting scholar opportunity. At the end of 2009, he came to Canada.

Ming believed that growing up in a small village somehow restricted his choices and makes him have more real life concerns than others. In his hometown, he was the pride of the neighborhood. In the year he attended the college entrance examination, he was the only student in his village who got a score that made him eligible for key universities. It was the dream of the people in his hometown to end their hard life as farmers, establish in big cities and never come back. Going to a city for university was considered a good opportunity to fulfill this dream. Ming used to be ambitious and have great ideals about life. At the end of his undergraduate study, he turned down the administration position offered by his university and pursued his Master’s and PhD. However, as he knew more about working in academia, he found it was not really what he wanted. His view about studying abroad also changed after he came to Canada. His observation was that a PhD abroad did not secure a position at a university or a better life. Compared with studying in China, sometimes it could only mean longer years, harder work and a more uncertain future. About doing research, he also had more reservations. He found most of the research results did not transfer to practice. The consumers of academic work were mostly researchers themselves. For him, instead of continuing on as
a student, starting his career as soon as possible seemed to be a more practical choice. Ming’s Canada-based program could have lasted for as long as 2 years, but Ming decided to stay only for 1 year. Although he came to Canada, his most pressing concern was to complete his PhD thesis, go back to China and look for a job.

Ming started English learning from middle school and had formal English classes until the second year of his undergraduate. During these years, his English learning experiences were very restricted by the examination-orientated education system. From university, he sometimes attended the English Corner (an event where English learners get together to practice speaking) and practiced English by doing exercises. From his graduate years, the examination pressure had been mostly alleviated. For Ming, the importance of English reduced to a medium that he did not need all the time. Although sometimes he still had to read English literature in his field, he found it unnecessary to commit much time to English learning. According to him, unless it was a personal interest, learning English for its own sake was hard work. Ming did have a hobby, however, that continued to expose him to English from time to time. He liked to read aloud in the morning or in the afternoon. The material he read included Chinese poems and English essays.

In Canada, most of his English exposure was at the university through classes and meetings with his professors. At his residence, he sometimes needed to talk to his landlord. He did not have English-speaking friends with whom he could talk and his social network was mostly Chinese. They sometimes organized trips on weekends.

*Previous experiences with classroom discussions*

The classes Ming attended at schools in China were mostly professor-centered lectures. However, in his graduate study, Ming had chances to attend some research seminars which were similar in style to the classes he had in Canada. According to Ming, he knew about student-centered teaching from research papers but never really experienced it. The first time he walked into the class at the Canadian university, he was very surprised by the classroom environment, the snacks brought by some students to share with the whole class, and more importantly, the heated discussions that was almost self-generated by students’ active participation. According to Ming, these would never be
possible at his Chinese university.

**Ming’s Participation in the Classroom**

**Classroom context**

I observed Ming and Yao in the same class. When I describe Yao’s participation in the classroom discussions in the above sections, I also provide some contextual information in detail. The context of Ming’s class is the same.

**Ming’s participation**

Ming was usually silent in whole-class discussions. Sometimes, it was difficult for him to follow discussions due to different accents and speaking styles. He also had worries about whether he could express clearly and make himself understood.

However, Ming was a very active speaker in small group discussions. He took the initiative to talk and sometimes he could dominate group discussions. At the same time, he also discovered that not all of the students in the class showed the same level of understanding of his English. For one of the course projects, he had to cooperate with a student. The student was constantly confused by his English and always asked him to repeat. Ming felt embarrassed and offended. Therefore, in small group discussions, he avoided being in the same group with that student, and usually chose to talk with the students he knew that would show him support. He also felt it was much easier for him to participate in small group discussions, as he could start his sentences over when he could not make his ideas understood. The following excerpt is an example of how he participated in a group discussion and negotiated his ideas and understandings with two other students.

```
Ming: We should copy this
S1: What’s our title again? Second Life and ?
S2: I don’t know, haha
S1: What’s our title again?
S2: Isn’t it second life theater, but it mashes up with the google, hum
Ming: Maybe. Google Earth is something, my mind, my concept maybe a little big, too much, maybe
S2: We could call it, Sugoole Earth, haha, Second Life, hum, I am just thinking mashing the words together, hum
```
S1: not my ability, so waiting for you to
S2: No, I don’t think I am
Ming: Maybe call it Second Earth, huh
S2: Second Earth. That’s a cool idea, I like Second Earth a lot. What do you think?
S1: Good, Second State?
S2: I like earth, cuz it takes google earth
Ming: Yeah, maybe first life and second life, maybe, the google earth maybe, we call it, maybe, the first time, maybe our planet in truth, maybe is the first earth, the Second Earth is based on the google earth
S2: Yeah, I like this.

(Class recordings, Yao & Ming’s class, March, 3rd, 2010)

Some of Ming’s group members seemed to be very conscious of second language speakers’ needs. In one class I observed, he had to lead a group discussion. One of the components of the discussion was to record and list the results on the computer and project them onto a big screen for the whole class to see. A student in his group noticed that he might have difficulties in verbalizing the results in perfect English, so she jotted down some notes and showed it to him in a very hesitant manner. However, Ming was too busy juggling with writing, handling the technical problems of his computer and taking the discussion to the next stage. He was not able to understand and pick up the group member’s offer to help.

Generally, Ming found the class environment very lively and active. As it was the first course he participated in at this Canadian university, he felt it was a mind-opening experience. He especially liked the idea of sharing snacks in the class. He thought the snack sharing contributed to a more comfortable classroom environment and was a demonstration of the level of humanity in Western universities.

Ming’s Voice

In this section, I summarize Ming’s views on classroom discussions and his experiences with classroom interactions.

“What is the purpose of the class?”

Ming is very reflective on student-centered classrooms and classroom discussions. While he believes discussions promote students’ thinking (in a lively and
supportive classroom environment students do not have to limit their thoughts), he thinks discussions are not organized to achieve concrete learning goals. He can enjoy the heated discussions in class, but he usually does not feel that discussions fulfill specific learning purposes.

I think classroom discussions have advantages. But later, I find there are problems too. It is too broad. There is no focus. When discussions are over, it’s over. Let’s go. But what kind of goals have we achieved? It can promote students’ thinking, for example, this kind of discussion, students may not have clear ideas about some things, but when they articulate their ideas, they can reinforce the ideas and make the ideas stronger and better. But I am saying, is this the purpose of the class? This is one achievement, yes, but what is the purpose of the class? (Individual interview, Ming, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Secondly, Ming believes that classes are so student-centered that professors’ voices are not present.

The professor seems to become a member in group discussions. Actually, we also want to hear from you, because, no matter what, in this field, you are more experienced and knowledgeable than students. Can you contribute some more? I mean, we also want to know you, although you give us opportunities to have discussions. Everyone contributes. You give us chances, student-centered, that’s great. But on the other hand, your participation is marginalized. So we have fewer opportunities to hear your ideas and your thoughts. But you are not equal to students in terms of knowledge and understanding. Generally speaking, there is no comparison between what you have accumulated and what your students have. (Group interview, May 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Thirdly, Ming views participating in classroom discussions as a way to establish social relations with other students.

You establish relationships with others. For example, you find something about him, but you are also presenting yourself when you are sharing your ideas. Other people will have an idea about you as a person, they know you more. If you don’t say anything, even if you are suddenly silent, others will also have an idea about you, but if your participation is very frequent, it will definitely be better. If you don’t say anything, it is not a good thing. (Group interview, May 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)
"Because she always says: sorry?"

Familiarity with the content also plays a key role. When Ming has a clear idea about issues being discussed, his participation is more frequent. He also finds it more comfortable speaking in small groups with people he knows well and become more anxious about his language and the content when speaking in whole-class discussions.

If I am talking with them (group members), I am at ease. Sometimes, if I can’t say it well, I just say it again. I am very relaxed with them. But in front of the whole class, you will be worried. What if I can’t say it well? You will have worries. (Individual interview, Ming, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

If you speak in front of the class, the pressure is high, what if you say something wrong? But for small groups, because we all know each other well, we have passed that phase, even if I have concerns, even if what I say is not right, they will forgive and understand me all the time. You are just thinking about your ideas, instead of worrying whether you can explain it clearly, or worrying about whether they would say “sorry?” (Individual interview, Ming, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

As I describe in the previous section, in the course I observed, Ming tried to avoid a student who always asked him to repeat. In my interviews with Ming, he also brought up this issue many times. Due to the fact that he had to complete a group project with that student, the interactions between them became particularly frustrating for him.

Well if you can’t say it clearly, it is embarrassing. For example, Carrie (pseudonym), sometimes, I don’t want to [talk with her], because she always says “sorry?” I feel like, am I that bad? Everyone else is okay [with my English]. Last time, I was in the same group with Eva (pseudonym), we were talking about second language learning. As a second language speaker, you should try your best to speak; try to be clear every time. But as a listener, you should also make some efforts. You should try to understand. You say “sorry?” instead of, so I, because every time, you ask me to repeat, I will, of course, say less. Every time I talk to her, she says “sorry?” although I try to participate, she still says it all the time, so I [don’t want to talk] (Individual interview, Ming, March 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Ming also knows the expectations of Western classes and what strategies he should adopt to negotiate access. In fact, he believes he learnt enough from others who came before him and from the literature he reads. However, it takes inner strength to overcome fears and carry out such strategies.
At the rational level, we all know, I need to be active, I need to speak more, and I should not worry about making mistakes. I have to open up, we all know. But if you do this, there is a psychological component. Every time, you meet a foreigner, you have to try to persuade yourself, this is not an easy thing. You have to do some adjustment. (Group interview, May 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

For example, you just came here, you are afraid of making mistakes in English. The two aspects conflict with each other. You are worried about making mistakes. Sometimes, you think it is okay to make mistakes, you should say it. At the same time, you are still worried if others can’t understand you, or whatever. It seems like two people are arguing in your head. When you are thinking about what part you should play, it is always weighing the pros and cons. Then you think, whatever, I don’t know them anyway. (Group interview, May 2010, author’s translation from Chinese)

Summary

The above descriptions of the 4 participants provide detailed information about their background, viewpoints, and classroom experiences. In the next chapter, I revisit these descriptions in an attempt to identify some of the factors that shape the 4 participants’ socialization experiences at the Canadian university. Further, I undertake a comparative analysis of the 4 participants’ engagement in classroom discussions and relate this analysis back to the related literature.
Chapter 6 Discussion

In the previous chapter, I provide a detailed description of the 4 Chinese students’ participation in classroom discussions and their voices regarding their classroom experiences. In this chapter I provide a cross-case analysis in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the 4 students’ socialization in classroom discussions. I do this by summarizing and discussing the findings of the four cases in relation to the two research questions that I propose in the first chapter. My analysis suggests that the socialization experiences of the 4 Chinese international students in classroom discussions are complex—not only are they shaped by their educational, cultural and social backgrounds, but they are also constructed by local contextual factors in Western classrooms.

Discussion of Research Questions

Research Question 1

What are some of the contextual factors in their classrooms that facilitate or constrain the participation of the 4 Chinese participants in classroom discussions in their graduate courses in a Canadian institution?

Based on the descriptions of the classroom contexts I provided in the previous chapter, Table 2 summarizes some of the contextual factors in the three classes that may influence the 4 students’ participation in classroom discussions. Though not exhaustive, this summary helps to reveal the important roles that contexts play in the process of socialization and is useful for achieving a better understanding of the factors impacting the participants’ engagement in classroom discussions.

As Table 2 shows, although the three courses took place within the same department in the same educational institution, they demonstrated distinctive class formats, teaching styles, academic requirements, and social relations. While I observed the 4 students in only one of their graduate courses, the diversity of these three classes points to the range of communication skills that the participants are likely required to possess in order to become competent members of the different classroom communities to which they belong. McKay and Wong’s (1996) study identified the multiple interacting
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<th></th>
<th>Zhiling’s Class</th>
<th>Ziyi’s Class</th>
<th>Yao &amp; Ming’s Class</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Class Size</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of Final Grade Based on Participation in Class</strong></td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Composition of the Class</strong></td>
<td>4 Chinese students</td>
<td>1 Chinese student (Ziyi)</td>
<td>2 Chinese students (Yao and Ming) Students from diversified disciplinary backgrounds</td>
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<td>2 Canadian-born students of Chinese</td>
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<td><strong>Discussion Formats</strong></td>
<td>• Some student-led whole-class and small group discussions</td>
<td>• Students take turns answering discussion questions</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Familiarity with the Content and Readings</strong></td>
<td>• Accessible content</td>
<td>• Not very accessible content</td>
<td>• Accessible content</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Moderate amount of reading</td>
<td>• Heavy amount of reading</td>
<td>• Moderate amount of reading</td>
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<td><strong>Experts’ Engagement</strong></td>
<td>• Frequent engagement by the course instructor in whole-class discussions</td>
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discourses into which the Chinese immigrant adolescents in their study were socialized, including colonialist discourses, the model-minority discourse, academic discourses, gender discourses, and cultural discourses. McKay and Wong argue that their learners, although socialized in a middle school, were situated in a complex social environment and negotiated multiple and sometimes contradictory identities. However, as the present study shows, even within the academic discourse, multiple rules and norms can exist. When the 4 students socialize in different classes, they adjust to various forms of classroom discussions and negotiate between different academic expectations and social relations.

Among the factors listed in Table 2, student composition of the class seems to be one of the key factors. As Zhiling and Ziyi both mentioned, they felt more comfortable and relaxed with their English when they were in classes with students that they knew or students who were non-native English speakers. Yao also acknowledged that classes with other international students allowed him to observe and learn from other newcomers’ successes and blunders in classroom interactions. This could be linked back to the power relations that exist between language learners and target language speakers. As Norton (2000) claims, target language speakers usually control the linguistic and social capital. At the same time, learners also identify who they are in relation to others (Young, 2008). When learners speak, “they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (Peirce, 1996, p. 18). In this sense, when engaging in interaction with their classmates, the 4 students may perceive their interlocutors as more competent members who possess the linguistic and cultural capital which they do not have access to. Therefore, it is possible that they may experience “a reduced sense of self” (Kinginger, 2009) and a higher level of psychological pressure, whereas in a context in which more non-native speakers of English are present, the 4 students may identify themselves differently and may feel more comfortable.

The discussion format is another significant factor. Generally speaking, the 4 participants find small group discussions less intimidating than the whole-class discussions. During the interviews, all 4 participants mentioned that they experienced much less psychological pressure when making contributions in small group discussions.
This finding resonates with the findings of some other studies. For example, in Lee’s (2009) study on factors influencing 6 Korean students’ participation in graduate seminars, 5 of Lee’s participants identified that they were more conformable in group discussions than whole-class discussions. As was the case in Lee’s study, the 4 participants in my study felt more comfortable in small group discussion. It is interesting to note how they approached these two formats of discussions. While in the small group discussions they spoke spontaneously, in the whole-class discussions they rehearsed internally what they would say beforehand.

In addition, the 4 participants were more likely to be engaged or be provided with scaffolding because their silence was more noticeable in small group discussions as was the case with Yao. However, as Duff (2007) points out the intention of supporting newcomers has to be shared among all parties who participate in the interaction for there to be a positive outcome. Sometimes, the dynamics between group members can be complex. For example, sometimes, learners may resist being engaged (Shi, 2006 & 2009) because they think that discussions are not a useful or appropriate type of learning activity. In my study, Zhiling provides an example of this. Duff (2007) also explains how in some cases, “old timers” in the community may not be accepting and understanding for a variety of reasons. In my study, Ming’s discussion partner who constantly asked him to repeat could be an example of this. These dynamics all point to the complex nature of socialization, which involves “negotiation between different viewpoints” and “struggle over access to resources” (Morita, 2004, p. 577).

Experts’ engagement in discussions is also a crucial factor identified by the participants. It is a factor that socialization researchers are most interested in and have paid great attention to. In Language Socialization Theory, engaging in interaction with experts from the local community is deemed as the means for newcomers to acquire competence and skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Duff, 2007). The power dynamics between experts and novices in the community has also been the focus of much socialization research (Morita, 2004; Talmy, 2008; Vickers, 2010).

Generally speaking, my data reveals the 4 participants’ classmates and professors showed a high degree of understanding and accommodation in their interactions with them. As non-native English speakers, the 4 students all felt that they were in an
accepting and tolerant environment. In the classroom, Zhiling’s professor was a good example of how an expert’s facilitation can enhance classroom participation. Due to the professor’s embrace of a multi-cultural classroom, Zhiling’s knowledge about China and the Chinese language was valued in the classroom community. Therefore, Zhiling could frequently take on an “expert role” when the professor led the classroom discussions in the direction of Chinese issues. As some socialization researchers have shown (Ryme, 2003 & 2004), temporary reversed “expert and novice” roles are important and productive sites for acquiring the skills necessary for engagement in the community of practice. Although Zhiling was sometimes passive in her class and was not fully socialized into the discussions, she was given many opportunities to take part in classroom discussions, to practice her academic English, and was seen by her peers as a competent member of the classroom community.

What also needs to be pointed out is that the factors listed in Table 2 do not work individually, but interact with each other to facilitate or limit the students’ participation. For example, the professors’ engagement strategies might be linked to the demographics of the class. In other words, the make-up of the class changes the power relations in a classroom context. In Zhiling’s class, the four Chinese second language students who consistently sat together likely made it imperative for the professor to find ways to include them in the classroom discourse. The engagement strategies employed by the professors/experts are also influenced by the type/format of the discussions. As mentioned above, the dynamics of small group discussions can facilitate the engagement of language learners. In student-led whole-class discussions, the 4 students were less likely to be engaged, as their classmates, unlike their professors, may not have had the resources and awareness of the need to allocate turns to their second language classmates.

However, it might be necessary to mention that engagement strategies need to include more than the offer of a conversation turn. My interviews with the 4 learners revealed that the accepting and appreciative attitudes of instructors towards their contributions, their willingness to listen attentively to their responses, and the scaffolding instructors provide when they encountered language difficulties all contributed to their positive learning experiences and their legitimacy in the classroom community. Sometimes the engagement strategies also extended beyond the classroom. For example,
in Ziyi’s case, her classmate’s offered to introduce her to a civil engagement community in Canada providing Ziyi with access to local cultural knowledge. This became a critical resource for effective participation in her course discussions.

The degree to which learners participate in classroom discussions should also be understood according to their status as newcomers. For example, in Ziyi’s class, turns to speak were assigned. However, due to the inaccessible content of the course and her undeveloped language skills, the assigned participation in the course became a stressful classroom situation she had to deal with. Participating meaningfully became very difficult, and in free-run discussions, she was practically invisible.

As Ziyi was new to the Western academic discourse, she had not acquired the cultural, linguistic and academic knowledge and skills, which were necessary to effectively participate in that course’s discussions. However, not being able to participate overtly does not imply that she completely withdrew from the classroom discourse. As she mentioned, she enjoyed listening to the heated discussions among her classmates. Therefore, it might be necessary to clarify that the emphasis on engagement strategies employed by experts does not mean a students’ learning would cease if not being explicitly engaged. Ziyi was immersed in the classroom and participated as a peripheral, but legitimate member. Although she did not overtly participate, she still was engaged in the socialization process, acquiring competence by learning how to participate in ways valued by her local community. As Lave and Wenger (1991) point out, through observation and as peripheral participants, learners can “develop a view of what the whole enterprise is about, and what there is to be learned” (p. 93).

In addition, a final contextual factor that was not related specifically to the three courses (so not listed in Table 2) but emerged as an important factor from the interviews with the 4 participants is the special relationship between the professor and the student. Both Yao and Ziyi reported that in courses with their supervisors, they were more motivated to make high-quality contributions. However, they also experienced a higher degree of psychological pressure to participate. This could also be connected to the power relations between experts and novices, and the 2 students’ investment in learning and their career goals in Western academia. As both students aimed for a career in the academy, they were highly invested in their studies. Their supervisors possess resources
that are particularly important for them. As Peirce (1995) claims, learners may feel “most uncomfortable talking to people in who they had particular symbolic or material investment” (p. 19).

**Research Question 2**

*How do the 4 Chinese students negotiate their participation in classroom discussions? What effect do their classroom experiences have on their evolving identities in their classroom communities?*

In Table 3, I summarize and carry-out a cross-case analysis of the 4 students’ perceptions of classroom discussions, their agency in coping with difficulties related to negotiating access and participation and their evolving identities and personal changes during socialization in relation to my second research question. Each of these themes is addressed in the discussion that follows.

**Perceptions: negotiation of viewpoints**

As Table 3 shows, the 4 participants have diverse perceptions of classroom discussions. Some of these perceptions are very similar to those of other Chinese students documented in previous literature. For instance, Zhiling believes that teachers are authority figures, she places an emphasis on making high-quality contributions, and Ming values his teacher’s input over that of his fellow students. These perceptions are also believed to be related to traditional Chinese culture (Huang & Brown, 2009; Wu, 2009). For example, the value of high-quality contributions is interpreted as protecting *mianzi*, Chinese public face (Wu, 2009 & Liu, 2002). In Chinese culture, gaining *mianzi* is related to “honor and prestige”, while losing *mianzi* is to lose status to function properly in the society (Liu, 2002). However, as many scholars have proposed (Cheng, 2000; Clark & Gieve 2006; Zhou, Knoke & Sakamoto, 2005), it is important to be cautious when attributing students’ behaviours in Western classrooms only to Chinese cultural traits. Students’ silence in class can reflect various factors, many of which are locally constructed rather than culturally preset (Cheng, 2000; Clark & Gieve, 2006). At the same time, learners’
Table 3
*Participation in Classroom Discussions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions of Classroom Discussions</th>
<th>Zhiling</th>
<th>Ziyi</th>
<th>Yao</th>
<th>Ming</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple views</td>
<td>Important and beneficial</td>
<td>Important and beneficial</td>
<td>Have pros and cons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professors as the authority and knowledge source</td>
<td>Professors want to avoid bias</td>
<td>Professors should have more input</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Familiarity with readings</td>
<td>Familiarity with readings</td>
<td>Familiarity with readings</td>
<td>Prior knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difficult discussion questions</td>
<td>Cultural knowledge</td>
<td>Competing for the floor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prior knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency (strategies)</td>
<td>Take classes with familiar classmates</td>
<td>Consult classmates</td>
<td>Participate in small group discussions</td>
<td>Participate in small group discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consult classmates</td>
<td>Declare her difficulties</td>
<td>Participate when discussions lose focus</td>
<td>Group with familiar and accepting discussion partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participate when engaged by professors</td>
<td>Draw on prior knowledge about China and Chinese people/culture</td>
<td>Rehearse speech</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Draw on prior knowledge about China and Chinese people/culture</td>
<td>Rehearse speech</td>
<td>Double efforts after class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rehearse speech</td>
<td>Double efforts after class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Identity and Personal Changes        | Start to appreciate classroom discussions | More tolerant towards her proficiency in English / position herself as an international student | More comfortable in classroom discussions | Not obvious |
|                                     | Acquiring the value of multi-cultural classrooms |                                    |                                    | |
|                                     | Identity as a non-native speaker of English | More confident in participation | Focus more on content than his English | |
views also change when learners become more socialized into the local community and values (Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1984). The multiple and ambivalent views Zhiling holds could also be explained as her negotiation between Chinese values and the values of the Western classroom. As Shi (2010) proposes, in intercultural encounters socialization into local values should not be seen as simply one value replacing another. It is also possible that learners add new values to their existing repertoires. In this sense, contradictions and ambivalence in viewpoints during the socialization process are possible and reasonable.

Students’ goals and their prior experience with classroom discussions can also influence their perceptions. In Table 4, I summarize some of the students’ relevant background information. As Table 4 shows, due to his background in education, Yao had more knowledge than the other 3 students about student-centered classrooms and Western research on teaching methodologies. He also had more experiences with classroom discussions than other 3 participants. Due to these prior experiences, it is possible that Yao had been partially socialized into the values of classroom discussions even before he came to Canada. In addition, the fact that Ziyi and Yao perceive classroom discussions as important and beneficial can be linked to their career goals of working in a Western university.

**Student agency and identity**

Socialization can be seen as co-constructed, because learners can exercise their agency to shape their socialization experiences (Duff, 2002; Li, 2000; Shi, 2006). As Table 3 shows, the 4 students have some shared difficulties. Most of these difficulties can be attributed to their status as newcomers: a lack of access to local knowledge, inadequate linguistic proficiency, and psychological anxiety. Table 3 also shows some common strategies they employ to negotiate their participation. The agency of Ziyi is particularly salient in my study. As I report in the previous chapter, her experience highlights the co-construction of the socialization process in classrooms.

When second language students are acquiring academic discourse, they are also negotiating their identities in the local academic community (Morita, 2009; Young, 2008).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Program in Canada</th>
<th>Goals in Canada</th>
<th>Experiences with Classroom discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zhiling</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Majored in English Translator for 3 years</td>
<td>Master in Education</td>
<td>Study English</td>
<td>Not familiar Little experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Learn Canadian culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Immigrate (probably)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ziyi</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Majored in English</td>
<td>Master in Education</td>
<td>Study English</td>
<td>Not familiar Little experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pursue PhD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Immigrate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Master in Education</td>
<td>PhD in education</td>
<td>Career in Western academia</td>
<td>Very familiar Some experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Immigrate (probably)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Master in Education</td>
<td>Visiting scholar (1 year)</td>
<td>Experience the Western educational system</td>
<td>Familiar Little experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personal transformation and identity reconstruction are assumed inevitable as they gradually become competent members of the community (Shi, 2006). My study shows that the 4 students’ identities and personal changes in the classroom are co-constructed and evolving. In the case of Zhiling, because of her professor’s engagement strategies and the multicultural classroom she participated in, she became a legitimate contributor knowledgeable about China and the Chinese language. Gradually, she internalized this identity and became a valued member of the classroom community while learning to value multiculturalism herself. What Zhiling experienced in another classroom could be evidence of her personal change. When she believed that her new professor had “little north American teaching experience” and therefore “needs more orientation”, she took on the role as an “old timer” who knew more about the expectations of her local community than the instructor who was new to the university. It is interesting to note how this view differs from her view of “teachers as the authority in class”. In the case of Ziyi and Yao, their more tolerant view towards their proficiency in English could be seen as emerging from contexts where others accepted them as language learners and accommodated to their needs during interactions.

It is also important to understand both the socialization experience and identity formation in the contexts of learners’ personal historical backgrounds (Kinginger, 2009). In my interviews with Zhiling and Ziyi, they both expressed great concern about their English. This concern might be related to their background. Zhiling and Ziyi both majored in English, Zhiling also worked as an English-Chinese translator after she graduated. Given the investment that the 2 students made in English before they came to Canada, not being able to communicate effectively or participate sufficiently in their classroom communities may have generated a high level of anxiety and frustration. Zhiling’s identity as an English major in China may also explain her harsh self-criticism over her English and her self-perceived “foreign language anxiety”. It is also possible that due to her background as an English major and translator, she is particularly conscious of her language, and therefore has a tendency to associate professors’ and other students’ help with her status as a non-native speaker of English. In this sense, Zhiling’s interpretation of the instructors’ and classmates’ engagement also shapes her identity formation. Her interpretation is connected to both the local context and her historical
background.

At the same time, it is also important to point out that 3 of the participants had a plan to immigrate to Canada, particularly Ziyi whose motivation for staying in Canada was high. Her agency in negotiating access in her class may also be connected to this future plan and her great investment in learning English. As Yao said in his interview, language was a gate-keeping issue. In this sense, many social-cultural factors in and outside of the classroom can influence students’ classroom practice.

**Summary**

The major findings of this study are summarized below and include the following:

1) The 4 students’ participation should be understood in context. Their participation patterns were not only influenced by their cultural background and their proficiency in English, but also reflected contextual factors, such as the culture of the classroom, the teaching methodology employed in the course, the composition of the class and the power relations in the local community.

2) While most of the challenges the 4 students encountered can be tied to their status as newcomers who had little access to cultural knowledge, linguistic resources and disciplinary knowledge, occasionally there were challenges that were locally constructed, such as encountering interlocutors who were not aware of the challenges second language learners often face.

3) Facing with challenges, the 4 students exercised their agency to co-construct their socialization experiences. A variety of strategies for negotiating access and participation were employed including consulting local students, declaring difficulties in class, and drawing on prior cultural knowledge.

4) As the 4 students became more socialized into their classroom communities, they experienced different degrees of personal transformation. They started to acquire the views and values of the local community. Particularly, they became more tolerant of their language proficiency in participating in classroom discussions. These changes can be perceived as co-constructed and influenced by the students’ desires to participate in
discussions, their backgrounds, and the welcoming classroom contexts they found themselves in.
Chapter 7 Implications and Conclusion

Overview of the Research

This study investigates the participation of 4 newly admitted Chinese international students in classroom discussions at a Canadian university. This qualitative case study provides rich descriptions of the participants’ backgrounds, classroom participation and their voices regarding their classroom experiences.

Language Socialization Theory provides me with lenses to examine the classroom contexts where the 4 students are socialized, particularly the social relations between these students and the course instructors and local students. I also focus on the 4 students’ coping strategies in negotiating access and participation in classroom discussions. Overall, the findings suggest that language socialization can be a co-constructed and bi-directional process. The 4 students’ socialization experiences are not only shaped by their educational, cultural and social backgrounds but are also constructed by local contextual factors in Western classrooms.

Overview of Findings

The specific research questions that guide this case study are: “How do 4 new international graduate Chinese students socialize and how are they socialized in classroom discussions at a Canadian university?” I approach this issue by addressing the following two sub-questions:

1) What are some of the contextual factors in their classrooms that facilitate or constrain the participation of the 4 Chinese participants in classroom discussions in their graduate courses in a Canadian institution?
2) How do the 4 Chinese students negotiate their participation in classroom discussions? What effect do their classroom experiences have on their evolving identities in their classroom communities?

In response to my first sub-question, my research shows that contextual factors such as the composition of the class, discussion formats, students’ familiarity with the course
content and readings, and instructors’ and other students’ engagement all play a role and interact with each other in shaping students’ classroom participation. My study also shows that experts’ engagement, the factor most addressed by socialization researchers, largely influenced the 4 students’ participation and their identity formation in the classroom community. The power relations between the 4 students and their course instructors and local classmates either facilitated or restricted the students’ socialization into the classroom discourse.

In response to my second sub-question, in Chapter 5 I describe in detail how the 4 students exercised their personal agency to negotiate access to participation and resources. The difficulties they encountered can mostly be linked to their status as newcomers, and therefore a lack of access to skills that are necessary to fully engage in classroom discussions. However, the 4 students applied a range of strategies to fight for access as well as to meet the classroom expectations. Some of them also experienced conflicts in identities and viewpoints. As they became more socialized into the classroom discussions, they also experienced different degrees of personal transformation. They started to acquire the views and values of the local community and became more tolerant of their English proficiency.

As such, my overarching question can be responded to as follows: the 4 students’ socialization into classroom discussions is a complex process. It involves the negotiation of access and participation and is structured by the power relations in the classroom community. While the 4 students’ participation was influenced by the various contextual factors in local classrooms, the students also exercised their agency to co-construct their participation. Their identities in the classroom communities were also negotiated, jointly constructed and sometimes sites of struggle.

Limitations

As Creswell (2007) claims, qualitative research is always evolving and never ends, and, as such, my understandings of the 4 students and their experiences represent only part of the fuller picture and are not conclusive. As with all research, my study has a number of limitations that should be borne in mind. One of the limitations lies in the short data collection period. Because of time constraints, I only captured a fraction of the 4
students’ socialization process. A longitudinal and ethnographic study would bring forward even richer data and would allow me to observe more silent personal changes in the participants and gain a better understanding of the 4 students’ struggles and negotiation in their socialization processes. During my study, I had casual conversations with a few senior Chinese students and some course instructors at the university. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Chinese students at the university experienced great personal transformations during their programs. Within a few years, many of them changed from the most silent students in their classroom communities to the most vocal students in their classrooms. Longitudinal and ethnographic research would help reveal how this change happens and how the participants’ interaction in classrooms and their identity formation change across time. Most of the student changes I report in this study are based on the students’ own perceptions. However, a longitudinal study would allow me to observe these changes myself and enrich the students’ perspectives with my own descriptions and analysis.

A further limitation to my study is that I observed each student in only one of their courses. My observation of Zhiling in one classroom and her experiences in another course that she shared during the interview show clearly that the same student can participate very differently in different classrooms. The difference in Zhiling’s experiences seems to point to another possible research design—to observe the same student in multiple classes and generate a comparison of her/his behaviours and participation patterns in different classroom contexts. This type of methodological change would help to document how different contexts shape students’ participation.

Additionally, during data collection, I was able to gather much richer data from my 2 female participants than from my 2 male participants. This imbalance could be attributed to the individual differences that exist among the 4 participants, but could also be due to some other methodological reasons and my own restrictions. During their interviews the 2 female participants seemed to be much more relaxed and open with me than the 2 male participants. I also felt that as a female student researcher it was easier for me to build a rapport with the 2 female participants than with the 2 male participants. However, as mentioned above, a longitudinal study with several periodic interviews and richer data from other data collection sources probably could reduce this imbalance. At
the same time, this also suggests the co-constructed nature of interviews. The data elicited by a different researcher might not be the same. However, what one interviewer or observer can capture is always restricted by her/his background (Seidman, 2006). The data I collected and interpreted was coloured by my own experiences and was only one way of understanding the 4 participants’ socialization.

**Implications**

A number of implications can be drawn from the present study. First, many researchers have pointed out that the existing literature tends to see Chinese learners studying in Western universities as a homogenous group (Clark & Gieve, 2006). As Zhou, Knoke and Sakamoto (2005) claim, the “imagined homogenous and timeless” Asia represented in the literature hinders the revealing of contextual factors that may contribute to Asian students’ difficulties in mainstream classrooms (p. 289). The findings of my study speak directly to this lack of understanding in the literature regarding individual differences within the Chinese cultural group and also the lack of understanding in how an individual is influenced by various contextual factors. As my findings show, various contextual factors interacting with students’ backgrounds, goals, and language proficiency help shape their classroom participation. As students socialize into their classroom community, they also acquire local values and construct or reconstruct their identities in the communities. Instead of imposing a homogenized view of the identity of the “Chinese learner”, we should understand them as individuals whose classroom participation is influenced by their cultural backgrounds and the local communities.

Second, 3 of the participants in this study have strong desires to practice their English. For 2 of them, improving their proficiency in English is the most important reason for studying in Canada. However, they experienced challenges in participating in classroom discussions and therefore gaining opportunities to practice their English and acquire academic oral discourse. As I report in Chapters 5, 2 of my participants (Zhiling and Yao) did not think that they had made noticeable progress in their English proficiency since coming to Canada. They expressed their disappointment with the limited opportunities to practice English since their arrival in the country. For Ziyi, as active as
she was in integrating into the Canadian local communities, she still found it difficult to establish social networks in and outside of classroom, as local students tended to ‘maintain some distance’. On the one hand, the way to improve one’s English skills lies in engaging in meaningful interactions (Peirce, 1993); on the other hand, a lack of English proficiency restricted the 4 students in this study from gaining access to the types of meaningful interactions that would allow them to practice their English. However, as my study shows, teachers’ and fellow classmates’ engagement strategies can enhance the participation of foreign students, particularly when their cultural knowledge is recognized and valued in the classroom communities. Therefore, to raise teachers’ and local students’ awareness of the key roles they play in socializing new second language learners is crucial.

This implication can also be extended to the administrative level. The university and the department have taken measures to meet second language learners’ needs, such as offering academic writing and speaking classes. The participants in this study were active students in taking advantage of these resources and found them helpful, particularly the writing and grammar courses designed for non-native speakers of English. For improving students’ oral discourses, it seems programs at a more personal level would be beneficial, such as establishing one-on-one peer mentoring relationships between local and foreign students or other types of peer support programs. As all of the participants mentioned, the difficulties in establishing a social network with their classmates, and given the valuable linguistic and cultural knowledge local students could bring, such programs would help foreign students better socialize into their local communities and would also help local students enrich their intercultural knowledge and awareness.

**Directions for Future Research**

Based on the present study, some suggestions can be provided for future research. First, although more researchers are beginning to show an interest in second language socialization research in recent years, the area is still under-studied, particularly at the university level. As increasing numbers of international students are coming to study at universities where English is the medium of instruction, conducting more research in university settings is important and potentially beneficial. Such studies could examine
cultural groups other than Chinese students, or compare learners’ socialization experiences in different disciplinary areas. Activities such as making academic presentations, conducting group projects that require collaboration between local students and foreign students could be further possible topics.

Second, learners’ diaries could be used in future research to enhance the current practice of interview data. Norton’s (1992) study on immigrant women’s language learning and Morita’s (2004) study on Japanese students at a Western university include learners’ diaries as part of their data collection methods. This methodological choice would generate rich data regarding students’ voices and provide evidence of personal changes and the identity work conducted during the socialization process. At the same time, this method may also bring with it some challenges in the recruitment of participants, given the demands placed on participants to keep a journal. However, if it is logistically possible and if ethical issues are carefully considered, employing learner diaries as a data source can be very beneficial in achieving a fuller understanding of learners’ identity formation and their socialization experiences.

Third, it would also be interesting to triangulate learners’ voices with the perceptions and perspectives of other parties involved in the learners’ socialization process, such as course instructors and classmates. These multiple voices allow for a more accurate explanation of how learners react to and interpret their realities.

Finally, investigating learners’ socialization across multiple contexts would be another potentially fruitful avenue for future research. In my study, Ziyi’s case points to other social and cultural factors outside of the classroom that might significantly impact her classroom participation. Focusing on the multiple discourses and socialization settings learners participate in could allow us to understand how multiple discourses and multiple settings interact with each other and how learners juggle with multiple identities across contexts.
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Appendix A: Invitation Letter and Consent Form for Core Participants

(Produced on OISE / UT letterhead)

Date: __________________________
Dear (participant’s name)________________________

My name is Cuijie Chen. I am currently enrolled as a Master’s student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I would like to invite you to participate in a study that I will be conducting about second language (L2) graduate students’ socialization in academic contexts. I am doing this research for my MA thesis. My thesis supervisor is Dr. Antoinette Gagné.

The purposes of this study
The study proposes to investigate how L2 graduate students participate in classroom discussions. I am interested in how students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds experience Western academic environments and the dynamics of a multi-cultural classroom. My purpose is not to evaluate you academically or judge your English proficiency. Instead, I hope that the findings of my research will increase the mutual understanding of L2 students and Western educators.

Inclusion Criteria
My study will require participants who are:
1. Chinese graduate students
2. New to Western academic environments
   a. In Canada for less than 6 months;
   b. First time studying in a Western country

Study procedures
Time: 5th January, 2010 --- 30th April, 2010 (one academic session)
Tasks: If you would like to participate in this study, you will be involved in the following 4 procedures:

1. Background questionnaire
   You will take a brief background questionnaire at the beginning of the study. You will be asked questions such as your program, time you are in Canada, how long you have studied English, how comfortable for you to speak English, etc. The questionnaire will take you 5-10 minutes.

2. Classroom observation
   I will observe you in one of the classes you will be taking between January and April. Observations will take place 6 times in total through the academic term (each observation will occur at a time that is convenient to the instructor). I will look at how you participate in class discussions. To better analyze classroom discourse, I will also audio record 3 classes.
   To protect your anonymity, you will not be personally identified in the class as the object of my observation.

3. Individual interview
   You will also be interviewed individually by me. You will be asked to talk about your positions and opinions regarding classroom discussions. The interview will be conducted in early
March and will last 40-60 minutes. You can use either Chinese or English or 2 languages at any time during the interview. The interview will be recorded and selectively transcribed.

4. Group interview

You will be interviewed with other participants like you in a group of 3 to 4 at the end of the research. The interview is semi-structured. Some of the interview questions are attached to this form. Generally, you will be asked to talk about your experiences in Western classrooms, especially class discussions. The interview will last 40-60 minutes. You can use either Chinese or English or 2 languages at any time during the interview. The interview will be recorded and selectively transcribed.

Possible benefits and risks

- You may be benefit from reflecting on and discussing your experiences in class in the interviews.
- You will also receive a report of the final results.
- There are no known risks as a result of participating in this study.

Participation, non-participation and withdrawal

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the research at any time without any negative consequences to you. You can inform me of your wish to withdraw either in person or via phone number I provide in this letter. The data collected before withdrawal will only be used with your agreement.

Compensation

- You will receive a 25 dollars gift card for the Chapters at the end of the study.
- If you choose to withdraw before the completion of the study, the compensation will not be affected. You will receive it in a timely manner.

Confidentiality

Pseudonyms will be used in my study for all the students and for the university. All data, notes, transcripts will be locked in my residence at all times when not in use by me. Some data that are stored in my personal computer will be protected by passwords. With the exception of me, my thesis supervisor, Dr. Antoinette Gagné, and my committee member, Dr. Katherine Rehner, the data will not be shared with any other person without your permission. However, please note that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in the group interview (when you will be with other 2 or 3 participants like you). The raw data will be kept for 5 years after the completion of my thesis and then will be shredded and deleted from my computer.

Contact information

Cuijie Chen: cuijie.chen@utoronto.ca ; TEL:xxx-xxx-xxxx.
You may also contact Dr. Antoinette Gagné, at antoinette.gagne@utoronto.ca .
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may also contact the Ethics Review office at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416)946-3273.

If you agree to participate in this study, please complete and sign the attached consent form. Please keep one copy for your records. I appreciate your consideration to participate in this research. Thank you.
Consent Form

Please sign and date this form if you agree to participate in the study. Please return one copy to me and keep one copy for yourself. Thank you.

I have read the above letter and have been informed of the nature of the present study. I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time.

I __________________ agree to participate in Cuijie Chen’s research entitled, “The Socialization of L2 Graduate Students through Classroom Discussions”.

Signature: _______________________

Printed name: ____________________

Date: ___________________________
Appendix B: Background Questionnaire for Core Participants

Please fill in the information requested below. You can use either Chinese or English as you wish. (请您填写以下信息，您可以使用中文或英文)

1. Name (this information will not be shared with others): __________________________
3. Your program: __________________________
4. number of years you are in the program: __________________________
5. The year you came to Canada: __________________________
6. Did you study abroad anywhere else before you came to Canada, if yes, please indicate where and for how long: __________________________
7. How many years did you study English before you came to Canada: __________
8. Did you take ESL classes when you first came to Canada? If so, for how long? _____
9. What is the highest degree you got in China? __________________________
10. What did you do before you came to Canada? For how long? ________________

11. How would you describe your current ability to use English, on a scale of 1-5 where 1=minimal proficiency and 5=highly proficient?
   everyday speaking ___ everyday listening ___
   everyday reading ___ everyday writing ___
   academic speaking ___ academic listening ___
   academic reading ___ academic writing ___

    Chinese only _____
    Mostly Chinese, some English _____
    Chinese and English mixed _____

1 The Background Questionnaire is Adapted from Jean Kim (2008). Negotiating multiple investments in Languages and identities: The language socialization of generation 1.5 Korean-Canadian university students. unpublished doctoral thesis. The University of British Columbia.
Mostly English, some Chinese _____
English only _____

13. While taking courses here, do you have difficulties speaking in English in class? If so, in what ways or on what kinds of tasks (e.g., oral presentations, group discussions, asking questions to instructors)?

14. Does the fact that you are a non-native speaker of English in any way affect your studies here (it can be positive and/or negative)? If so, how?

Thank you very much for answering these questions!
Appendix C: Semi-structured Individual Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about the classroom discussions used in the courses you have taken? What are they like? How often are they used? What kind of discussions are they?

2. Can you tell me what the classes are like in China based on your experience? Are classroom discussions often used?

3. When you first attended classes here, what did you expect courses to be like, especially in terms of classroom activities? Are your expectations same as the reality?

4. How do you participate in classroom discussions? How often do you participate? If not very often, what are the reasons? How comfortable do you feel participating in class discussions? When do you feel most comfortable/ uncomfortable speaking in class discussions?

5. How much do you feel you learn from classroom discussions?

6. How important do you think it is to participate in classroom discussions?

7. Compared to when you first came here, do you think your participation in classroom discussions has changed? If yes, how and in what way? (Tell me about difficulties, if any, you have in classroom discussions? How do you deal with these difficulties?)

8. What do you think are the factors that influence Chinese students’ participation in classroom discussions?
Appendix D: Semi-structured Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about the format of classroom discussions used in the courses you have taken? Can you give me examples?

2. How much do you feel you learn from classroom discussions?

3. How important do you think it is to participate in classroom discussions?

4. Were you familiar with this classroom activity before you came here? Why?

5. Were you comfortable with this classroom activity when you first came here? Are you comfortable with it now?

6. How often do you participate in classroom discussions? (e.g. Do you contribute every time or most of the times when you have ideas? Why and why not?)

7. Do you remember the first time you participated in classroom discussions? What was it like?

8. Compared to when you first came here, do you think your participation in classroom discussions has changed? If yes, how and in what way?

9. Is your participation in discussions different in different classes?

10. Do you have difficulties speaking in English in class? If so, in what ways or on what kinds of tasks? Can you give an example?

11. What do you think will help you participate in classroom discussions? What do you think will limit your participation?

12. When you experience difficulties in classroom discussions, how do you deal with it?

13. Are there any support you can get to help you better participate in classroom discussions?

14. Can you tell me about your language learning experience? (e.g. When did you start to learn English and how do you learn it?)

15. What do you think of the English environment and English learning environment in China?
16. Why do you choose to study abroad?

17. What is your plan after you finish your program?

18. When you first attended classes here, what did you expect the schools / courses to be like? Why did you have this expectation? Are your expectations same as the reality?

19. How do you think Western classrooms differ from Chinese classrooms, based on your own experience?

20. Have you experienced any cultural shock? If so, can you tell me about it?

21. Can you tell me about your typical day or typical week?

22. Do you think you have enough chances to practice English at school and in life after you came here?

23. What is the biggest challenge you experienced after you came here?

24. How do you like studying and living here?
Appendix E: Administrative Consent Letter

(Produced on OISE / UT letterhead)

Dear [Department Name],

My name is Cuijie Chen. I am enrolled as a Master’s student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). The purpose of this letter is to inform and request administrative consent to conduct research in the [Department Name] at OISE/UT.

I am currently at the thesis stage of my MA degree under the supervision of Dr. Antoinette Gagné. My thesis research is related to second language (L2) graduate students’ socialization in academic contexts. In particular, the study investigates the participation of L2 language students in classroom discussions. I intend to explore how students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds adapt to Western academic environments and also the dynamics of a multi-cultural classroom. My data collection will occur between January and April, 2010. The data collection process consists of background questionnaires, classroom observations, and interviews.

Your department’s potential participation in the study would involve allowing me to: observe 3-4 students in class, audio recording 27-36 hours of class sessions, administer a brief questionnaire to all students registered in the classes and interview 3-4 students in focused groups. In addition to obtaining administrative consent at the department level, I will also contact the course instructors and students participants.

Classroom observation

I also plan to observe 3-4 Chinese graduate students in courses they will take in the winter term. I plan to observe each of them 6 times (it is possible 2 or more participants may be in a same course, thus the number of courses I will observe will depend on the distribution of these 3-4 students). Each observation will occur at a time that is convenient to the instructor. The purpose is to observe how Chinese students participate in classroom discussions. In order to analyze the classroom discourse, I will also audio record 3 classes.

Background questionnaires

I plan to administer a short questionnaire to all students in each class I will observe in order to identify background characteristics such as linguistic background and number of years in Canada. This questionnaire will take no more than 5 minutes. The 3-4 observed students will take a similar but more detailed background questionnaire.

Individual interview

Students who will be observed in class will also be interviewed individually at the end of the semester. The interview will serve as a follow-up to class observations. The purpose is to elicit participants’ thoughts about their classroom experiences and also to provide them with opportunities to reflect on their classroom discussions. The interview will be openly structured and audio recorded. It will last 40-60 minutes. Participants will be interviewed on or off campus at a location convenient to them.

Group interview

The group interviews will be conducted between late March and early April. All Chinese graduate students who will participate in this study will be interviewed in groups of 3-4. The interviews will focus on students’ perceptions of classroom discussions and their experiences in Western classrooms. The interviews will be audio recorded with participants’ permission. All measures will be taken to guarantee institutional and individual confidentiality in any written reports. Audio
recordings and transcribed documents will be kept in a personal computer, protected by passwords. The raw data will only be accessed by me, my thesis supervisor and my committee member. Conference presentation or publication may emerge from this research. The raw data will be kept for 5 years after the completion of my thesis.

There are no known risks associated with this study. Benefit associated with your department’s participation may include:

- improved ability of L2 graduate students to adapt to a Western academic context through reflective discussions.
- improved ability of instructors to understand and accommodate the needs of L2 graduate students registered for their courses.

I will also provide a summary of the findings after the completion of the thesis. If you agree to participate in this study, please complete and sign the attached consent form. Please keep one copy for your records. I appreciate your consideration to participate in this research.

Should you have any concerns about the research, you may at any time contact me by e-mail at cuijje.chen@utoronto.ca or by phone at xxx-xxx-xxxx. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Antoinette Gagné by email at antoinette.gagne@utoronto.ca. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may also contact the Ethics Review office at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416)946-3273.

Thank you for your interest in this research. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Cuijie Chen
MA Candidate
Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning
OISE/UT
Consent Form

Please sign and date this form if you agree to participate in the study. Please return one copy to me and keep one copy for yourself. Thank you.

I have read the above letter and have been informed of the nature of the present study. I understand what is being requested of me in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

I ____________, agree to allow Cuijie Chen to conduct research entitled “The Socialization of L2 Graduate Students through Classroom Discussions” in ________________ (department name).

Signature: __________________________

Printed name: ________________________

Date: _______________________________
Appendix F: Invitation Letter and Consent Form for Course Instructors

(Produced on OISE / UT letterhead)

Dear ____________________.

My name is Cuijie Chen. I am enrolled as a Master’s student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I am currently at the thesis stage of my MA degree under the supervision of Dr. Antoinette Gagné. I am writing because some of the participants for my research are taking the course ___________. The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in my study and request consent to observe some sessions of ___________ (course name).

Study purpose

My thesis research is related to second language (L2) graduate students’ socialization in academic contexts. I propose to investigate how L2 students socialize and are socialized through classroom discussions. I intend to explore how students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds experience Western academic environments and the dynamics of a multi-cultural classroom.

Tasks involved and steps

I hope to observe these students in your class 6 times between January and April 2010. My purpose is to find out how these L2 students participate in classroom discussions and some possible contextual factors that influence their participation. Field notes will be taken in order to compliment the observation logs. In order to better analyze the classroom discourse, I will also audio-record 3 class sessions. The audio recording will be partially transcribed. I will transcribe the parts that involve any contribution of these L2 participants and the relevant speech contexts where those verbal contributions happen. My focus will be the common features of the contributions among the L2 participants. Special attention will also be paid to the interactions (i.e., turn taking, interruption, overlapping, etc.) between the participants and their peers and the instructor. If you agree to have me present in you class, the exact time for observation and audio recording could be scheduled at your convenience.

Upon your agreement, I will come to the class of ___________ (course name). Due to the audio recording process, I will have to ask for permission from all the students in your class. I will have to use 5-10 minutes of the break time of your class to explain my research and also distribute the consent forms to every student. The consent form will be attached to a short (no more than 5 minutes) background questionnaire.

Confidentiality

Pseudonyms will be used in my study for all the students and for the university. All data, notes, transcripts will be locked in my residence at all times when not in use by me. Some data that are stored in my personal computer will be protected by passwords. With the exception of me, my thesis supervisor, Dr. Antoinette Gagné, and my committee member, Dr. Katherine Rehner, the data will not be shared with any other person without your permission. The raw data will be kept for 5 years after the completion of my thesis and then will be shredded and deleted from my computer.

Possible benefits and risks

There are no known risks associated with this study. Benefit associated with your participation may include:
Further mutual understanding of you and L2 graduate students might be achieved.

The L2 graduate students in your class may gain better understanding of the expectations of Western classrooms. Their reflections and discussion in interviews may help them to better adapt to the Western academic context.

Also, to appreciate your support, I will provide a report of the final results.

If you agree to participate in this study, please complete and sign the attached consent form. Please keep one copy for your records. I appreciate your consideration to participate in this research.

Should you have any concerns about the research, you may at any time contact me by e-mail at cuijie.chen@utoronto.ca or by phone at xxx-xxxx-xxxx. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Antoinette Gagné by email at antoinette.gagne@utoronto.ca. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may also contact the Ethics Review office at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416)946-3273.

Thank you for your interest in this research. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Cuijie Chen
MA Candidate
Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning
OISE/UT
Consent Form

Please sign and date this form if you agree to participate in the study. Please return one copy to me and keep one copy for yourself. Thank you.

I have read the above letter and have been informed of the nature of the present study. I understand what is being requested of me in this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time.

I, ______________________, agree to participate in Cuijie Chen’s research entitled “The Socialization of L2 Graduate Students through Classroom Discussions”.

Signature: ______________________

Printed name: ______________________

Date: ______________________
Appendix G: Invitation Letter and Consent Form for Other Participants

(Produced on OISE / UT letterhead)

Date: __________________________

Dear (participant’s name)________________________

My name is Cuijie Chen. I am currently enrolled as a Master’s student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). You are contacted because one / some of your classmate(s) in the course __________________ has/have agreed to participate in a study that I will be conducting for my MA thesis. Because the study will involve class audio recording, I am now asking for your permission to audio record some sessions of the class.

The purposes of the study

The study I am conducting proposes to investigate how L2 graduate students participate in classroom discussions. I am interested in how students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds experience Western academic environments and the dynamics of a multi-cultural classroom. The study will be a multiple case study. One of the foci of the study is to analyze how L2 graduate students communicate with other students in class.

Procedures

Time: 5th January, 2010 --- 30th April, 2010

Tasks: you will be involved in the following 2 procedures:

1. Background questionnaire
   You will be invited to take a very brief background questionnaire which is attached to this form. The questionnaire will take you less than 5 minutes and will involve questions such as your program, time you are in Canada, your linguistic background, etc.

2. Audio recording
   I will audio record 3 classes (9 hours) during this academic term. The exact dates of the recording will be decided by the course instructor___________. I will transcribe the recordings that involve communication between some certain L2 graduate students (the core participants of the study) and other students in the class. I will look at general discourse features such as turn-taking, overlapping, holding floors, etc.

Possible benefits and risks

Although there are no direct benefits to you associated with participation in this study, your support for a study that attempts to increase the mutual understanding of L2 students and Western educators will be sincerely appreciated. There are no known risks to you as a result of participating in this study.

Participation, non-participation and withdrawal

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences to you. The data collected before withdrawal will only be used with your agreement.

Confidentiality

Pseudonyms will be used in my study for all the students and for the university. All data, notes, transcripts will be locked in my residence at all times when not in use by me. Some
data that are stored in my personal computer will be protected by passwords. With the exception of me, my thesis supervisor, Dr. Antoinette Gagné, and my committee member, Dr. Katherine Rehner, the data will not be shared with any other person without your permission. The raw data will be kept for 5 years after the completion of my thesis and then will be shredded and deleted from my computer.

Contact information
Cuijie Chen: cujie.chen@utoronto.ca; TEL: XXX-XXX-XXXX.
You may also contact Dr. Antoinette Gagné, at antoinette.gagne@utoronto.ca
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may also contact the Ethics Review office at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416)946-3273.

If you agree to participate in this study, please complete and sign the attached consent form. Please keep one copy for your records. I appreciate your consideration to participate in this research. Thank you.

Consent Form
Please sign and date this form if you agree to participate in the study. Please return one copy to me and keep one copy for yourself. Thank you.

I have read the above letter and have been informed of the nature of the present study. I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time.

I, ________________, agree to participate in Cuijie Chen’s research entitled, “The Socialization of L2 Graduate Students through Classroom Discussions”.

Signature: _______________________

Printed name: ___________________ 

Date: __________________________

Background Questionnaire

Please fill in the information requested below. Thank you!

1. Your program: ________________________________

2. number of years you are in the program: ____________

3. number of courses you have completed: ___________

4. Please briefly describe your linguistic background (i.e., what languages do you speak? What is your first language or are you bilingual / multilingual? In what language do you feel more comfortable speaking?). _____________________________

Thank you very much for answering these questions!