

**How Chinese International Secondary School Students in Montreal Are Affected by  
Foreign Language Anxiety: A Qualitative Study**

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### **Abstract**

Many studies have shown that international students are likely to be affected by foreign language anxiety. In recent years, the number of Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal is increasing greatly, yet the literature on this group of students' experiences related to foreign language anxiety is limited. This thesis aims to investigate whether Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal are impacted by foreign language anxiety, focusing on their reactions to it and the factors that increase or decrease foreign language anxiety in this group. This study gathered qualitative data from seven participants using semi-structured interviews. This study also reveals the challenges and coping strategies that are mentioned by the participants. Finally, some different features between the educational systems of Canada and China are presented and discussed. The findings of this research enrich the understanding of the influence of foreign language anxiety in Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal and provide some insights for the development of helpful measures which are beneficial for the students' successful integration into their studies and daily life in Montreal.

*Keywords:* foreign language anxiety, Chinese international secondary school students, qualitative study

## Résumé

De nombreuses études ont montré que les étudiants internationaux sont susceptibles de s'affecter par l'anxiété langagière. Au cours des dernières années, le nombre des étudiants chinois internationaux du secondaire à Montréal augmente considérablement, pourtant, la littérature sur ce groupe d'étudiants et leurs expériences liés à l'anxiété langagière est limitée. Cette thèse vise à déterminer si les étudiants chinois internationaux du secondaire à Montréal sont affectés par l'anxiété langagière, se concentrant sur leurs réactions et les facteurs qui augmentent ou diminuent l'anxiété langagière chez eux. Cette étude rassemble des données qualitatives de sept participants à l'aide d'entrevues semi-structurées. Ce qui ressort également de cette étude, ce sont les défis et les stratégies d'adaptation mentionnés par les participants. Enfin, certaines caractéristiques différentes entre les systèmes éducatifs du Canada et de la Chine sont présentées et discutées. Les résultats de cette recherche enrichissent la compréhension de l'influence de l'anxiété langagière chez les étudiants chinois internationaux du secondaire à Montréal et fournissent des idées pour l'élaboration de mesures utiles pour l'intégration réussie des étudiants dans leurs études et leur vie quotidienne à Montréal.

*Mots-clés:* l'anxiété langagière, étudiants chinois internationaux du secondaire, étude qualitative

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**Chapter One                      Introduction: Setting the Scene**  
**Situating Myself**

Through my experiences regarding foreign language learning, I have been a language user, a language researcher and a language instructor. As a foreign language user at the beginning, I majored in Spanish and had a minor in English in my undergraduate studies. When I used these foreign languages, which both were not my native language, I clearly felt that my whole mental state was different from what it was when I spoke Chinese, my mother language. I would carefully choose my vocabulary, worrying that my sentences did not make sense to others. I would get tense the moment I began to speak English or Spanish, even if I was just saying some simple sentences. In addition, I tended to be an active, even a talkative person when I spoke Chinese, but when speaking a foreign language, I would either try hard to be concise or, to another extreme, I would be adding too much explanation to clarify my sentences. Even if I had some ideas to add in a conversation, it was likely that I would give up after hesitation. At that time, I noticed that my feelings varied between using my mother tongue and using a foreign language. Since I began my studies at McGill University, English has been my main communication medium, including listening, speaking, reading and writing. The feeling of nervousness became more evident, especially in presentations. I had to rehearse several times so that I could appear less anxious before my classmates, but from time to time, I would forget what I was about to say or pause because of my anxiety. At that moment, I obviously felt the influence of emotions on the use of a foreign language.

As a foreign language researcher at McGill, I began to learn about the theories regarding second language education. As Douglas Fir Group (2016) put it in a paper:



Language learning is a complex, ongoing, multifaceted phenomenon that involves the dynamic and variable interplay among a range of individual neurobiological mechanisms and cognitive capacities and L2 learners' diverse experiences in their multilingual worlds occurring over their lifespans and along three interrelated levels of social activity: the micro level of social action and interaction, the meso level of sociocultural institutions and communities, and the macro level of ideological structures. (p. 36)

I came to understand that language learning involved cognition, personal experiences and various psychological factors and many other issues, all of which were closely interrelated. Through my studies, I became interested in individual differences (IDs). Dörnyei (2014) introduced various IDs, such as anxiety, creativity, willingness to communicate (WTC), self-esteem, and learner beliefs. I recalled that many of the IDs could be identified in my experiences or in my observation of the language use of others. Therefore, I considered that the sociolinguistic aspect of language studies was something that I would like to dig into deeper and investigate.

As a language teacher so far, I have met a number of Chinese international students studying in Canada, some of whom are university students while others are secondary school students. Through our conversations, we have identified similar experiences in terms of emotional influence on language use. Some secondary school students have talked to me about the difficulties they meet in communicating with their teachers and peers. For example, since they need to use English to communicate with their teachers and peers, they are likely to give up asking for help or are reluctant to take an active role in communication.

Before I started my graduate studies, I often reflected on a question: how can I improve my teaching techniques to better help my students acquire their second or foreign language? But

later, I had a new question: how can I help my students better reflect on their feelings alongside their language using and learning, and help instructors better understand their students? I believe that when students and instructors both achieve deeper understanding of the factors related to second language acquisition, it benefits the enhancement of effectiveness and efficiency of language education. When I got the chance to conduct my own academic research, my talks with some international students triggered an idea: as a Chinese and English speaker, why don't I become the bridge that connects both ends? The students can express themselves at ease, using the most comfortable tongue for them, while I can learn about the students' experiences and feelings communicating in their mother language, and then organize and analyze the data academically. Hopefully it will help instructors learn about their Chinese international secondary school students and their psychological issues related to language education and produce more effective communication and teaching techniques.

### **Common Existence of Language Anxiety among International Students**

As the first individual difference factor that I identified in my own language experiences, I first read about Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and found that language anxiety commonly existed among students learning a second language. In a quantitative study focusing on Japanese language study among American university students, Saito and Samimy (1996) investigated 257 students (134 beginners, 79 intermediate, and 44 advanced-level students) from different majors and indicated, "a trend also was observed in which advanced students scored highest in anxiety, intermediate students the lowest, and beginning students fell between the other two" (p. 247). Similarly, in another study whose participants were 134 college students at a midwestern American university enrolled in Spanish as a foreign language courses, Marcos-Llinás and Garau

(2009) found significant differences “between beginners and advanced learners in terms of language anxiety, with the latter scoring higher on the anxiety scale” (p. 103).

Among numerous studies on foreign language anxiety, I found that a great part of them took international students as the focus of inquiry. These students learn a foreign language immersed in an environment where this foreign language is widely used both in their academic and daily life. The international students may first start learning it as a foreign language in their home country, but when they are abroad, this foreign language, which is the language of the country, goes beyond classroom use and become a must both in the classroom and in their daily life. So, the level of language anxiety in this population may also be high. Zhang (2000) conducted a study on the reading anxiety of 145 intermediate students from the People’s Republic of China, studying ESL in Singapore, and found, “several factors are key contributors to ESL readers’ anxiety - students’ lack of L2 proficiency, cultural knowledge that is embedded in the language being learned, and the changed learning context, all of which seem to have complicated the anxiety construct.” (p. 51), and the context was also emphasized, “the study-abroad context seems to be one of the biggest challenges for ESL readers” (p. 51). Studying a foreign language at home or abroad are two such different contexts that results of anxiety levels or sources that cause anxiety could differ a lot. In a study entitled “An exploration of language anxiety in L2 academic context for Chinese international students in U.S. universities”, Zhao (2013) pointed out that, “language anxiety was often manifested in oral communication and receiving input for the participants when they were with native speakers of English” (p. 93).

Given that many studies have proved that foreign language anxiety is commonly found in language learners, and international students are a group greatly affected by FLA, I believe that it

is of significance to conduct a study on the degree to which international students in Canada are affected by foreign language anxiety, and to investigate their feelings and experiences firsthand.

### **Increasing Number of Chinese International Secondary School Students in Canada**

When reading articles about FLA, I found that many studies are about international students in colleges and universities, but in fact, there are an increasing number of Chinese international secondary school students studying in Canada, whose experiences related to FLA may not be the same as the university students' and thus, worth investigating. According to the Canadian Bureau for International Education (2016), among 353,570 international students in Canada at all levels of study, 118,915 students (33.55%), came from China, much more than from the second country of origin, India, consisting of 13.74%, and the third, France, with a percentage of 5.68%. Not only was the percentage higher, but the number of Chinese international students increased by 11% from 2014 to 2015. Apart from the fact that there is a dramatically increasing number of Chinese international students in Canada, a younger-age trend is arising in that students seek further studies abroad at an earlier age (Center for China and Globalization, 2016). Among the 44,510 international students at the secondary level in Canada in 2015, 24,415 came from China, while for the second country of origin, South Korea, the figure was 3,575 (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2016). As this student body keeps expanding, it is worthwhile to take Chinese secondary school international students as the focus of research to better understand their distinctive characteristics. I sincerely hope that the current study will help to identify the emotional difficulties the international students suffer and eventually help to come up with practical solutions and aid for them.

### A Comparison of Educational Systems of Quebec and China

International students usually find themselves in a special position when they begin their studies in Canada. One important reason contributing to this issue is the different educational systems in the two countries (See Table 1). Since education in Canada comes exclusively under provincial jurisdiction and systems vary across the country, my study focuses exclusively on Quebec. In Table 1 below, I compare the educational systems of China and Quebec so that background information about the Chinese international secondary school students can be provided from a macro point of view.

Table 1 Chinese Educational System vs. Quebec Educational System

China		Quebec	
Age	Educational Period	Age	Educational Period
6 - 12	Primary School (6 years)	6 - 12	Primary School (6 years)
12 - 15	<b>Junior High School (3 years)</b>	12 - 17	<b>Secondary School (5 years)</b>
15 - 18	<b>Senior High School (3 years)</b>	17 - 19	CEGEP (two-year pre-university programs)
18 - 22	University	19 - 22	University

In China, after graduating from primary school and before entering university, students go through two stages of secondary or high school education: junior high school and senior high school. Junior high school consists of 3 years, corresponding to Grade 7, 8 and 9 in North America; Senior high school also consists of 3 years, corresponding to Grade 10, 11 and 12 in North America.

The secondary school stage in Quebec is widely known as high school in the rest of North America. In Quebec it consists of 5 years, corresponding to Grades 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 in North America, but does not include Grade 12. Quebec has a special pre-university stage at separate institutions, called CEGEPs (*Collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel*), whose two-year pre-university programs correspond to Grade 12 and the first year of university in other parts of North America. Therefore, students in Quebec must complete secondary school and CEGEP studies before entering university. The focus of the current study is secondary school students in Quebec. CEGEP students were beyond the scope of this study.

By comparing the two educational systems, I find that though students in both countries generally begin primary school and exit university at about the same age, starting from 6 years old and graduating at the age of 22, the greatest difference lies in the secondary period. Since every stage in the educational system means a complete and progressive design of curricula, these differences in education systems have resulted in two major situations which Chinese students are likely to encounter when they seek further studies abroad: one is that students finish their whole secondary education in China (junior high school and senior high school) and begin university studies in Canada; the other is that students finish junior high school studies in China, and begin from Grade 10 in Canada (some may begin from Grade 9). The second situation is more common since the trend has been observed that an increasing number of students go abroad at an earlier age (Center for China and Globalization, 2016), as discussed in the previous section, “Increasing number of Chinese international secondary school students in Canada”. But these students are likely to encounter difficulties in their studies due to the difficult transfer between the two educational systems.

Take a student who graduates from Grade 3 of a Chinese junior high school (Secondary III in Quebec, and Grade 9 in North America correspondingly) and starts their studies from Secondary in Montreal for example. In China, this student has Chinese language, maths, English as a foreign language, history, geography (Canadian history or geography makes up only a part of world history or geography), etc. as school subjects; while in Quebec, a student is required to take courses such as ethics and religious studies, History of Quebec and Canada, and French as a second language, all of which are brand new subjects for a Chinese international student. More importantly, after the study of merely one year, this student will be facing the ministerial exams of History of Quebec and Canada, mathematics, and so on.

To better understand their level of English when these students arrive in Canada, I refer to the graded description in the Chinese Curriculum Standards of Compulsory Education (2011), a document that reflects the state's requirements for Chinese students at different stages, to obtain quantified figures. According to this document, when a Chinese student graduates from junior high school, he should be able to use 1500-1600 English words and 200-300 idioms or collocations (p. 19).

In contrast, students in an English school in Quebec are assumed to be quite fluent in English. According to Quebec legislation, to obtain a certificate of eligibility to attend English school, a student should be a child: (1) who has received the major part of their elementary or secondary school instruction in English in Canada; (2) whose brother or sister did the major part of his or her elementary or secondary studies in English in Canada; (3) whose father or mother did the major part of his or her elementary studies in English in Canada; or (4) whose father or mother attended school in Québec after August 26, 1977, and could have been declared eligible for instruction in English at that time (*Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur*).

From the criteria mentioned, I find that students in an English school in Quebec are supposed to come from an English-speaking family and there should be enough exposure to English.

Given the situation of the local students, in English schools language support of any kind for students who use English as a second or foreign language is not readily available. There is no official ESL program in such schools in Quebec, a province where ESL is assumed to be necessary only in French-language schools (which make up the majority of Quebec schools). Besides, teachers and administrators have not been trained to teach and communicate with ESL students. When the Chinese international secondary school students arrive in Montreal, they are in grave need of second language support. However, due to the characteristics of the English schools in Quebec, they may not be able to gain adequate support.

To sum up, for one thing, they often lack foundational knowledge for some subjects, such as Canadian history, basic vocabulary for science, etc. Meanwhile, they are obliged to adjust themselves as quickly as possible to all the classes using English as the language of instruction. Considering that previously they were learning English as a foreign language, whose use was restricted to the EFL classroom, it is logical to assume that international secondary school students may suffer from language anxiety.

### **Focus of Inquiry and Research Questions**

Therefore, the focus of my inquiry is to understand how Chinese international secondary school students are experiencing foreign language anxiety in the situation where they use their foreign language at school and in their daily lives. In this qualitative study, I also aim to investigate the learning challenges students encounter and coping strategies they adopt to deal



with foreign language anxiety and other learning difficulties. The research questions explored in this qualitative research are:

1) Do Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal English high schools experience foreign language anxiety in their life and studies using their L2 (English)?

2) What contributes to their anxiety and how do students react as a consequence of foreign language anxiety?

3) What coping strategies do Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal adopt to deal with foreign language anxiety and other learning challenges?

With the research questions above, this study aims to contribute to the literature on foreign language anxiety and will hopefully offer insights to educational institutions in Montreal, (and possibly more widely, in Canada), to language and content instructors, and to current as well as prospective international secondary school students.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

This thesis consists of five chapters, starting with the current chapter, the Introduction. In this chapter, I explain my motivation to conduct this study and that the present thesis is necessary because of the common existence of foreign language anxiety among international students and the trend that there is an increasing number of Chinese international students at both the university and secondary levels. Then, in the second chapter of this thesis, to justify that a qualitative study on foreign language anxiety focusing on the Chinese international secondary school students is needed to fill the gap in the research, I review the existing literature contributing to the research on foreign language anxiety, as well as the academic works regarding the vulnerability of sojourner students in a study-abroad context, showing the

distinctive characteristics of international students, especially adolescent learners. In Chapter Three, I describe my methodology and methods adopted in this study, that is, a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews as the main instrument and deploying thematic analysis. The fourth chapter of this thesis is a presentation of my research results, summarizing the emerging themes from the interview data. It is found that the Chinese international secondary school students are all influenced by foreign language anxiety, which then affects their behaviors. Then I present the factors reported by the participants which increase the levels of foreign language anxiety, as well as the practice that helps reduce their anxiety. From the interviews, the students point out the academic challenges they have encountered in their studies and the coping strategies they have adopted. Some differences between the Canadian and Chinese educational systems mentioned repeatedly by the participants are also summarized. Chapter Five is a discussion regarding the results presented in the previous chapter, relating them to other research. Finally, I indicate the implication and limitation of the findings in this study, as well as ideas for future research.

## **Chapter Two Literature Review**

In this chapter, I review existing research on foreign language anxiety to better understand it from multiple dimensions, including its definitions, relevant mental and behavioral expressions, the influence it has on language users, various sources causing FLA, widely-applied research instruments and the interrelation of FLA with other individual differences (Liu, 2018; Liu & Huang, 2011; Shao, Ji & Yu, 2013). In addition, since I pay special attention to Chinese international secondary school students in the current research, I also review research literature regarding adolescent sojourners or underage international students, and the influence of the study-abroad context on them. Finally, I would like to argue that gaps exist in the current research literature and that a qualitative study regarding the influence of foreign language anxiety on Chinese international secondary school students is needed to fill this gap.

### **Foreign Language Anxiety**

#### ***Defining Foreign Language Anxiety***

Individual differences (IDs) have been characterized as psychological traits that are relatively stable within a single individual but that vary across individuals (Dörnyei, 2014). Although factors of individual differences have been categorized differently according to different scholars (Dörnyei, 2014; Ellis, 2008; Robinson, 2002), anxiety has remained consistent across all three taxonomies.

In the 1980s, scholars started to pay attention to a specific kind of anxiety that is related to foreign language acquisition and achievement. In their ground-breaking paper laying a solid foundation for the study of FLA, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) defined foreign language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to

classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). The authors distinguished foreign language anxiety from other types of anxiety, generated from the special context of a foreign language classroom. Moreover, they indicated that such anxiety goes beyond mere feelings, and is also reflected in learners’ behaviors.

Another definition was given by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), that foreign language anxiety is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon which refers to “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language [L2] contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (p. 284). This definition adds more detail to the “language learning process” in the definition of Horwitz *et al.* (1986) and suggests multiple second language contexts. In terms of speaking, listening and learning of a second language, a classroom is a typical context. In the studies mentioned above, the authors carried out research mainly based on a classroom setting. However, language anxiety can arise in both classroom and non-classroom settings, in academic settings as well as non-academic settings, especially for international students. For an international student, a language learning setting may include classroom conversations, communication among peers or with teachers out of the classroom, daily communication out of school, etc. In the present study, I consider contexts associated with language learning, involving both classroom settings and non-classroom settings, to get a comprehensive understanding of foreign language anxiety and its impacts.

### ***Understanding Foreign Language Anxiety***

#### **Components of Foreign Language Anxiety**

Horwitz, *et al.* (1986) identified three components of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. First, communication

apprehension refers to “a type of shyness characterized by fear or anxiety about communicating with people” (p. 127), suggesting that due to foreign language anxiety, language users may be reluctant or withdraw from a communicative situation, though in fact they are able to manage it. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) explained communication apprehension as “the metacognitive awareness that, as a speaker and a listener, full comprehension of foreign language messages is not possible” (p. 104). Under the influence of such a belief, anxious language users often rate their language proficiencies as insufficient, even for those who actually have intermediate or even advanced proficiencies. In her case study on foreign language anxiety, Godfrey-Smith (2017) suggests that “breakdowns in communication have the potential to be anxiety-inducing for individuals of any proficiency” (p.182).

Second, the test anxiety component is “a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure” (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986, p. 127). Test-anxious students often attach too much importance to tests or exams, trying to achieve a perfect performance, and thus become stressed. They may over-study or they may underestimate their performance on quizzes or exams, assuming that they are not able to understand the test materials and questions. However, later research on Japanese language learning (Aida, 1994) does not support what Horwitz *et al.* (1986) claimed, “Items 2, 6, and 19 which were considered by Horwitz *et al.* to be indicative of test anxiety, failed to load on any of the factors.” (p.162) A major difference between Aida (1994) and Horwitz *et al.* (1986) is the target languages, which were Japanese and Spanish respectively. Therefore, it implies that test anxiety varies across different languages.

Third, fear of negative evaluation is considered as “the avoidance of evaluative situations, apprehension and/or expectation of negative evaluations from others” (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986, p. 128). According to Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009), the students interviewed reported avoiding

speaking activities for two reasons; one is a belief that they were not good at speaking, which is a negative self-evaluation, while the other is a belief that they should produce faultless sentences. In Gregersen (2002), “the high-anxious participants in this study tended to fear the evaluation of their peers and the subsequent possibility of appearing foolish” (p. 567). Yan and Horwitz (2008) found a similar situation that foreign language learners feel a gap between them and their peers due to the impact of language anxiety, “Many students in the highly anxious group reported that they felt there was a large gap between them and their peers in many language learning abilities—comprehension, memorization, logical abilities. The more anxious learners generally rated themselves as lower in ability than did people in the moderate and low anxiety groups” (p.171). From previous research, I find that language learners with higher anxiety levels tend to self-evaluate their language abilities more negatively. This situation may be worse when international students are put into an environment where their peers are native speakers of the foreign language.

### **Effects of Foreign Language Anxiety**

Although the term “anxiety” seems to associate more often with words for negative emotion like nervousness, fear, or worry, it doesn’t necessarily impose a negative effect on a language user. According to Scovel (1978), there are two possible types of effects generated by language anxiety: one is *facilitating* anxiety which “motivates the learner to ‘fight’ the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behavior”. The other is *debilitating* anxiety, which, in contrast, “motivates the learner to ‘flee’ the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behavior” (p. 139). According to Horwitz *et al.* (1986), anxiety is debilitating; that is, they hold the opinion that language anxiety contributes

directly to learners' poor linguistic performance. On the other hand, some researchers believe that anxiety has a facilitating effect on language learning. Spielman and Radnofsky (2001) investigated the anxiety of adult learners of French in an intensive summer program. They found that students experienced two kinds of tension (i.e., euphoric and dysphoric). The former plays a positive role while the latter imposes a negative effect on learning. Therefore, for different targeted languages, language anxiety may produce different effects on the students. It is worthwhile to investigate what the case is for Chinese international secondary school students learning English in Montreal.

### **Sources of Foreign Language Anxiety**

Besides studying the effects, researchers also investigate the causes of foreign language anxiety. Young (1994) examined a series of empirical research on language anxiety and suggested three interrelated sources of foreign language anxiety: the learner, the instructor, and the institutional practices. Young then classified these anxiety-provoking sources into five categories, that is, anxiety stemming from personal and interpersonal anxieties, from role-related beliefs about language teaching, from instructor-learner interactions, from classroom procedures, and from aspects of language testing (p.31).

Likewise, Awan, Anwar and Anjun (2010) identified some sources closely related to language anxiety, that is, speaking in front of others, being unable to talk spontaneously, worried about pronunciation, fear of being misunderstood, talking to unfamiliar classmates, worry about grammatical mistakes, embarrassment in using broken English, and comparing one's ability with others (p. 38).

To gain more insight for the current study focusing on Chinese international students, I narrowed down my focus to reading literature involving this student body. Yan and Horwitz (2008) conducted a qualitative study with six graduate students from China at an institution in the United States. In this study, the “bidirectional relationship” between foreign language anxiety and other variables were investigated. The authors found that comparison with peers, learning strategies, language learning interest and motivation are the “most immediate sources of anxiety” (p. 173).

To sum up, there are multiple sources of language anxiety; academic, cultural or social factors are all possible sources that cause the feeling of anxiety and result in behaviors triggered by language anxiety. Identifying the main factors that lead to foreign language anxiety of Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal may enable us to come up with corresponding strategies to deal with the most anxiety-provoking problems.

### ***Measuring Foreign Language Anxiety***

To quantify learners’ anxiety levels and facilitate further studies on foreign language anxiety, Horwitz *et al.* (1986) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure the anxiety levels of university students. This 33-item Likert-scale instrument and the adapted versions of this general foreign language anxiety scale have been widely used in later studies (Awan et al., 2010; Cheng & Erben, 2012; Liu & Chen, 2014; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Zhao, 2013). This scale has been further modified to meet different research purposes, for example, a Foreign Language Writing Anxiety Scale (FLWAS) (Liu & Ni, 2015). In the study of Xiao and Wong (2014), the authors not only use the general scale FLCAS, but also several other scales, including a Writing Anxiety Scale, a Speaking Anxiety Scale, a



Listening Anxiety Scale, a Reading Anxiety Scale, and a Preliminary Heritage Language Anxiety Scale.

The scale developed by Horwitz *et al.* (1986), or variants of it, have been applied widely across a large number of studies on foreign language anxiety. However, using a scale as the main instrument or conducting a quantitative study has some disadvantages. A quantitative instrument may “fail to reveal the learners’ real situations and experiences” (Shao, Yu & Ji, 2013, p. 924). Compared with quantitative research, qualitative research “requires mediative or reflective thinking rather than calculative thinking” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p.36). In the current study, I decide to adopt a qualitative approach, with interviews as the main instrument, to “add breadth, depth, and richness to our understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of the individuals having the experience” (Godfrey-Smith, 2017, p. 204).

### ***Interrelating Foreign Language Anxiety and Other Individual Differences (IDs)***

Since anxiety is one of the multiple variables of individual differences (IDs), which are a set of stable psychological factors, it is not possible to investigate anxiety without considering other factors. Therefore, in previous academic research, foreign language anxiety has been associated with other factors of IDs and its correlation with several other factors has been identified, for example, unwillingness to communicate (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Liu, 2018), self-rating of second language proficiency (MacIntyre, Noels & Clément, 1997; Dewaele & Ip, 2013; Liu, 2018), emotional intelligence (Dewaele, Petrides & Furnham, 2008; Shao *et al.*, 2013), self-perceptions (Yan & Horwitz, 2008), and motivation (Liu & Huang, 2011). From the existing research, it can be understood that language anxiety, as a significant factor, closely interrelates

with other psychological variables. Therefore, in the current study, I focus on foreign language anxiety, but at the same time, I note if other IDs appear in the data.

### **International Secondary School Students as a Vulnerable Group and Cross-cultural Adaptation**

In recent years, an increasing number of Chinese students have been going abroad for study purposes. The Chinese term 留学 (Liu Xue) has gained increasing popularity among Chinese students and parents. Literally speaking, 留学 (Liu Xue) means “study during staying”, which implies a temporary or short-term stay with an academic purpose. Therefore, the concept of a sojourner reflects the Chinese meaning of this term, referring to temporary and voluntary residence.

Sojourners have been regarded as a special group of people with distinctive characteristics who are worth studying. According to Kinginger (2009), “a sojourn abroad is normally considered to be a crucial step in the development of ability to use a language in a range of communicative settings.” (p. 4-5).

As many international students stay in a new environment temporarily, the term “sojourner adjustment” is often used to refer to the students’ attempts to achieve “a fit between themselves and the new learning environment through learning either to change self or environment without necessarily relinquishing their inherited beliefs about learning” (Wang, 2015, p. 91). Therefore, when an international secondary school student gets into a foreign language context, there may be conflicts between the student and the environment, which negatively impact on their studies.

Studies have shown that sojourner students may experience some problems due to the situation they are in, since their use of the foreign language goes so much more beyond the classroom setting. “Students abroad potentially observe, participate, and communicate in classrooms, homes, personal relationships, service learning, or commercial interactions” (Kinging, 2009, p. 5). In the research of Zheng and Berry (1991), the researchers specifically divided their participants: 30 local Chinese students in China, 68 Chinese sojourners in Canada, who were international students and visiting scholars, 28 Chinese-Canadian students, who were immigrants or second, third generation Canadians, and 33 non-Chinese Canadian students. The Chinese sojourners reported lower English fluency, lower ease of making friendships, more adaptation and communication problems, and lower subjective adaptation than non-Chinese Canadian, or Chinese-Canadian students. From this study, I find that although all the participants can all be generally categorized as Chinese students, we should distinguish Chinese sojourner learners from other groups of students due to their distinctive characteristics.

To investigate the difficulties Chinese international students encounter in their stay abroad, Wang (2015) conducted an ethnographic study of the learning experience of a group of Chinese postgraduate students during their overseas study in a British university and found that “when commencing their study in the British learning environment, the participants, more or less, felt a sense of loss or disorientation, followed by uncertainty and even fear” (p. 52). Through a thematic analysis and quantitative distribution, Wang (2015) categorized the obstacles Chinese sojourner learners face: (1) independent learning; (2) verbal participation; (3) “critical learning” (learning using critical thinking) and (4) teacher-student relations (p. 56). The second factor here is closely related to their second language status. As Wang (2015) explains, verbal participation is referred to as raising questions in class, speaking up in group discussions, joining

in group work, and giving presentations to the whole class (p. 64). These activities are regarded as part of their classroom performance, in which they need to do well to get a good score.

In her research, nearly all the participants felt they spoke less than their local peers and tended to attribute this “both to a Chinese culture of learning, which emphasizes on teachers’ lecturing and students’ listening rather than on discussing and communicating, and to their inadequate English proficiency” (p. 64), which indicates that an inherited stereotype of the organization of a class and their self-rated linguistic ability both restrain them from verbal participation. However, the analysis revealed that this was due not only to cultural and linguistic factors, but also to contextual situations. Taking all types of factors into account, the most prevalent factors are categorized as: (1) inherited classroom scripts, (2) language (English) inadequacy, (3) concern about ‘face’ and beyond, (4) lack of the necessary background knowledge and a biased curriculum, and (5) perception of a less supportive classroom atmosphere (p. 64). To elaborate: first, international students tend to have inherited ideas regarding communication patterns or teacher-student relationship in a classroom, which may be different from that of the culture of the host country. Second, the students self-evaluate themselves as incompetent in English communication, which hinders them from verbal participation. Third, students’ performance of using English is seen as a reflection or a defence of cultural identity. A person’s verbal participation is “to claim his cultural identity and win not personal but ‘national face’” (Wang, 2015, p. 70). Fourth, participating in communication involves mutual understanding between two different cultures, that of the international student and that of the host country. The host institution should therefore consider the perspective of international students and adjust the curriculum to make it more easily accepted by both international students and local students. If they do not, the lack of necessary background

knowledge and a biased curriculum may result in Chinese students' withdrawal from verbal participation. Finally, "a safe and benign classroom atmosphere" benefits verbal participation (Wang, 2015, p. 68).

Turning my attention to studies conducted in Canada, Through data gathered from one-on-one interviews and focus group discussion of Chinese international students in a Canadian university, I found that Zhang and Zhou (2010) identified themes which emerge during the international students' academic sojourn in Canada, including initial difficulties at arrival, residence issues, challenges, learning differences, and the impact of prior educational experiences at public, private or international high schools.

From the literature that I have read, I found that sojourner adjustment is an issue most international students have to face during their stay in a foreign language environment and cross-cultural adaptation may be difficult due to cultural, linguistic, or contextual factors. However, the studies mentioned above are about international university students. To learn more about the focus of my thesis, I reviewed studies about international secondary school students.

### ***International Secondary School Students: Unaccompanied Adolescent Sojourners***

When reading about research on international students, I found that the meaning of this term is very broad and can be narrowed down. First, by academic level, they can be divided into international students in primary schools, secondary schools, or universities. These can be further categorized into accompanied students and unaccompanied students, who may have different experiences and feelings abroad due to the presence or absence of their parents. Accompanied students go abroad with a parent or parents, while unaccompanied students arrive overseas without a parent. The latter need a guardian if they are underage, but a guardian will by

definition not share a relationship with the student as close as that between the students and their parents. Thus, problems may occur. For my study, my participants are unaccompanied adolescent sojourners. In the literature, these students are referred to using different terms, like “parachute kids” (Lee, 2014), or “unaccompanied sojourners” or “adolescent international students” (Kuo & Roysircar, 2006; Popadiuk, 2009). In this thesis, I use “international secondary school students” and “unaccompanied adolescent sojourners” interchangeably.

Lee (2014) used a retrospective way to learn about the experience upon arrival of some Korean adolescent sojourners. The participants recalled their experience as unaccompanied adolescents to study abroad and themes were identified. Firstly, (mal)adjustment to the host family. From the interviews, the author found that “regardless of the good or bad living condition students were put into, all participants expressed feeling difficult, weary, and stressed while adjusting to their new lives with the host family” (p. 40). The second problem is frequent movement. “Among the 10 students who participated in the study, all but one had moved host families at least once” (p. 41). The other themes include school and academic adjustment, relationship dynamics with parents, and coping with loneliness. Since unaccompanied adolescent sojourners are under-age and have to stay in a host family, they have to deal with the relationship between themselves and the host family, the relationship between themselves and their family at a long distance (which usually results in communication problems), and the relationship between themselves and their emotions, which requires them to regulate their emotional problems as best they can. As Lee (2014) found, “feeling lonely emerged in all aspects of the participants’ experiences, including host family experiences, being in school, learning English, and living away from parents and family” (p. 48).

More research has been conducted comparing unaccompanied adolescent sojourners with other groups of students. For example, Ying (2001) compared three groups of Chinese students: accompanied minors (those who migrated as children with their parents), unaccompanied minors (those who migrated as adolescents without their parents), and unaccompanied adults (those who migrated as adults without their parents). Kuo and Roysircar (2004) examined three groups of Chinese adolescents in Toronto, Canada: Canadian-born, immigrants, and international students (unaccompanied sojourners). Chiang-Horn (2004) compared unaccompanied Chinese sojourners, accompanied Chinese immigrant adolescents and American-born Chinese adolescents in terms of their academic, psychological, and behavioural adjustment. Through these studies, I find that unaccompanied adolescent sojourners are a group of learners who have unique characteristics and should be regarded as a special group among those who are generally called “international students”.

Kuo and Roysircar (2006) conducted a study of 201 Taiwanese adolescent unaccompanied sojourners about their cross-cultural adaptation process. One significant issue identified is the preparedness for overseas study. The authors found that one fifth of the students are not adequately prepared and do not make their own decision to study abroad. Other findings include that “a significant number of the current sample reported feeling ill-prepared (51%), not adequately oriented for studying abroad (41%), lacking information about Canada (74%), and feeling unclear about the purposes of coming to Canada (34%)” (p. 170). Identifying these issues is of significance to help future students to get better prepared for their studies abroad and can reduce the possibilities of suffering from challenges upon their arrival.

Another issue worth paying attention to is potential abuse and neglect. Popadiuk (2009) pointed out that “these issues could include physical, sexual, emotional, or financial abuses by

people they come into contact with in their daily lives, through the home-stay families with whom they live, or strangers” (p. 240).

To sum up, sojourner adjustment occurs in every moment of international students’ stay in a foreign language country, and it should be noticed that most of the activities related to cross-cultural adaptation also involve the use of the foreign language of these unaccompanied adolescent sojourners. Considering that there is limited research on unaccompanied adolescent sojourners and that previous studies primarily focus on quantitative rather than qualitative methods, the present thesis aims to conduct an in-depth qualitative study of Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal, who are unaccompanied adolescent sojourners immersed in a foreign language environment, to get their firsthand feelings and experiences during their sojourn in Canada.



## Chapter Three

## Methodology and Methods

### Methodology

According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994), “qualitative research is based on a phenomenological position, while quantitative research is based on a positivist position” (p. 3). Positivism is likely to be more objective, measurable with statistical approaches, but for the topic of foreign language anxiety, not all phenomena are measurable or generalizable. “Qualitative research, on the other hand, generally examines people’s words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways more closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 3). In this study, I aim to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact of foreign language anxiety on Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal. I was inspired to develop my methodology when I read the metaphor Anderson (1998) used in his book *Fundamentals of educational research*: “Like the mountain lake, qualitative research has many sources that contribute to its shape and substance. Just as the rain, snow and small mountain streams blend together uniting into one body of water, the multiple perspectives, differing theoretical positions, diverse methods of collecting, analyzing and interpreting data blend together to reveal a deep and rich form of research” (p. 126). Therefore, I chose to conduct a qualitative study because I believed this qualitative study would contribute to the enrichment of an understanding about students’ psychological characteristics, with an analysis of words rather than numbers.

In terms of research approach, I chose the narrative inquiry approach. Adopting the narrative inquiry approach does not mean simply to set down the stories of the participants, but also to interpret the data, because “a story can be research when it is interpreted in view of the literature of a field, and this process yields implications for practice, future research or theory

building” (Heigham & Croker, 2009, p. 46). Therefore, the approach of narrative inquiry is beneficial to yield practical pedagogical ideas, in conformity with the goal of the present study.

For the data collection method, I opted for interviews, more specifically, semi-structured interviews, which take into account both comparability and flexibility. According to Heigham and Croker (2009), the researcher knows “what topics need to be covered”, so “a degree of comparison is possible”, while interviews “allow sufficient flexibility to probe some aspects in depth” (Heigham & Croker, 2009, p. 185).

As a perspectival observer rather than an objective observer, I adopted thematic analysis as the data analysis method for my study. I consider thematic analysis appropriate for my research because, as Braun and Clarke (2006) define, thematic analysis is a method for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p.79). Instead of generating a theory or theoretical pattern, for example, using grounded theory analysis or phenomenological analysis, I use thematic analysis to present the themes I found in this qualitative study, and may compare them horizontally in the future with other studies on the same topic.

### **Recruitment and Consent of Participants**

I planned to conduct my research with 6-8 Chinese international students currently studying in Canadian secondary schools in Montreal. I referred to the purposeful sampling techniques Anderson (1998) provides in educational settings (p. 131). Based on the criteria followed, I decided on the research population of my study: the inclusion criteria were students who a) have finished the Junior High School level of education in China, b) have resided in Canada ranging from 3 months to 3 years, c) are studying at an English school board in Montreal.

The recruitment began from a Chinese social networking site, WeChat, which is the largest social platform and the most commonly used among Chinese students. I circulated the Letter of Recruitment (see Appendix A) as an electronic poster on the platform to which every WeChat user could freely get access. Those who showed an interest were asked to send me a private message informing me that they would like to participate in the research. Then, based on the criteria mentioned above, I sorted out my potential participants among those students who were willing to join the research. At the same time, a snowball sampling approach was also employed to try to better reach the targeted population. This meant that potential participants could also recommend to their friends that they participate in the study.

After selecting participants from those who responded to my recruitment letter based on my selection criteria mentioned above, I contacted each participant via e-mail. In the email, I attached the consent form in which I explained my study. They decided after reading it whether to take part in the study. When we met in person, I explained in detail and gave each participant a printed consent form to sign (see Appendix B). In the end, I finally conducted my study with 7 participants.

The time and place to hold the interviews were up to the participants to decide, to offer them “an empathetic choice of interview site and times” (McCarthy, 2016, p. 37). The interviews were in fact held in coffee shops in downtown Montreal, the quiet conversation section of a library and some open spaces the participants considered comfortable for talking. The reason for choosing these settings was that students are more likely to talk about their experiences and feelings in an environment that is familiar to them where they are comfortable and relaxed to express themselves.

Since my participants were underage, parental consent had to be taken into consideration. In the current study, the participants are secondary school students. When a student finishes junior high school (Secondary III in Quebec correspondingly) in China, they are expected to be 15-17 years old. Although they are under 18 years old, they are mature enough to give consent at their age. Moreover, most overseas students are independent enough to live abroad. I did in fact as certain that my participants could legally give consent without asking for the approval of their parents or legal guardians (M. Sarkar, personal communication, November 2017).

### **Participants**

Each participant was asked to fill out a form with some personal information, such as age, gender, and time of arrival in Montreal, etc. Table 2 shows the summary of background information about the seven participants. All participants were between 16-18 years old and finished junior high school level in China. There were five female and two male participants. Due to the difference between the educational system in Canada and China, my criterion to select secondary school students who finished junior high school might result in three different situations: first, they join in the corresponding grade of the first year of senior high school in China, that is, the 10<sup>th</sup> grade in Canada; second, they begin from a lower grade, starting from Grade 9; third, if they finish junior high school in China and go through part of senior high school, they may begin their secondary school studies in Montreal starting from the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, which is the last year of secondary school in Montreal. Secondary school students not in this age range either have not finished junior high level in China, or they apply to a CEGEP or a university instead of a secondary school in Montreal, which were not the populations I intended

to study. The participants who were selected and agreed to join my study all belonged to the first situation mentioned above.

Table 2 Background of Participants

	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Arrival in Montreal	Beginning Grade	School Board
1	<i>Gui</i>	Female	17	2016/08	Secondary III	English school board on the island of Montreal
2	<i>Lan</i>	Male	16	2016/08	Secondary III	
3	<i>Wei</i>	Male	16	2016/08	Secondary III	
4	<i>Yue</i>	Female	17	2016/07	Secondary III	
5	<i>Xing</i>	Female	17	2016/08	Secondary III	
6	<i>Ling</i>	Female	17	2017/02	Secondary III	English school board in Longueuil of Greater Montreal
7	<i>Yan</i>	Female	18	2017/02	Secondary III	

All the participants started their studies in Montreal from Secondary III (Grade 10), though two of them didn't arrive at the beginning of the academic year, but instead, started their studies in the winter semester.

### Semi-structured Interviews

In a qualitative study, data can be obtained in various forms. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) provide a range of sources, including “field notes of the shared experience, journal records, interview transcripts, others' observations, story telling, letter writing, autobiographical

writing, documents such as class plans and newsletters, and writing such as rules, principles, pictures, metaphors, and personal philosophies” (p. 5). Among these methods, I chose to do interviews. In his book, Anderson (1998) explains three advantages of performing an interview. First, people are more easily engaged in an interview than in completing a questionnaire (p.202). There is already rich research on foreign language anxiety using scales from the general Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986) to adapted scales derived from this very scale FLCAS. I preferred to use interviews rather than questionnaires because I hoped to elicit more personal experiences from the participants in a naturalistic way. The second advantage is that the interviewer can clarify questions and probe the answers of the respondent, providing more complete information than would be available in written form (Anderson, 1998, p. 202). The participants in my study are secondary school students. Since they are still underage and are in the process of forming a clear and independent way of thinking, I think it is more effective if the interviewer is there to explain the interview questions. This helps avoid possible misunderstanding. Third, interviewing enables the interviewer to “pick up on non-verbal cues, including facial expressions, tones of voice and, in the case of interviews conducted on the respondent’s turf, cues from the surroundings and context” (Anderson, 1998, p. 202). Quantitative methods, such as filling in questionnaires or completing Likert-scales, leave out non-verbal information that is not able to be revealed through data gained through written forms, or transformed into diagrams or statistical values. We all know that tones of voice may reveal hidden messages and reflect the emotions of a person. A recorded interview enables the researcher to notice them.

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews of around 60 minutes with each participant (see Appendix C, Interview Guidelines). A semi-structured interview format was

chosen because “it has the advantage of using questions specified in advance and the flexibility for more extensive follow-up of responses” (Liu, 2013, p.127). The interview included questions to probe participants’ understanding of foreign language anxiety, the problems they met in language learning and use, and the strategies they used to deal with those problems as well as the reasons why they adopted certain strategies.

In the face-to-face semi-structured interviews, questions were divided into four parts. In the first part, I asked participants about how they used their L2, i.e. English, at school, and about their overall feelings about learning through their L2 instead of their L1. I thought that starting to talk about their own experiences and feelings would help to make them feel comfortable and to come up with details and examples more easily. The second part focused on the four skills of their L2, listening, speaking, reading and writing, and whether they felt differently when using each skill, since previous quantitative studies have found that there is a gap between students’ expectation of the level of competence of these four skills needed in a particular situation and their self-evaluation of their level of competence, which results in language anxiety (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; Xiao & Wong, 2014). The third part was closely related to the first two parts because I asked them about the problems they encountered, behaviors adopted under the influence of foreign language anxiety, and strategies they employed to deal with the problems. I thought the flow from part 2 to part 3 was important in the interview because I hoped it could help participants to reflect on their behaviors based on how they used their L2 and on their emotions, rather than generally talking about school activities and classroom tasks. Part 4 consisted of some general questions to probe their ideas to see whether they could think about and share more feelings and experiences about foreign language anxiety.

### **Data Collection**

The interviews were held using a one-on-one format instead of a focus group.

Considering the characteristics of adolescents, “one-on-one questions promote adolescents to the empowering role of youthful experts” (Richards, as cited in McCarthy, 2016, p. 39). Given the researcher’s “full and undivided attention”, the adolescents are more likely to “explore underlying feelings and thoughts, and express deeper individual perceptions” without being influenced by the presence of other peers (McCarthy, 2016, p. 39).

During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to recall their past experiences of studying and living in Montreal. I tried to elicit their feelings and emotions generated in the experiences, especially feelings related to foreign language anxiety, but I carefully avoided using wording that would have implied negative feelings. When asking how they feel about a certain experience, I probed using the neutral words like “emotions” and “feelings” or giving positive emotion words and negative emotion words at the same time.

Since there was an age gap between the researcher and the participants, and the researcher is a language instructor, I adopted measures to avoid causing discomfort to the participants due to the age and profession of the researcher, in order to make sure the interview data would be unrestrained. According to Heigham and Croker (2009), “establishing a comfortable rapport with participants is crucial if we expect them to talk about their lives” (p. 50). Therefore, before the interviews began, I had conversations with the participants in Chinese, the first language of both parties, talking casually about their studies and lives, as well as my studies as a university student. During the conversations, I took the position of a student who shared similar experiences with them and wanted to talk with them about their life stories. I tried to develop a relationship with mutual trust and to create a relaxed conversation atmosphere to



reduce to a minimum the effect of my role as a teacher, which could have made them feel that they were supposed to give “correct” answers. The outcome of an interview can be enhanced “if the adolescents are relaxed with a known, trusted interviewer so the perception of adult authority is lessened” (Stewart & Shamdasani, as cited in McCarthy, 2016, p. 38). When I judged that the atmosphere and the students were opportune, I asked for their permission to start the interview proper.

Besides the relationship between the researcher and the participants, I also considered the impact of the language used in the interviews, because “adolescent interviewing is enhanced if the researcher has previously developed a close relationship with the participants and their first language community” (McCarthy, 2016, p. 37). All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the mother tongue of both the researcher and the participants, and audio-recorded. Each interview lasted for about an hour, so in total, seven hours of interview data were collected. After the interviews, the researcher first fully transcribed the audio recordings into Mandarin Chinese. Then the excerpts that were related to the research questions of the study were translated into English by the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

In the present study, I used thematic analysis as my data analysis method. In Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is suitable for qualitative research with various benefits: flexibility, accessibility to researchers with little or no experience of qualitative research, potential to highlight similarities and differences across the data set, to generate unanticipated insights, and so forth. (p. 97). I followed the steps introduced in Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarizing yourself with your data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4)

reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report (p. 87). I read through the interview data and identified the emerging themes related to my research questions. I first read and re-read the transcriptions using Microsoft Office Word and highlighted the codes with different colors. I then input the coded data in Microsoft Office Excel to identify any emerging themes.

In the process of coding the interview data, I began to reflect on my contact with Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal, since I have been offering tutorials to them on English school subjects. The excerpts of the participants greatly triggered my memories of the teaching experiences and evoked my self-reflection. Therefore, I decided to add autoethnography to my research methods. The nature of autoethnography is “ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation” (Chang, 2008, p. 48). As a method increasingly adopted in qualitative research, “autoethnographers use their personal experience as primary data” (Chang, 2008, p. 49). I considered autoethnography appropriate for my study because it “combines cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details” (Chang, 2008, p. 46). The benefits of autoethnography are introduced in Chang (2008) as: (1) it offers a research method friendly to researchers and readers; (2) it enhances cultural understanding to self and others; and (3) it has a potential to transform self and others to motivate them to work toward cross-cultural coalition building (p. 52). I added my data as an instructor/participant in the Results chapter, so that a perspective from an instructor would enrich the results of the present study.

## **Chapter Four                      Results**

After examining all the participants' interview transcripts, I found that most of these secondary school students were affected, to different degrees, by foreign language anxiety. In addition, foreign language anxiety affected their behaviors and their anxiety levels could be increased or reduced due to different factors. During the interviews, the participants also shared the challenges they had encountered and how they had faced them.

This chapter presents the qualitative data gathered from the participants' answers to the interview questions, which are elaborated based on the three research questions. I present relevant extracts from the interview data to support the theme of each subsection, followed by comments arising from my own experience tutoring students with very similar profiles. This makes this chapter a combination of ideas from students' and a tutor's perspectives. The first part of this chapter focuses on foreign language anxiety: (1) common existence of foreign language anxiety among the participants; (2) reactions and behaviors under the influence of foreign language anxiety; (3) factors that cause foreign language anxiety; (4) practices that reduce foreign language anxiety. The following part identifies the academic challenges the participants have encountered and the coping strategies they have adopted. The last part presents some different characteristics between the Canadian and Chinese educational systems and their teaching features.

### **Foreign Language Anxiety**

#### ***Common Existence of Foreign Language Anxiety***

In the interviews, all participants expressed their negative feelings aroused in communicative circumstances using English. From the excerpts, I found that foreign language

anxiety not only arises in classroom settings but also in non-classroom settings. English oral communication was the most frequent context in which foreign language anxiety arose.

When talking about communicating with English speakers upon her arrival in Montreal, *Xing* recalled her experience as one of being ill-prepared. Her confidence was “shaken” and the incomprehensible input and “colloquial” way of talking by other English speakers caused negative emotions:

I felt that I hadn't made enough preparations. After I arrived, my confidence was shaken, because I didn't understand anything in the first week. I felt that I was wasting my time, and I couldn't accept it in my heart (...) I just asked myself, “what could I do? I don't understand anything.” I was so hopeless. (*Xing*)

After all, students are not like teachers. They may be more colloquial. Since I don't understand, then I will think that, ‘fine, forget it.’ I am quite afraid to talk to them. (*Xing*)

In *Ling*'s experience, she recalled herself being “nervous” and “reluctant” in both daily communication context, as well as classroom setting:

When I first came, I didn't dare to communicate with foreigners [English speakers]. I was afraid that they would not understand what I was saying, so when I spoke, I was particularly nervous. (*Ling*)

[In a group discussion, the teacher] will ask you to discuss (...) At the beginning, I was very reluctant, because you are forced to talk to a large group of foreigners [English speakers]. (*Ling*)

*Yue*'s negative emotions was triggered due to her worry about not being able to convey and receive linguistic information in English. In addition to this, she was anxious about being unable to respond to others properly in English, which restrained her from participating verbally:

When I first came, I was relatively scared. Because I was afraid that I couldn't understand what others were saying, and that others couldn't understand what I was talking about. I was afraid of communication. (*Yue*)

Sometimes, someone shares a happy experience with me. However, I don't know how to respond to him, that is, I am listening, but I don't know how to respond to him in his way (...) In fact, under such circumstance, I am quite anxious. In the end, I just smiled, or nodded. (*Yue*)

*Wei* was bothered by foreign language anxiety in class because he couldn't understand what the teacher said. Also, when international students only took up a small proportion of the class, this added to his anxiety level:

Usually I will not volunteer to speak at class, unless the teacher calls me. Even if he asks me, I am not sure what he is asking, which is very embarrassing. (*Wei*)

In my English and French classes, there are mainly international students. But in my science class, in total there are only two international students. The science class is particularly stressful. (*Wei*)

*Yan* mentioned her stage fright when presenting in front of the class, and the nervousness even began the night before the presentation, showing that doing presentations is quite anxiety-provoking for her:

It was my turn [to present news headlines]. I had been nervous for the whole night before, looking for news on the Internet and trying to make it interesting to everyone. (...) my voice was shaking, because I was sitting in front of everyone. (*Yan*)

When I asked about her memories about using English upon arrival, *Gui* recalled her avoidance and nervousness. She stated, "Before [upon arrival], I would avoid participating and

escaped if I could.” “If the same situation happens in the first year, I would be like, super nervous, worrying that the day of speaking publicly is coming.”

*Lan* had some similar experiences and emotions in common with other participants.

When we talked about doing classroom presentations, he said he was nervous, and the nervousness affected his performance. She said, “When I was doing classroom presentations, I was quite nervous.” “The anxiety has something to do with language use, for example, I suddenly forget the pronunciation of certain words.”

#### *A tutor’s reflections:*

As participants mentioned a lot of emotional experiences upon arrival, I reflected on my experiences as a tutor with various Chinese international secondary school students. If I go back to what happened in the international students’ timeline upon arrival specifically, the students I have encountered can be put into two groups. One is those students who ask for some tutorials before they really start their studies in a Montreal secondary school. The other group is the students who come to me for tutorials some time after their first semester in Montreal begins.

Leaving aside the learning outcomes these two groups of students achieved, since this varies a lot depending on how strong the individual student is academically, the two groups of students had very different experiences in terms of their emotions, according to my observation. For those who I began to teach before the start of school, their feelings were mainly the expectation of a new life, with a little bit of anxiety about the unknown. A small number of students had mild anxiety, but basically there was not much obvious negative emotion. In addition, these students were quite proactive in asking about, or being willing to know about, the difficulties and challenges that they may encounter after school starts.

However, when I met those students who sought tutorials after the semester started, for example, after the first semester or in the middle of the first semester, many of them had encountered some failure or obstacles in their studies. It was more common and evident to see negative emotions, such as anxiety, frustration or worry, in them.

Pondering on what I have observed, I noticed another factor that possibly affect students' emotional experience upon arrival, that is, whether the student played an active or a passive role in making the decision to study abroad. When Chinese international secondary school students make the decision themselves and willingly prepare for their sojourns, they tend to be mentally better prepared to face the unknown challenges and thus less anxious upon arrival. However, some students are indifferent or reluctant to seeking further studies overseas. As a result, they are more likely to be daunted by the overwhelming use of English upon arrival, which generates negative emotions.

### ***Reactions Under the Influence of Foreign Language Anxiety***

Since I identified foreign language anxiety in every one of the participants, I reviewed the interview data to find their behaviors and reactions under the influence of foreign language anxiety.

***Avoidance.*** A reaction commonly found among the participants is avoidance. When the participants were engaged in communicative situations, including classroom communicative tasks and daily communications with other English speakers, many participants chose to avoid or withdraw from verbal communication:

Last year [the time of her arrival], I basically had ‘zero communication’ with the local students. Even if they greeted me, I just greeted them back, but no further communication. (*Gui*)

My ability to express myself may not be very good, and you have to discuss with the English-speaking classmates, so basically, I just sit there listening to and looking at them. (*Ling*)

We have written a response in this recent exam. Many local students in the class score 95 points or more. They all have a high level of writing skills. I am the only international student in the class, who doesn’t understand anything. So, I never speak in the English class. (*Yan*)

The participants above all chose to withdraw from communicative tasks or situations due to their negative emotions triggered by using English. Moreover, *Yan* indicated one more reason for her avoidance, which was that her insufficient language proficiency might affect the teacher or classmates:

If you raise your hand [volunteering to answer the question], but you say very slowly, and there may be stuttering, (...) I feel that I may influence the teacher's entire teaching plan, or that the classmates want to answer questions, (...) If I raise my hand, then others will have no chance to speak. (*Yan*)

***Over-studying.*** One participant, *Yan*, was test-anxious because of the peer pressure from the local classmates. As with many other participants, math and science are regarded as relatively easy subjects because the content involved in these subjects in a Chinese classroom tends to be more difficult. Therefore, in math and science classes, the international students think they have already learned most of the class content and thus expect to get good scores. When *Yan* found



that she didn't manage to do this in her math class, she had a tendency of over-studying due to test anxiety:

Sometimes, I may think, 'I have already learned it in China. Why didn't I score as high as others?' Because of this, I will learn more diligently than before. I will go home and search for some exercises on the Internet to practise. (*Yan*)

***Reluctance to Communicate with Teachers or Failure to Achieve Mutual***

***Understanding.*** It is not uncommon to see that Chinese international students choose not to communicate with their teachers. There are several reasons that have contributed to this situation. One participant regarded her personality as the reason for her reluctance to communicate with teachers:

The teacher sometimes talks to you about your past. Generally, I don't think I really like to participate in such conversation. I prefer to listen to others and not to express myself (...) Maybe firstly, it's a question about my personality. I don't really like to take the initiative to communicate with others. (*Yue*)

*Yue* also indicates that, on the one hand, she was afraid that she couldn't make herself understood, while on the other hand, she was worried that she couldn't understand what the teachers said. She was afraid that she cannot achieve mutual understanding with teachers:

The second reason is that my expression may not be clear, and I won't be able to understand what the teacher tells me. Therefore, it is easier to ask for help from a classmate. (*Yue*)

Another participant expressed the same idea:

I didn't understand some of the homework requirements. I wanted to ask the teacher, but I couldn't make my question understood. Although the teacher is willing to help, I can't express my problem. (*Wei*)

*Ling* also felt the same way, and she said, "I am afraid that the teacher can't understand what I ask, and the teacher misinterprets the meaning. And I am afraid that I can't understand what he says."

For another participant, although she attempted to seek help from a teacher, the result didn't turn out to be effective:

For the teacher here, you may have to explain your question many times before he can finally understand what you are asking, understand your point. Sometimes the teacher tries hard to explain to you, but you find that the answer is not at the point. So, I have to ask the question several times. (*Yue*)

This reluctance to communicate with teachers resulted in the fact that the students either gave up communicating or turned to Chinese classmates. *Wei* gave up asking, saying, "Because I fail to communicate with the teacher, then I simply don't ask the teacher. I just look for information myself or ask Chinese classmates." Another participant also did the same thing:

I am more dependent on asking Chinese classmates, because I don't dare to communicate with the teachers. So, I usually ask my classmates. Even if sometimes I ask the teacher, I am afraid I can't understand. (*Ling*)

***Preference to Stay with Chinese Classmates.*** The participants tend to stay with Chinese classmates. Seeking help from a Chinese classmate would often be their first choice. One participant shared the different situations of hanging out with local students and with Chinese students:

In the first year, I didn't like to talk to local students. I usually stayed with Chinese students as much as I could. Plus, there were many Chinese in the classes I chose. But in other regular classes [without many Chinese students], I would leave the classroom as soon as I finished the class without much talking to them. (*Gui*)

One participant indicated that asking a Chinese international student was easier for her: It is better to ask Chinese students questions, because some problems are relatively difficult to express. I cannot explain clearly even in Chinese, not to mention in English. Because my Chinese classmates and I all speak Chinese, their answers are very clear. (*Yue*)

Also, asking a Chinese student would be the solution when asking a teacher doesn't work, as *Ling* put it, "If asking the teacher doesn't work, since there certainly are some Chinese students in the class, I will ask those Chinese."

However, *Ling* also realized that despite her preference to stay with Chinese students, asking her to cooperate with local students was the teachers' way to help her:

Of course, in my mind, staying with the Chinese is definitely my preference, but I know that the teacher is trying to help me, letting me talk to them [local students]. I know he is doing good to me, so I accept his help despite my preference. (*Ling*)

When the participants are to finish some task in class, they also tend to group with the Chinese students. However, some participants depended on this solution and thus lost their motivation to learn in class. One participant talked about how he and some classmates depended on certain Chinese students to finish learning tasks:

For example, group discussion. I just find a few Chinese who also do not speak English well and pass that time chitchatting. Then, when we are to present to the class, we

generally look for one student in our group who is good at English and do whatever he tells us to. Like doing the poster, we don't know the subject, we don't quite understand the subject of the article, or how the poster text should be written. Then we just follow what he says. We rely on this kind of cooperation to do posters and classroom presentations.

(*Wei*)

Another reason why the participants tend to stay with Chinese students is that the local classmates have already been friends for a long time and the Chinese students are new in the class, which causes their failure in integrating into the group. *Yan* shared her experience:

Many people in our school have been in the same school since elementary school. Many foreigners [local students] are together as a group. When a Chinese newly arrives, at first, the local students may warmly welcome you, but they later discover that you tend to belong to a Chinese circle, so they will gradually separate from you, and return to their own circle. Then you have to find the Chinese circle. So I almost speak Chinese all the time at school. (*Yan*)

Another cause of this phenomenon is about cultural difference, as one participant explained:

Because of the different cultures, (...) for example, when we hang out with local students, what we want to eat does not appeal to them, thinking this does not taste good or they are not used to the taste. But on the other hand, we are not accustomed to the food they like to eat. There may be a little discrepancy. Therefore, I usually hang out with the Chinese. After all, the language is more convenient, and we talk more freely. In terms of food and other stuff, we have similar preference because of the same cultural background. (*Yan*)

***Emotional Breakdown.*** Doing a presentation is not only about writing down one's ideas or preparing one's speech, but it also requires emotion regulation. *Yan* recalled her experience of doing a presentation, before which she had a hard time dealing with this assignment, even conflicting with her mother because of the assignment:

Before public speech this semester, I have been preparing my script. It was the first time that I remembered such a long English speech by heart. I spent a lot of time, but I still couldn't remember it well, so I was in a state of collapse. (...) When I was writing the script, my mom often talked to me, so I became impatient and a bit bad-tempered with her. My mom felt insulted. But after that, I felt sorry and a little regretful, but I am embarrassed to say sorry to her. (*Yan*)

However, when I then asked about how she coped with her stress or anxiety, *Yan* said she would just "swallow" it, without seeking help from anyone:

I won't talk to anyone about my stress and problems. Because, first, the host family will not care about my stress or anything, and they will not help you. Then, the classmates, you and the classmates are under the same circumstance. You have the same pressure. Why should anyone listen to you complaining? For my parents, if I talk about the problems, Mom and Dad will be worried about me. So, I just swallow them. (*Yan*)

*A tutor's reflections:*

When I reviewed the transcripts and read about the participants' behaviors under the influence of foreign language anxiety, I recalled what my students had shared with me or even complained to me about their problems of communicating with their teachers. Many anxious students I encountered were unwilling to communicate with their teachers. Even if I made efforts

to encourage them, they were not likely to go. Just like the participants in my research, I observed that many Chinese international secondary school students tend to rely on turning to classmates for help instead of teachers, especially to their Chinese-speaking classmates.

However, this may cause errors in information transmission. In my experience, some students came to me with their assignments. I asked them what the requirements were for the assignment, yet many of them had no idea or just retold me some sentences summarizing the requirements, which were usually begun by “my classmate said that ...”. Not all of them could read carefully through the requirements. According to my observation, this is likely to cause a misunderstanding for the teacher, who will think that this student is not serious enough with the assignments and his attitude toward study is problematic. The issue of not meeting assignment requirements is understood by the students in an emotional way. I have had several similar experiences, in which my students attributed their poor scores to their teachers deliberately flunking them, rather than to their failure to meet the assignment requirements.

Another issue that bothers the Chinese students a lot is plagiarism. What’s worse, this issue aggravates due to the lack of communication and mutual understanding between teachers and students. Some Chinese students are used to extracting information from the Internet, without properly quoting the information source. Many of them do this, unaware that it is plagiarism. They make this mistake because they do not have a clear and full understanding of the definition of plagiarism and what actions constitute plagiarism. As far as I recalled from my own experience, the first time I learned to cite a source or a quote from other people was when I wrote my undergraduate thesis. Throughout all the exams from primary to high school, there is no such requirement like “you have to put page numbers in parentheses” or “you have to indicate the author if this is not your own sentence,” and there is no such section as “sources/references”

in any of my homework before postsecondary period. Take writing a composition in a Chinese (here as a school subject) exam for example. Of course, students quote from some famous people, but from my perspective, we write “according to this famous historical figure ...” with the purpose to enhance the richness of the text content and to strengthen the argument, instead of referring to the source of the quote.

In my opinion, this issue about plagiarism could generate from the writing task itself. There is a sentence that commonly appears in the writing tasks in the Chinese exams. The literal translation is: “there is no limitation on styles, except for poems”. This means a student can write a literary text, like a prose or a narrative story, but also can write an argumentative essay. Consequently, there is no clear distinction between creative writing and academic writing. Therefore, Chinese students usually begin to learn academic writing in the university period. When the Chinese international secondary school students arrive in Canada, writing academically is something new for them.

Plagiarism is a serious problem for teachers in Canadian high schools and beyond, because it violates academic integrity. In Canada, the importance of academic integrity is emphasized gradually throughout the curriculum and students learn step by step how to cite properly. However, the Chinese international secondary school students are not fully aware of the seriousness of this issue, and lack guidance. Meanwhile they are unwilling to communicate with the teachers, which results in a bad situation for both sides: teachers question the students’ attitude or integrity, considering them as dishonest with an “attitude problem”; students are frustrated with the teachers’ scores or comments and react in an emotional way, believing that the teachers intentionally flunk them.

In my own teaching experience, even though the students' English writing proficiency was not improved immediately, the students were able to get much a better score after I seriously analyzed and explained the importance of academic integrity and helped students to complete the assignments and finished citations and references. Moreover, the students' motivation to learn was obviously promoted and some students even confessed to me that it was their misunderstanding towards the teachers that blocked their progress.

### ***Factors that Cause or Increase Foreign Language Anxiety***

Knowing that some behaviors of Chinese international secondary school students were caused by foreign language anxiety, I went through the data to identify the factors which increased the participants' foreign language anxiety. *Gui* indicated her reason why she chose not to continue talking in a conversation. She was afraid that she couldn't understand the answer or the explanation, so she just didn't ask the question or ask for clarification at all:

In the first year, if I didn't understand, I probably wouldn't ask further questions, because I felt that if I asked more, maybe I still wouldn't understand his explanation, which would be more confusing. So, when he finished, then I just replied 'um', nodded, and smiled. I wouldn't go any further. Then actually I didn't really know what he said, but the conversation was over. (*Gui*)

In addition to not understanding others, *Yan* also attributed her anxiety to the fast speed of native speakers' speeches:

After my arrival here, what I felt first was that the foreigners [English speakers] spoke so fast that I couldn't understand, that is, I couldn't catch up with their speed. When they



said something, I might ask again and again for clarification, which finally made them quite annoyed. (*Yan*)

Another participant pointed out that poor pronunciation was the factor. *Ling* said, “At the beginning, when you talked with them, you were afraid that your pronunciation was not standard and that what you said didn’t make sense to them.”

Other than pronunciation, *Yue* felt that the need to speak perfect English when communicating and speaking non-standard English may cause pressure to both parties of the conversation:

I would postpone communicating with foreigners [English speakers] until I have proficient English speaking and listening skills, because communicating with my poor English causes stress to me and the English speaker in the conversation with me. (*Yue*)

Lack of confidence and limited vocabulary are two reasons that add to the participants’ anxiety:

You know that your vocabulary is small, and then your voice will become lower. When your voice is getting lower, you will doubt whether you are saying it correctly when being asked. Then you are less and less willing to talk. In the eyes of others, you are particularly shy, don’t like talking, and then others will rarely talk to you. (*Yan*)

Doing presentations is the most anxiety-provoking activity according to the interviews of the participants. The use of English itself has been a challenge for the students, not to mention the difficulty of the task content. One participant put it this way:

I think the hardest part is the class presentation, which is public speech. (...) I feel that it is really brave of me to do a public speech, because it is not your first language, then you have to stand on stage and speak. It is very difficult for me. (*Ling*)

The peer pressure from the English-speaking classmates around them has increased the language anxiety the Chinese international secondary school students feel. *Yue* stated, “I found that the students around me are so good in English, while I can't keep up with them, and then I am more anxious.”

In addition, the peer pressure is combined with test anxiety, which together cause anxiety in the participant. On the one hand, students tend to self-evaluate negatively; on the other hand, they also assume that there is a gap between their peers and themselves regarding English competency. Seeing that the classmates performed much better, the participants indicated that this put pressure on them:

But the classmates all finish the tasks. The people around me all finish, and some of them even score very high. I feel pessimistic, on the one hand, but I am very anxious, wanting to do it well. (*Yue*)

Fear of evaluation also occurs when students expect negative evaluations from others. As a method to promote her willingness to communicate with English speakers, *Xing*'s homestay host encouraged her to do a task, withdrawing money at the bank counter, by herself. *Xing* shared her feelings and the reason why she felt anxious:

(...) they were just very simple words, but I couldn't understand, and I couldn't express clearly because of nervousness. (...) When there are Chinese people watching me, I am very nervous. (...) Because I think foreigners are good at English, they can guess what I am saying, and they are able to understand me. If there is a Chinese listening, I will feel embarrassed. They will judge, I am not saying this correctly, or my pronunciation is wrong. (*Xing*)

*Ling* indicated that she had thought that others would see her in a negative way, but she later discovered that it was not the case, “When you don't know anyone, you are afraid that foreigners may slightly discriminate against you because you are Chinese, but in fact, most people are very friendly.”

A participant was burdened with the pressure to make progress and not letting her parents down, which was the reason for her anxiety and pressure:

Maybe you don't want your parents to be disappointed, (...) Anyway, you have come out, why not try your best at least once? You did not learn well in China, why not try once in a foreign country? It is a little stressful, especially recently, before the end of Term 2. The attitude of Mom and Dad is that I send you abroad to let you grow up happily, but for me, if I don't do well, my parents have to comfort me while also worrying about me. So, I just want to reduce their worries. Sometimes I will put pressure on myself (...) Sending me abroad has definitely put pressure on my parents. It is like a gamble. Since I am already here, I will study hard, and earn myself a better life, at least. (*Yan*)

Another participant also had a similar opinion, stressed about making progress:

When I went back to China on summer vacation, and my parents asked me how good my English is. Then I thought that I have come to Montreal for more than a year and if I didn't make any progress, I was not contented with it. (*Xing*)

In addition, she said that studying abroad is a decision with “no retreat”:

I just try hard listening even if I can't understand. Just listen, just listen and guess.

Because I feel that there is no retreat. If I return to China, people will talk, this is an even

worse choice for me than staying here [facing the difficulties]. Therefore, since other classmates can do it, I should be able to make it too. (*Xing*)

One participant even thought about the next stage of her studies, worrying about her admission to a CEGEP:

Whenever I have a lot of homework, I would rather not touch my favourite musical instrument and I will do the homework first. If my grades are not good and thus, I fail to get admitted to a CEGEP, it will be shameful for me if I go back to China. (*Yan*)

*A tutor's reflection:*

Indeed, some factors that increase students' language anxiety come from something related to the language itself, such as pronunciation, or the speed of speaking. However, anxiety also arises when the reasons seem irrelevant to the language. For example, not letting parents down, peer pressure, losing 'face' and even applying for a CEGEP could become factors that aggravate language anxiety. Because speaking English involves so many factors which may all possibly present challenges to Chinese international secondary school students, it is quite difficult for a teacher to fully understand them without appropriate training in teaching ESL, especially native English speaker teachers with little personal knowledge of the challenges faced by immigrants. As I noted in the section "A Comparison of Educational Systems of Quebec and China", teachers in an English school in Montreal are not trained to teach ESL students due to the special characteristics of the Quebec education system. Since there is not a uniform guideline, teachers cope in their own ways. As far as I know from my students, many English teachers kindly offer extra lessons, tutorials or office hours to help international students.

However, these measures do not always work because some students told me that the teacher organizes extra lessons in the same way as a regular class, which is just as confusing for them.

### ***Factors that Reduce Foreign Language Anxiety***

The Chinese international secondary school students are anxious for various reasons. Now that I have identified the factors that increase foreign language anxiety in the previous section, it is also important to identify the factors that reduce it. In the previous part, it was found that speaking in public is a difficult task for the participants. However, there are some cases in which the participants feel confident to talk in front of others, that is, to begin by **talking about something familiar** to them. *Yan* shared an experience in which she felt comfortable using English to talk with others about China:

I attended a country fair. We Chinese international students introduced China as a group. It was a great effort at that time, and we had costumes shipped from China. (...) In the activity, we taught foreigners how to use chopsticks, and I repeated my sentences so many times that day, (...) I was more and more fluent (...) I think because in the country fair, you are introducing Chinese things, you are particularly confident about Chinese things (...) I felt very happy when I returned home. (*Yan*)

Another practice that reduces the students' anxiety is **the possibility of bringing aids to exams**. According to *Ling*, in China, exams were given with strict rules, without permission to bring any aids. However, she was less nervous because she could bring some aids with her:

I was super, super nervous when I took a test in China. I was particularly nervous every time. Here, for example, science tests, unlike China, allow you to use the calculator, to

bring ‘memory’ with some formulas. I think here exams are more human than in China.

(*Ling*)

Writing a response here is similar to the Chinese reading comprehension. (...) I think this [writing a response] is not as rigid as the Chinese one [reading comprehension questions], and this is quite good. Then, like history exams, it will give you ‘documents’, which helps me to answer. There will be less pressure. (*Ling*)

***Help from Teachers.*** When *Xing* recalled the help that she gained from her teachers, she though, “All the help from teachers is quite straightforward. I ask them and they will answer me directly and clearly.” Since one major challenge for the students is their linguistic inadequacy, many of them received help from teachers regarding this aspect. One participant talked about the teacher’s help to her during exams:

During an exam, when we are reading a question, it may be because we are Chinese, and we don’t understand it very well, the teacher will patiently help you explain what it means. (*Ling*)

Another participant received help with her homework:

When we read, the teacher will tell us some skills. After class, he will tell us what the homework is, asking if he needs to put it down for us on paper. He also says, ‘if you don’t understand, don’t hesitate to ask me’. I think it really helps me. (*Ling*)

*Gui* talked about her experience regarding improving her writing assignments and the help her teacher kindly offered:

When term one ended, my writing score was low. I asked my teacher how I could improve. He gave me a suggestion, ‘if you have time, come and ask me, and you can show me anything you write.’ After hearing this, I got to know that I can go to him after

class, which he didn't mention in the first term. Through his help with my writing, I could learn about my grammar errors, and he will help me correct. Starting from term two, I showed him my essay as soon as I finish one. (*Gui*)

The school also offered some help to the international students collectively:

Because our school has an 'after school' tutorial, a teacher will help you with English. The teacher is very good. He starts speaking slowly and accelerates gradually, starting from what we can understand. He also helps expand our vocabulary, or teaches us grammar, which is helpful. (*Yan*)

In addition to direct help regarding English abilities, the participants also received some help with classroom participation or integration. One participant put it this way:

In English class, the teacher would deliberately put the Chinese students into different groups, because he knew that we would definitely get together. In group discussion, he let us integrate with local students to communicate, which I think really helped us. (*Ling*)

Another participant also recalled similar encouragement from her teacher:

On the leadership course, the teacher will create a communicative atmosphere, and encourage everyone to talk to me. When he asks some questions, he will try as much as possible to ask me to answer. (*Gui*)

Besides some concrete tips or measures to help the students, some encouraging words from teachers also help the students a lot in terms of their emotions:

After doing a presentation, the teacher told me, 'I am proud of you!' I cried immediately. (...) Because the presentation took me a lot of effort, (...) I pondered for a long time, changed it many times, and finally wrote my script. Then I spent much time remembering it. At that time, I felt very frustrated. But after the presentation, everyone applauded me,

saying it was good. The teacher gave me such a compliment. I just can't help crying.

(*Yan*)

The participant then added another detail in which her teacher encouraged her on her written assignments:

Every time the teacher writes 'good job' or something like this on my homework, encouraging me to talk more, write more. Last time on my homework, the teacher wrote this to me, 'Don't be shy. You are well prepared. There will surely be no problem.' I was like, quite moved. (*Yan*)

However, the help from teacher does not always work. Even though a teacher takes some measures to help, the measure may not seem useful to the students. One participant talked about how he felt as the teacher gave international students extra time in the exams:

The teacher gives you an extra hour in the exam (...) I don't think it helps. In fact, within the normal length of exam time, if you know the answers, you will finish the questions; if not, adding another hour makes no big difference. (*Lan*)

Some comments teachers leave on the students' assignments may not be practical or feasible enough. One participant shared his opinion on this:

The teacher gave some written comments on my homework, saying, 'You need to improve your language, because language is very important.' But what he said didn't make much sense, because I already knew that I needed to improve my language. (*Wei*)

Sometimes students even fail to gain help from their teachers. One participant talked about her experience in which the teacher seemed to avoid helping deliberately:



For example, my history teacher of the last semester basically didn't care about us. When I asked him, he just pretended not to hear, or just answered one or two words, or, just said, 'I am not sure. You can go to the school office.' That's it. (*Yan*)

***Help from Local Classmates.*** Seeking help from a teacher is not the first choice for some participants, as I mentioned in the section "Reactions Under the Influence of Foreign Language Anxiety". Instead, many of them turn to their classmates for help. With the help of the local classmates, *Gui* increased her willingness in classroom participation and said, "With the help of my classmates, I would be more willing to participate in these classroom activities. I wouldn't feel like hiding and avoiding participation."

The participants received help with their learning tasks. One student mentioned his classmate's help in the science class:

In science class, my desk-mate is a foreigner [English speaker]. For example, the teacher wrote a question on the blackboard. He saw that my answer was wrong. He would actively teach me. Although I may not understand him very well at that time, I knew that he was helping me. Then when I have some words that I don't know, I will ask him by translating on my phone. He teaches me patiently. (*Wei*)

Another participant talked about her classmates' help in classroom activities:

If the teacher assigns a task or plays a game, I may not understand when she says it for the first time. (...) When I later begin to play the game, the classmates in the group will carefully explain it to me. They will say that I don't have to worry too much. I feel that they always comfort others. They always say, 'Don't worry, you can do very well.' This is very encouraging. (*Gui*)

Similarly, encouragement from classmates was also mentioned by another participant:

When I was doing public speech, every time I looked at my classmates, they would encourage me. They made eye contact with me and nodded. I think public speech is a good encouragement to me and makes me confident. (*Ling*)

*Yan* had the same kind of experience when she did her oral presentation:

On the day of public speech, there was a prompter reminding me of the content. When I was going to the stage, the girl patted me and said, ‘Don’t worry. You will be OK.’ She helped me modify my script. She helped me change a lot. (*Yan*)

As the participants get along with their classmates, they tend to appreciate special attention paid by other classmates to their home country and culture. Being asked about Chinese culture brings positive emotions in *Yan*:

There are many local classmates who want to know something about other countries, and some friends have come to me asking how things are in China. I feel very happy, then I will happily share with them. (*Yan*)

***Help from Homestay Hosts.*** “Living in a homestay makes me work harder and be more independent.” This is *Ling*’s opinion about living in a homestay and managing her life by herself. Homestay hosts are quite likely to be the first people with whom international students have contact after their arrival in Montreal. Many participants shared their experiences with their homestay hosts. Many said that their homestay hosts do a lot to help them with their English and integration in Montreal. One participant said:

My host family has helped me a lot. When I am at home, they will always talk to me.

First, I think they have helped improve my English a lot. And they are all very nice. They will tell me a lot of things that I should pay attention to during my stay here. (*Ling*)

Daily communication in the homestay improved *Ling*’s language use:

When we have dinner every day, the homestay host will ask me English questions. For example, he will point to a cucumber and ask how I say it in English or point to the chicken and ask me to say it in English. I think this is really good, because this really helps me. I think this is much better than going out to take English classes. (*Ling*)

*Wei* also found his homestay host quite enthusiastic and helpful and said, “My homestay host encourages me to speak English more, and also helps me to integrate into the Western society, which is a great help to me.” “Because my homestay hosts are English speakers, who are particularly enthusiastic, they like to talk to me, and I am gradually familiar with the everyday vocabulary as I talk to them every day.”

*Gui*’s story mentioned a lot of details in daily life in which the homestay host tried to communicate with her and engaged her in conversations:

My homestay host are local people and they are that kind of people who love to chat. No matter what my homestay host is doing at home, such as waking me up, cooking breakfast for me, making lunch, or having dinner after school, he will constantly talk to me. As long as I am at home, he will share what he has done today, and his feelings, for example, he quarreled with others, or he was unhappy. (*Gui*)

Although *Gui* was not very active at first, she gradually adapted and began to express herself:

At first, I thought that this person loved chatting so much, but I didn’t dare to express, so I was a bit panicked when he talked to me. But later, I found that his character and my personality were quite alike. I may be quiet when I first meet others, but when I get along, I begin to be more active. (...) I am quite lucky because my homestay host is willing to talk, and we chat from studies, to life problems, and even affective problems.

As our topics expand, we have talked about familial relationships and he even gives me life lessons. I feel that we are communicating more naturally. (*Gui*)

*Xing*'s homestay host did a lot to help her with different tasks she encountered in her studies and daily life:

My guardian sometimes drives me to withdraw money from the bank. For the first few times, he did it for me. But there was a time when he encouraged me to do it myself. And the staff was also very nice, guiding me step by step. (*Xing*)

My host family, they are particularly hospitable. There was a time when I couldn't solve a math problem. They tried to help me but failed to solve it, so they went online to look for help. After I handed [the assignment] in the next day, they followed up asking whether the answer was correct or not. (*Xing*)

In my homestay, there are people [roommates and guests] from different countries, and we will talk for a while after dinner. (...) I gradually got more self-confidence. (...) In fact, daily vocabulary is much broader than the vocabulary I use for school. At the beginning, I didn't quite get it, but later I suddenly discovered that I began to understand. Now I know what they are laughing about. I understand their humor. I even gossip with the two daughters of my homestay host. Gradually understanding everything, I tend to speak more actively. (*Xing*)

Homestay hosts are probably the only adults who can provide the students with emotional shelter other than their teachers, and thus the hosts can help these students to regulate their emotions:

A while ago, there was some conflicts among the Chinese students, which was quite fierce with a lot of quarrels and friction. Everyone was in a bad mood. At that time, my host was always comforting me at home. (...) I was really emotionally upset then,

wondering why everybody blamed me but it really had nothing to do with me. They all came to me every day at noon and said I should give an explanation. But there was nothing I can do. Why did they come to me? At that time, I talked a lot with my homestay host, and he has been comforting me a lot. (*Yan*)

***Adaptation Over Time.*** Although all the participants were influenced by foreign language anxiety to a certain degree, many pointed out that they began to get accustomed to the new environment as time went by. When asked about their adaptation over time to the new environment, many participants recalled some experiences or some changes after they had been in Montreal for some time. One participant compared how her feelings changed between the first year and the second year at school:

In the first year I was actually quite depressed, because you don't communicate with others, and others won't talk to you (...) But in the second year, no matter who talks to you, you reply to him and even have a nice chat. (...) There has been a big change, of course, there has been a change in my emotions. When you can fully understand others, you will be very happy. You are integrated into this group. (*Gui*)

*Gui* then shared a detailed story that made her reflect on her adaptation in Canada:

One day, I met my math teacher from the first year. He said, 'You are no longer the girl I saw for the first time, the girl who entered the classroom, holding a book and saying nothing, then directly sat down, didn't communicate with anyone. You look great now!' His words struck my heart. At that moment, I thought, 'that's really the case.' (...) My math teacher said that, 'now, you come downstairs like a local student, with earbuds in your ears, listening to music. When you see other students, you greet them and ask them

how they are doing.' I felt so happy when I heard it [laughter], because this teacher observed me. (*Gui*)

*Xing* also had the same experience. At first, she was not confident enough and avoided classroom activities, such as answering questions, but at the time of the interview, it was no longer a problem:

I am much more confident. At the beginning, I just sat quietly, hoping that the teacher didn't see me at all and wouldn't ask me questions. But it's all right now. I don't mind. I understand now. If asked, I'm not afraid. (*Xing*)

When asked how she noticed her adaptation, she shared her story:

I remember that it may be some day before or after Christmas several months after my arrival, suddenly I found that I understood all that the teachers said, from the beginning to the end of the day! (...) Our math teacher has a good sense of humor, but we did not understand his jokes. One day, I suddenly noticed that I understood his jokes. (*Xing*)

*Yan's* story was about her improvement in classroom tasks. After doing the same task for several times, she got used to it because of the sense of achievement she gained from her experiences:

After a few times of book talks, I found that some of my ideas provide others with new ideas. And I had a very friendly book talk. I might find a quote from the article, which other classmates thought that made sense. He found another meaning from this same quote, and there may be kind of a cooperation experience. I gradually felt that I liked it [book talk]. (*Yan*)

### *Learning Challenges and Coping Strategies*

#### *Learning Challenges*

##### **Lack of Background Knowledge on School Subjects**

When talking about the school subjects, many participants mentioned certain school subjects that are not provided in the Chinese curriculum. *Lan* said, “There are many subjects in this area that are not covered in China (...) History lesson talks about the history of Canada, which I haven’t learned before.” And *Yue* stated, “Now we have finance class and world history. What they are about is a little too deep for me (...) The course content is very difficult to understand. The homework is also difficult.”

The ethics course was repeatedly mentioned in the interviews since the content of this course is barely touched in the Chinese classrooms. One participant puts it this way:

Ethics is difficult, because my English is not good. Then the things the teacher say in class are completely incomprehensible (...) Such content like religion is not very familiar to me, and then my English is not so good, so that I have absolutely no idea of what he writes on the blackboard. (*Lan*)

Another participant also felt the same way:

Like ethics, it mainly talks about religion. There is a time when the teacher assigned a religion to me to present. I haven’t even heard of its Chinese name. Then I was asked to introduce it. This is very difficult. (*Wei*)

*A tutor’s reflections:*

Since I have been tutoring students, helping them with different school subjects which all use English as language of instruction, I have the opportunity to know about various subjects and students' ideas on different school subjects.

A subject that greatly confuses the students is Canadian and Quebec history. Take the subject in Secondary IV (all of the participants started from this grade) as an example. Students are required to learn about the history from 1840 to the present, which emphasizes the formation of today's Canada and Quebec, including topics like the Canadian political system, indigenous issues, and French identity in Quebec. These topics may be everyday knowledge for any Canadian citizen, but it takes a lot of efforts for recently arrived students from China to understand them using a language that is foreign to them. In addition, the history ministerial exam is one of the ministerial exams the Chinese international secondary school students have to deal with in Secondary IV, their first year in Montreal. This exam adds to the difficulty because taking a ministerial exam not only means that students should be able to understand the historical facts, but they will also read and process the information in authentic historical documents in English.

Another frequently mentioned subject in the interviews is ethics, since the course involves some religious knowledge, while even Chinese religions, such as Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, are rarely mentioned in Chinese courses. Therefore, the students tend to find this subject quite difficult.

It is a common assumption that Chinese students have no problem with mathematics, but finance courses involve many practical issues, such as credit cards, credit scores, and the Canadian tax system. Therefore, some students find it a difficult subject, because economic and financial knowledge is not compulsory content in the Chinese curricula. Whether the students



can keep up successfully depends on whether the students have supplemented relevant knowledge outside the classroom.

Dealing with one difficult subject might not be very difficult but dealing with several at the same time is certainly overwhelming. In my opinion, the students are overwhelmed because the Chinese students and parents do not expect this situation, so they do not prepare for it. Some participants mentioned their preparation prior to their arrival in Canada, but in most cases, they made efforts to improve their English language skills, in order to meet the future needs for communication. Few students or parents think about background knowledge for school subjects. Also, I think there might not be materials or resources that are readily accessible to them in China.

### **Difficulties Regarding Coursework due to Inadequate English Competency**

Some students thought that the inadequacy of their linguistic ability was one of the obstacles in their studies. As English is the language of instruction at school, participants needed to use English in listening, speaking, reading and writing, all of which may respectively cause trouble to the participants. First, the participants talked about their failure to understand what teachers said in class:

My vocabulary is not enough (...) The class content was quite difficult. My understanding of the teachers' lecture was not so good because of the vocabulary (...) I didn't understand very well, and moreover, the teacher may speak quite fast, which in combination, made it even more difficult to understand. (*Lan*)

Another participant was in a similar situation. *Yan* said, “Well, I didn’t understand what the teacher said, it was the Chinese classmate behind me who told me that the teacher asked me to go to the front to write my e-mail.”

Since the students failed to understand the teacher, they had to take measures to make up the course after class, for example, by translating the course materials:

Although the class content itself was, in fact, quite simple to me, I needed to spend a great amount of time to translate it after class, because I couldn’t understand what the teacher said in class. (*Wei*)

Another participant also had the same experience. *Yue* said, “In the first weeks, I didn’t quite understand what the teacher was talking about. Then I didn’t understand his course materials. I had to go home and translate the materials.”

If the students had difficulty in listening to their teachers, it may cause them trouble in finishing their assignments, as *Ling* puts it, “At the beginning, I was completely lost. I just couldn’t understand what the teacher’s homework was.”

Moreover, failure to understand what the homework is has serious consequences for the students’ academic performance. *Wei* indicated:

When I just started my studies, I couldn’t understand what the teacher said and what the teacher told me to do. It was during this period that I felt depressed. The teacher left some homework, but I didn’t know what he had said. Then it was a frequent case that I didn’t finish my homework, which resulted in my failure in several school subjects in the first term. (*Wei*)

When the participants talked about their experiences in using English in their studies, some participants shared some cases in which reading course materials or test questions were

some challenges that they encountered. *Wei* said, “During exams, in fact, I knew the answers to many of the questions, but the problem is that I just can’t understand what it is asking when I read the question.” *Wei* used translation instruments to help but still couldn’t understand:

I sometimes type all the questions into Google Translate then translate them. However, I still do not understand very well the translation of the questions. Even though I understand some of the questions, I can’t do the exercise in accordance with the teacher's requirements. For some questions, I just completely don't know where to find the answer in the textbook. (*Wei*)

The inadequate English competency adds to the level of difficulty of the school subjects. One participant compared learning school subjects in English with doing it in Chinese:

Yes, the level of difficulty regarding different subjects is completely reversed. In China, I felt that English was the hardest. When it comes to physics, chemistry, because they are in Chinese, I just need to understand the knowledge points of this particular subject; here, before understanding the knowledge itself, you must first learn what those English words mean. (*Xing*)

When Chinese international secondary school students take an exam, they are being tested in a double way, that is, they are tested in terms of their English language (vocabulary, reading skills, etc.), as well as the knowledge of the school subject (math, science, etc.). Due to limited linguistic ability, one participant was unable to finish her exam in the given time:

I remember in the ministerial exam, I was given an 18-page article, which we were unlikely to finish. When time was up, I still had three or four pages left. Then students had a discussion. I could only make up the remaining three or four pages from their discussion. (*Yan*)

The amount of work on book reading the teacher assigned, because we were completely unaccustomed then, was just impossible to finish. Every time I went back home, I had to look for the Chinese version, and then read it bit by bit. In this way, I just barely passed the exam. (*Yan*)

*A tutor's reflections:*

For a Secondary IV or Secondary V student, he or she should possess sufficient reading and writing skills to write a literary analysis or to write a persuasive article logically expressing his or her ideas. According to my observation, though Chinese students have learned to read literature, they have difficulty in understanding the terms used in English literature.

Furthermore, I would like to compare the writing topics in the writing assignments to show the gap that the Chinese international students have to fill. If a student comes to Montreal after graduating from junior high school in China, he or she may have taken the high school entrance exam. Therefore, I think this exam can demonstrate the requirement for English as a school subject in the Chinese curricula. The following is the writing task in the 2018 and 2017 Shanghai high school English entrance exam (the reason to choose Shanghai is that it is a relatively internationalized city, where English education resources are considered sufficient):

The writing task for 2018 was: Write at least 60 words on the topic “My progress”.

The writing task for 2017 was: Write at least 60 words on the topic “There is always hope”

From these topics, it can be seen that the number of words required is small, and the topics are related to students' daily life. But according to my experience as a tutor, my students have written on topics including AI, death penalty, e-waste, and other social issues. The number

of words required by the teacher also varies from 400 to 800. The difficulty is not only the length of the composition, but they lack sufficient vocabulary to articulate their ideas. However, it is worth pointing out that, in my experience, the students are mainly restricted by the lack of vocabulary, but these young people actually have a lot of ideas and opinions about current affairs. I think they actually have many brilliant ideas, but they need some language help to express themselves.

### ***Coping Strategies***

As students faced a lot of challenges in their studies, they also came up with some useful strategies to deal with different situations.

**Repetition** is a strategy mentioned by *Ling* when she was going to do a public speech in class:

I first printed the script of the oral presentation, put down all the phonetic symbols of the words I didn't know, and then practised repeatedly. I tried to turn some difficult words into simple words that I was familiar with, and then practised repeatedly. (*Ling*)

**Note taking** is also a strategy. *Lan* said, “I will put down and remember those words that frequently appear on exam papers.”

**Use of key words** is a useful way to increase their understanding of the English materials. *Wei* stated, “Gradually, because you want to pass the exam, you often pay attention to the teacher's key words and key sentences, and then slowly you can understand the textbook.”

**Translation** is frequently mentioned by the participants:

But you translate the homework questions once, twice, three times and more, then, without deliberately reciting these words, you are familiar with them. Next time you see them, you will know what they mean. (*Wei*)

Then the teacher began to lecture. I didn't care what he was saying, but his notes on the blackboard must be what he said. So, I put down all his notes, translated them all, and remembered those words. After a period of time, I could understand. (*Yan*)

**Inference** is usually used in reading:

Last year, when the teacher asked us to read a novel, I just translated all the words that I didn't know. Then slowly I began to guess what the word meant, but I found that my understanding was very simple and shallow, which was not the meaning it really wanted to express. (...) But it is a lot better now. Now I probably guess from the contextual connection, and I seldom look up words in dictionaries. (*Xing*)

**Asking for explanation** is helpful:

Now [the second year] when the classmates talk to me and some words that I don't know suddenly come up, I will ask them what the words mean. Then, if I really don't understand their explanation, I will go and translate. 'Oh, that's what you mean!' and then I will continue the topic. In the first year, I may do some translation, but I won't go any further. If I couldn't understand, I would just escape. (*Gui*)

**Actively creating an English environment** facilitates some participants' integration.

*Yue* said, "My homestay host's two children grew up here, so their mother language is English. I sometimes ask them to talk to me in English, not in my hometown language, Chinese." To seek an opportunity to practise English, *Yue* chose the leadership class:

The original reason why I signed up for the class of leadership was to improve my spoken language (...) I knew that I would be supposed to talk a lot. But at the time my purpose was to improve my spoken language (*Yue*)

But this method sometimes did not work. *Xing* indicated:

Before I came here, I thought that Chinese students would also speak English to each other, but in fact, we didn't. We tried it at the beginning, saying that we would speak English among us, but after several sentences, we came back to Chinese (...) It is possible that the other Chinese friends are not willing to talk in English (...) I really wanted to continue to practise speaking English. (*Xing*)

*A tutor's reflections:*

In the interviews, I found that translation was frequently mentioned as a coping strategy. However, schools or teachers are unlikely to have sufficient Chinese-English resources to bridge the students' first and foreign languages, and in addition, students are not able to quickly learn to use the English-only resources provided by the teachers. Under this circumstance, teachers are trying to help, but students fail to benefit from the aids, thus, it is not possible to generate an outcome that is satisfactory to both sides. The students may end up mechanically searching for Chinese and English translation resources or relying on Google Translate. In the English written or oral production by Chinese international students, it is not uncommon to see words that are rigidly translated. The reason is that students can't use dictionaries or translation resources very well. They simply find the English words that seemingly correspond to the Chinese meaning they intend to express. Detailed usage of an English word, such as the definitions, its collocations, synonyms are often ignored. An excerpt exemplifies this: *Wei* tried to understand

the homework questions using Google Translate, but the results given by machine translation did not make him understand the questions. In fact, Chinese-English dictionaries or online dictionaries and website resources are abundant. If teachers understand what role the strategy of translation plays and to what extent translation has helped the international students and students are provided with appropriate resources that help them adapt from a Chinese-English learning method to an English-only learning method, they can guide students on how to acquire English knowledge when using these resources, which will surely be of great help to them.

### ***Difference Between Canadian and Chinese Teaching Features***

Since the Chinese international secondary school students have experienced respectively in the Chinese educational system and the Canadian one, they have noticed a lot of differences between the two systems. First, exams and scores are organized and carried out differently and the evaluation systems are also different. In China, scores are usually determined by a single final exam, while in Canada, different tasks throughout the semester count toward the final grade. Several participants pointed out this difference:

In China, you don't need to worry about your studies during the semester. What matters is the final efforts [final exams]. But here, the final score consists of a score for your performance during the semester and a score for your final exam. (*Ling*)

I don't really like their way of giving exams. Every exam is as important as a final exam in China. For the exams in China, it doesn't matter if you don't do them well because they don't count toward the final grade, but in Canada, if you don't do well in an exam, it may lower your average score, which has a great impact. (*Wei*)



I think here they give you many opportunities, because every exam counts for a certain proportion of the total score, which is much better than the Chinese way [the final score solely depends on the final exam]. Because chances are that people may perform badly in a certain exam or perform extraordinarily well in another one. If you do well in every test during the semester, it doesn't affect the final score that much, even if you fail in the final exam. But in China, it is possible that a student who doesn't work hard scores higher than someone who has always been diligent, which I think is unfair. (*Xing*)

The English courses in China emphasizes grammar knowledge and exam-taking strategies, while exams in Canada focus more on language use and expression of ideas. *Xing* shared what she thought:

In terms of homework, there is quite a lot of English reading and writing here, while in China there is a lot of grammar, quite a lot. The exams here are also mainly about your writing and your thinking. In China, they are still about grammar. (*Xing*)

In the Chinese English exams, I will look at the choices first, then the questions, and then scan for the keywords. There are a lot of strategies and tricks for taking exams. (...) Here, learning English is more about using the language practically, with the focus on understanding and expression of ideas. (*Xing*)

When the students first arrived in Montreal, they noticed course tasks were not given the same way as the Chinese teachers did. *Ling* indicated:

I was used to the way that the homework the teacher gives today should be handed in the next class, but here, the deadline may be next week, may be next month. There was a time when I stayed up the whole night to finish an assignment, but the teacher said the

assignment was not due until the next class. So, it is very important to listen to the due dates. (*Ling*)

What students learn at school is not limited to knowledge within a certain academic field, but there is also knowledge to cultivate a mature young citizen, who can take up their responsibility as an adult and a citizen. In fact, in both Canada and China, there are lessons that aim to achieve such goals, but class content varies in the two countries. *Ling* shared her experience about a special assignment:

I am very impressed by an assignment. I had a ‘family’ class last semester, and one task was to simulate carrying a baby around. I needed to buy two kilograms of flour from the supermarket, wrap it with bed sheets, and then hold the 2 kilograms of flour every day for two weeks, four classes a day. You had to ask every teacher to sign for you at the end of the class, proving that you had carried this ‘baby’ throughout the class. I didn't understand the task very well. This is not a difficult task, but I just don't understand it. I think it is because of cultural differences. (*Ling*)

This participant learned a lesson about the consequence of unprotected sex or the difficulty of attending a baby through a hands-on task, which was a quite rare experience for her.

Class size is a lot larger in a Chinese school. In a Canadian classroom, since the number of students is smaller, one participant thought this facilitated the teacher to pay attention to every individual student:

The class size here is much smaller than the class size in China. In China, there are nearly 50 students in a single class, but here there are only 10 or 20 students in one class, (...) The teacher is able to pay more attention to you. If a class is made up of a lot of students, the teacher may not be able to take care of everyone. Take doing exercise as example, the

teacher here can check how everyone is doing, but the teacher can't do that in a big class.

(*Wei*)

Self-management is another important difference, since many Chinese students are taken “good” care of in every aspect of their studies and daily life by their parents and teachers, many of whom devote a large part of their lifetime, out of their love towards the kids, to making sure that their children and students advance on a “smooth and correct” path. While in Canada, the students are required to manage their studies by themselves. *Ling* and *Yan* both talked about this contrast:

In China, I always have that kind of idea. You do whatever the teacher asks you to do, you do whatever your parents tell you to do. Then all you have to do is finishing homework on time. But here, it is more democratic. (*Ling*)

When I was in China, I was in a private school, which was strictly managed. The teachers arranged everything the students had to do. They would force us to do things even if we didn't feel like doing them. Then, at home, the parents would also force us. The teachers would send group chat messages to the parents every day, telling them things like who didn't finish the homework, or who slept in class today. Then after returning home, parents would force us to do some extra exercises. Luckily, my parents didn't push me as much as other parents did. (...) Here [in Montreal], no one will tell you what to do. You have to manage your studies well, if you want to graduate. You learn by yourself, if you want to enter a good university. No one takes care of you. (*Yan*)

In China, even if you fail, you can still continue in a higher grade. The school doesn't care if you can enter a university or not. They just care about those top students. (...)

Here, you have to reach a minimum requirement so that you are qualified to apply for a CEGEP. (...) Therefore, you have to take care of your studies yourself. (*Yan*)

Inherited image of teachers is a significant different between the two countries. Many participants compared their stereotype of a teacher in the Chinese culture with what they perceived here and found that Canadian teachers tend to be more accessible than Chinese ones. One participant described her previous impression of a teacher as a strict role from whom students should keep their distance:

I still have that kind of stereotype of teachers, because the teachers in China, I am not saying that they are not good, but they are stricter, so I will stay at a respectful distance from them. But here, at the beginning, I also kept a distance, because after all, they are teachers. But as we got along, teachers are very nice. Knowing that you are an international student, they will help you as much as possible. (*Ling*)

She then used Confucius as a simile and said, “In China, it is a passed-down idea that a teacher is like Confucius. Here I think a teacher is someone with whom you can make jokes or get acquainted. More democratic.”

One participant thought that in China, not all the teachers were enthusiastic to help the students, while there is a strong contrast between them and the Canadian teachers:

The teachers here, maybe out of enthusiasm, they are willing to talk to you. But in China, maybe just some teachers are willing to talk to you, not the teachers of the entire school. I found that the teachers in our school are very nice, every one of them. As long as you ask them, they will give you answers, as detailed as possible. (*Gui*)

In *Yan*’s opinion, she described that her stereotypical image of a teacher was someone serious:

A Chinese teacher is particularly serious, which means ‘you have to talk to me seriously, you can't joke with me. You ask me questions seriously, I give you the answer seriously, and then you can leave.’ Here teachers and students are almost friends. (*Yan*)

Because of the inherited impression of teachers, one participant attributed this as the reason why he preferred turning to his classmates to asking his teachers for help:

I am more inclined to seek help from my classmates. Because in China, the teachers are quite strict, not very accessible. I might be affected by this idea, so I usually prefer to seek help from my classmates. (*Wei*)

*A tutor's reflections:*

As far as I can see, the determining factors of a student's academic performance vary in the admission procedures of the Chinese and Canadian universities. In both educational systems, students apply for admission to universities with uniform exam scores. The Chinese college entrance examination (known as Gaokao) consist of standardized exams, and the admission basically depends on the exam scores (excluding some majors with special requirements). Students don't need to provide supplementary materials, such as CVs and letters of intent, which are required for the admission to a Canadian university. Therefore, Chinese students tend to attach great importance to the final exams.

Since the Chinese students are used to the characteristics of the Chinese educational system, some students are not very aware of the importance of academic performance other than test scores. Moreover, this idea is not only reflected in the application for CEGEP, but the students may overlook the importance of classroom participation. Unfortunately, I often encounter students who only realize this after they have studied in Montreal for one semester or

even a year. I feel sorry for my students, especially when I see that the students regret not having participated more.

In the excerpts, *Ling* shared her experience in the “family” class, where I think the teacher assigned the task with the purpose of sex education. Her story inspired me to recall the slow development of sex education in China. Sex education in China is far from becoming a generally accepted part of the curriculum, and instead, educators, schools, and the public are still in the moral conflict of figuring out the “proper” way of teaching sex knowledge to the young generations. In my opinion, the topic of sex education should certainly be taken seriously and is essential in the mental development of a teenager, but it takes time for a relatively conservative mindset, which many Chinese tend to have, to get used to an Internet era. As a result, for the mental health of the Chinese international secondary school students, this knowledge gap is worth noticing. When a teacher designs an assignment or a classroom activity that might involve some cultural differences, the teacher may need give guidance and explanation that would not be necessary for Canadian students, in order that the students can understand the significance of the tasks.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

In this chapter, data gathered through the semi-structured interviews are shown through the excerpts of the participants and the results are presented based on the three research questions. The first part presents answers to the first and second research questions, Chinese international secondary school students have shared their experiences and feelings related to foreign language anxiety. The themes revealed in the data can be summarized as: 1) Participants commonly experience foreign language anxiety, 2) students tend to have negative reactions

under the influence of foreign language anxiety, 3) participants have indicated the factors that add to their foreign language anxiety, as well as the factors that help them to reduce it. Also, I shared my stories and observation as a tutor for the Chinese international secondary school students, as well as my ideas and opinions inspired by the answers of the participants.

The second part of this chapter answers research question three, which is in regards to academic challenges and coping strategies Chinese international secondary school students developed during their studies. The academic challenges mainly result from their inadequate language proficiency and the lack of background knowledge of some school subjects. As an international student and a tutor, I reflect on my experience to find out what contributes to the students' academic difficulties. Their coping strategies include: 1) repetition, 2) note taking, 3) use of key words, 4) translation, 5) inference, 6) asking for explanation, 7) actively creating an English environment. Among these strategies, translation is commonly mentioned, but the students seem to lack sufficient English-Chinese bilingual resources to facilitate their studies.

In the interviews, when the participants reflected on their language use experience, they considered some different features between the Canadian and Chinese education systems as an important factor. Therefore, I summarized these features in this chapter and added some facts according to what I know about both systems.

## **Chapter Five                      Discussion**

In this chapter, I revisit my research questions and interpret my findings in light of what was already known in research about foreign language anxiety. I explain my understanding that emerged as a result of throughout my study. My three research questions are: 1) Do Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal experience foreign language anxiety in their life and studies using their L2 (English)? 2) What contributes to their anxiety and how do students react as a consequence of foreign language anxiety? 3) What coping strategies do Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal adopt to deal with foreign language anxiety and other learning challenges?

The key findings in this study are:

1) Foreign language anxiety commonly exists among Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal.

The results of this study confirmed that most Chinese international secondary school students experience foreign language anxiety, both in the classroom and in daily life. This concurs with similar research on the same subject (Godfrey-Smith, 2017; Liu & Ni, 2015; Zhao, 2013).

Furthermore, foreign language anxiety has an impact on these adolescent sojourners as early as the time they arrive in Montreal. Upon arrival, the difficulties encountered in communication impact the students, cause anxiety, and produce the behavior of avoidance. This suggests that foreign language anxiety may have begun since the moment the student arrives. Wang (2015) refers to this situation as “initial learning shock”, which is “more or less concerned with language shock, arising from participants’ perceived inadequate language proficiency” (p. 54). As students arrive, they tend to pay more attention to the difficulties they encounter and the



negative emotional experiences. When students actually start their studies, it is very likely that they have already been experiencing unsuccessful communication, culture shock, etc., all of which occur in a short period of time after their arrival, thus damaging their self-confidence. Therefore, help is needed at this point to reduce the students' emotional burden. When schools and teachers are well aware of this situation, they can offer help to the students to alleviate the negative emotions.

In this study, students regard themselves as insufficiently prepared for their overseas study, are afraid to get engaged in communicative contexts, and have a low self-estimate of their English proficiency. Cheng and Erben (2012), in their study on foreign language anxiety in American students, suggest that when the international students they studied began their studies abroad, "they connected with a distinctly different culture simultaneously" (p. 490). When they enter a brand new environment, "they often arrived with very limited or sometimes false knowledge and information about American society and culture and many were unable to communicate confidently and proficiently" (p. 490). This is also observed in the current study.

According to Liu (2013), the "Chinese traditional value of saving face" (p. 138) is one reason for which the students have a negative feeling towards speaking in front of the class. For example, *Wei* refers to the situation in which he could not answer the teacher's question when he was asked to as an "embarrassing" experience.

When talking about their experience regarding foreign language anxiety, the students pointed out that various tasks, which they accomplished using English, are anxiety-provoking. For example, answering questions in class and doing in-class presentations are anxiety-provoking. Apart from performing certain tasks, being in an environment with few other Chinese international students, who are in the same situation as the participants, also causes anxiety, since

they have the fear of being negatively evaluated by their Canadian peers. In the interviews, *Yan* pointed out that “I am the only international student in the class”. *Wei* thought it was particularly stressful because there were only two international students in his science class. According to Wang (2015), “being a minority group in the class also made Chinese students feel intimidated about speaking in class” (p. 71) When the proportion of international students is very small, the environment itself causes anxiety in these international students.

2) Under the influence of foreign language anxiety, the Chinese international secondary school students tend to react negatively to it under most circumstances.

Since most Chinese international secondary school students are impacted by foreign language anxiety, this study has explored their behaviors and reactions under its influence, including (1) avoidance, (2) over-studying, (3) reluctance to communicate with teachers or failure to achieve mutual understanding, (4) preference to stay with Chinese classmates, (5) emotional breakdown.

Avoidance is commonly found in the interview scripts. Students tend to avoid or withdraw from a communicative task, because of their inadequate English proficiency. Apart from concerns about their language skills, in *Yan's* answer, she mentioned concerns about hindering other classmates, because she thinks she speaks more slowly than other classmates and that if she is stuck when speaking, this will affect the teacher's teaching plan and stop the other students from getting the opportunity to express their opinions.

Another situation found in many participants' answers is that some of these students are reluctant to communicate with their teachers and meanwhile, prefer to stay with Chinese classmates, such as when doing an in-class task, completing an assignment or hanging out after school. Wang (2015) points out that when “being bewildered, they tend to turn to other Chinese

students for help in the first place instead of consulting their teachers” (p. 63). This situation is common but not beneficial to the students since a lack of communication between teachers and the international students is likely to cause misunderstanding or the failure of conveying information. In my reflections as a tutor, I found that the problem regarding plagiarism, discussed above in the section “Reactions under the influence of foreign language anxiety” (p. 47), which seems quite irrelevant to the teacher-student relationship, could become worse due to a lack of communication. When this becomes a pattern between the teachers and the international students, it will turn from being merely an unfavorable situation into an obstacle in their studies.

Since the subject of this study is secondary school students who are still underage though close to their adulthood, they are not necessarily independent enough to live without their parents in a foreign country. In this study, some students shared their emotional experience regarding their communication with their parents. One participant experienced an emotional breakdown due to her stress. Homesickness is also mentioned by the participants. These are among the examples of “the emotional pain that the participants experienced.” Popadiuk (2009) points out that this may include “anger, hatred, resentment, embarrassment, depression, fear, homesickness, loneliness, and entrapment” (p. 234).

3) There are various factors that cause or increase foreign language anxiety in the Chinese international secondary school students.

From the interview data, various causes for foreign language anxiety were found, including 1) inability to understand others' responses or explanation, 2) fear of not making oneself understood, 3) poor pronunciation, 4) feeling it was necessary to speak perfect English, 5) incomprehensible input, 6) lack of confidence, 7) limited vocabulary, 8) peer pressure, 9) fear

of negative evaluation, 10) fear of letting parents down, 11) the idea that going back to China without finishing one's studies is shameful. These sources can be divided into anxiety that stems from the self-evaluation of the language user—for example, poor pronunciation, feeling it necessary to speak perfect English, lack of confidence, and limited vocabulary—and anxiety that is generated from the communicative context—for example, inability to understand others' responses or explanation, fear of not making oneself understood, and incomprehensible input in the first place. The findings are consistent with the results of Liu (2006), in which she identifies causes for student anxiety in oral English lessons (p. 23). The causes include lack of practice, limited vocabulary, low English proficiency, shy or timid personality, fear of making mistakes, lack of preparation, incomprehensible input, inadequate grammatical knowledge, fear of being laughed at, lack of confidence, difficulty of the tasks, poor pronunciation, lack of familiarity with classmates/partners, lack of familiarity with the topic, fear of being negatively assessed, fear of being the focus of attention, fear of speaking Chinese English, and the inability to find proper words to express ideas. These findings also fall into one of the categories of foreign language anxiety that are classified by Young (1994), that is, anxiety stemming from personal and interpersonal anxieties (p. 31).

The participants' answers echo previous research (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009). Anxious students feel that there is a large gap between them and their peers in many language learning abilities (Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Anxiety affects students' behaviors. For example, *Yue* feels "pessimistic". *Yan* "never speaks in the English class".

4) The Chinese international secondary school students have their foreign language anxiety reduced if they receive help in various forms.

The current study concurs with many other studies, showing that foreign language anxiety impacts language users negatively, so it is important to investigate in what circumstances or with what kinds of aid students feel less anxious.

First, talking about something familiar. In terms of doing presentations, *Yan* mentioned that an element which is relatively anxiety-reducing for her, that is, being asked to talk about a topic that she is familiar with, thereby reduces anxiety and boosts self-confidence.

Second, the possibility to bring aids in exams helps to reduce test anxiety. In Horwitz *et al.* (1986), tests and exams are considered anxiety-causing. However, from the interviews of the participants, it is found that the Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal do not feel that exams cause anxiety to them. But it should be noted that taking exams does not contribute to language anxiety, but it indeed constitutes a learning challenge. It means that although students face some difficulties when taking exams, this challenge does not cause much negative feelings.

From the differences mentioned by the participants regarding taking exams in China and in Canada, it shows that in China students' academic performance is mainly evaluated by mid-term exams and final exams. Homework and class participation do not count towards the final score, so the exam rules in China are very strict. In some important exams, "security check machines like scanners" (*Ling*) are used to ensure that students are not carrying anything that is not exam-related, except the necessary stationery and to prevent cheating in exams. Therefore, the overall atmosphere is relatively serious and anxiety-causing.

In Montreal, participants point out that in the exams of some subjects, students are allowed to bring some materials as reference in the exam, which students call "memory" (*Ling*). Some exams allow the use of a dictionary, and all of these practices make taking exam a less

stressful task for the Chinese international secondary school students. Although there is a participant who mentioned that even using a dictionary does not significantly reduce the difficulty of reading the questions, still, taking exams with such aids does not cause him anxiety.

In the interviews, students shared some positive experiences in which they received help and encouragement in various forms and from different people. With the support they received, students showed positive emotional changes. “The type of encouragement and support was verbal and interpersonal and did not include tangible help or material support. The outcome of facilitating events showed that participants felt supported, encouraged, cared for, connected, cheered up, safe, and comfortable” (Popadiuk, 2009, p. 234).

Most participants recalled the support they received from teachers. As one essential factor in the classroom context, teachers’ help can greatly reduce students’ language anxiety. As Aida (1994) puts it, “the findings of the present study and those of other language researchers suggest the important role of teachers in lessening classroom tension and in creating a friendly, supportive atmosphere that can help reduce students’ fear of embarrassment of making errors in front of peers” (p. 164).

Apart from the help from teachers, many participants recalled the help they receive from local classmates. This includes help with classroom tasks, homework and encouragement and support. *Yan* had positive emotions when her classmates asked about her home country, which made her feel cared for and appreciated. Popadiuk (2009) points out that “the participant observed someone else interacting in a way that they appreciated. For instance, participants appreciated when others paid special attention to them and their culture” (p. 234).

As underage teenagers, the Chinese international secondary school students in this study have a lot of interactions with their homestay hosts. Living in a homestay could have positive or

negative effect on students' feelings. In this study, the experiences the participants shared are mostly positive ones, which echoes "the homestay advantage" (Kinging, 2009, p. 130). "In general, the students also spoke in support of the homestay advantage, citing the families' efforts to assist them, expanded opportunities to speak, and the importance of mealtime as a context for learning." (p. 132) Many participants recalled the efforts their homestay hosts make to engage them in communication and to prompt them to actively express themselves. "If students in homestay environments enjoy continuous immersion in which ample and authentic language input is available, these students should display interactive language skills superior to those of students living in university dormitories with other participants in their program." (Kinging, 2009, p. 132) The feelings and impressions of homestay in Kinginger (2009) include both facilitating and debilitating events, but in the interview data analyzed here, they were basically positive. "The main thing that students do in homestay is the sociological competence and some linguistic competence" (Kinging, 2009, p. 71). In the study reported here, students did make some progress in terms of these two competences.

When I presented the participants' answers regarding their adaptation to the study and daily life in Montreal in the section "adaptation over time" of the Results chapter (pp. 65), I realized that it was important to pay attention to the turning point in the process of students' gradual adaptation, because different students need different lengths of time to adapt to the new environment, and different conditions in the learning and living environment may affect them differently. From the students' responses, I aim to see under what circumstances students will realize that they are adapting to the English environment of learning and living. First, it is worth noting that the stories shared by the participants show that their awareness of adaptation comes from their interaction with others, as well as from self-reflection. On the one hand, there may be

a point where students come to realize that they have adapted to the English environment because they find that they almost fully understand what the other person is talking about in a conversation, even some humorous jokes. On the other hand, this awareness may also come from the remarks of others. When other people make observations about them or point out that they have changed, this may make them realize that they have adapted. The sense of accomplishment when they successfully collaborate with their classmates to complete some classroom tasks is also a stimulus for them to reflect on their progress.

In the stories of *Gui* and *Yan*, it can be found that “being accepted” is an important factor for the Chinese international secondary school students in their adaptation to their new environment. As Popadiuk (2009) puts it, “the focus on either being accepted or rejected was linked to more general interactions, such as meeting people at church, receiving positive feedback from classmates, being teased or called names by people, or being ignored by other students.” When the students are aware of the gradual integration into the class or the group, they gain in confidence and experience great improvement in interpersonal reactions. “The outcomes of the facilitating events tended to cluster around feeling accepted, comfortable, proud, confident, as well as having a sense of belonging and safety. In addition, behavioural outcomes, such as starting to speak out more in class and becoming more socially outgoing, led to feelings of competency and an ability to make more friends.” (Popadiuk, 2009, p. 235)

5) Due to the differences in the curricula of the Chinese and Canadian education systems, students lack a basic knowledge reserve, and the inadequacy of students’ English competency also increases their academic difficulties.



In the interviews, I found that the major challenges faced by the participants were mainly the following two: 1) Lack of background knowledge on school subjects, 2) difficulty due to inadequate English proficiency.

The subjects that are comparatively difficult to the students are finance, history which includes Canadian history and world history, and ethics, which involves much knowledge about religion. These subjects are the ones that are not included in the Chinese curriculum, so the lack of relevant background knowledge, along with the difficulty caused by the language of instruction which they are not familiar with, thus caused great difficulties for the Chinese international secondary school students.

Schleppegrell (2006) indicates several features of academic language in school subjects, including dense information, abstraction, and technicality, using multiple semiotic systems and conventional structuring (p. 49). These features make learning a school subject like math or science using English is very different from what an English class usually consists of (English conversation or English literature, for example). In a school subject other than English, high school students should be able to deal with dense informational texts, possibly with abstract concepts. To understand the abstract concepts, international students need more than the text; “they need other resources to enable them to go beyond a dictionary definition of a concept to truly understand its meaning” (Schleppegrell, 2006, p. 53). In addition, take the semiotic system in math for example. It seems that Chinese students and Canadian students all learn the same math symbols, but it is often neglected that “math symbols, written language, and spoken language typically all work together to build students’ understanding of math” (Schleppegrell, 2006, p. 54). Luckily, math is regarded as a school subject that causes little difficulty to the participants, but for other subjects, for example, ethics, which involves many abstract concepts,

or history or finance, which include many subject-specific terms, teachers should not only focus on how to teach the content, but also focus on how to teach the language in which the content is expressed to the international students.

When asked about the use of English in their studies and daily life, the participants mentioned a lot of difficulty regarding coursework, involving all aspects of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In terms of listening, difficulties include listening to the teachers' lectures, understanding the requirements of the classroom tasks, and the requirements of after-school homework assignments. When students find themselves in a situation which they cannot understand, either they spend more time and efforts to get to understand the confusing information, or they sometimes completely miss the teacher's words, which in some cases means that they are not able to hand in their homework on time and may even fail the whole course. Reading difficulties include reading course material and understanding exam questions. The students feel that their lack of English competency makes them unable to read the questions and give the correct answer that should have been given. Also, it takes a lot of time for the students to read the text and questions in the exam. Thus, they can't finish answering within the given time. The findings of the present study are consistent with Wang (2015), in which she points out several factors that affect students' verbal participation, two of which are language (English) inadequacy and lack of necessary background knowledge (p. 64).

6) The Chinese international secondary school students adopt some learning strategies to deal with the challenges they encounter.

Faced with the difficulties in using English, students adopted various strategies to deal with them. According to O'Malley *et al.* (1985), the strategies adopted by students can be divided into cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective strategies. In the present study, the

students mentioned some of the cognitive ones, including repetition, translation and note taking, and some socio-affective strategies, including asking peers for explanation and actively creating an English environment. According to O'Malley *et al.* (1985), cognitive strategies also include resourcing, grouping, deduction, and imagery; meta-cognitive strategies include selective attention, self-management, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and functional planning. (p. 582).

Among the strategies that students adopt, the most frequently mentioned strategy in the interviews is translation. This is consistent with the finding in Liu (2013), in which the researcher finds that Chinese international students have a “reliance on translation” (p. 131) and “depend a lot on translation” (p. 137). In the article, Liu (2013) uses a metaphor: “translation is the walking stick in the beginning” (p. 132). In my own experience, I also found that translation was the most important “walking stick” for students to adapt to the new learning environment in the early stage upon arrival.

7) Some features between the Chinese and Canadian education systems have an impact on students' mentality and study habits.

There are many differences between the education systems in China and Canada, from the setting of course subjects to the course content, from examination forms to evaluation criteria and systems. Understanding these differences ahead of time will help students adapt to their studies in Montreal more easily and quickly.

In terms of assessment methods, schools in China evaluate the students at the basis of one or two single exams per course. As a way to guarantee fairness, the teachers try to create standardized answers for every question so that the scores will be influenced by teachers' subjective judgement to the minimum. Usually homework does not count towards the final score, or only makes up a small percentage. Therefore, Chinese students are more likely to treat their

homework with a less serious attitude than an exam, or they are not aware of the relevance of their homework assignments to their final scores. Instead, they focus on their performance in important exams, such as the mid-terms or final exams. In Canada, homework and quiz scores are both included in the final score. This requires students to work hard on each assignment throughout the semester.

Moreover, the deadlines given by a Chinese teacher asking students to submit their assignments is generally short, that is to say, the deadline for an assignment is usually the next day or the next week after the day when the assignment is given. In Canada, the teacher may give an assignment whose deadline is one month later. Chinese international secondary school students are not used to this way of submitting assignments. The difference of these two ways of giving an assignment does not lie in the different number of days given to the students, but instead, when an assignment comes with a deadline that is one month later, it means that this assignment requires students to have good self-management skills. Usually, such a big assignment requires students to divide their time into several parts, including the time of planning, preparing, doing the assignment and modification. However, if students do not have such abilities or habits, they are likely to start working only a few days before the deadline. But the amount of work can not be completed in a short time, which finally results in the low quality of the assignment.

Among the components in students' report cards to assess students' performance in English classes, participation is often a focus of scoring, and this is usually not included in the scoring system in Chinese schools. Therefore, some students may be accustomed to listening to the teacher lecturing in the classroom instead of participating. Class size also contributes to this phenomenon, since in a Chinese high school classroom there are on average 45-50 students. It is

often the case that the number of students exceeds the upper limit of 50, while in a Canadian secondary school classroom, there are no more than 30 students. Thus it is not possible to let every student talk and express their ideas in a Chinese classroom as frequently as in a Canadian classroom. When students begin studying in Montreal, their expectations are not likely to change fast enough, and moreover, at the beginning students may not realize that participation is one of the aspects of their assessment.

When students start from Secondary IV in Montreal (Grade 10, normally at age 15 or 16) the content of their English courses is very different from a typical Chinese English class. With English being a foreign language in China, the English exam in the Chinese university entrance exam, which takes place at the end of high school, consists mainly of multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blank questions and grammar-correction questions, accounting for more than 80% of the total score. It emphasizes understanding and comprehension with a focus on the rate of the number of correct answers. The assessment of a student's English production is mainly through a composition, but the number of words required is only about 100 words, while in Montreal, the ministerial exam taking place at the end of the high school period is mainly to examine students' ability to produce written work after reading some assigned articles. The required ability is comprehensive language use abilities, including reading and understanding of long articles, inferring the author's intent or theme, being able to do a literary analysis, the ability to use English appropriately, and the use of English to logically express their opinions. When Chinese international secondary school students first come into the classroom of an English class in Montreal, if they have not been taking extra English classes but have merely followed the English course in a Chinese public school, it is possible that they are reading such a long article

for the first time, writing such a long composition for the first time, and discussing a topic using English for the first time.

In the interviews, students also mentioned the issue of independent learning. In China, although students also need to manage their own study plans, the school schedule and the amount of homework are likely to take up so much time that a student only has a very little time available for self-scheduled arrangements. During the weekdays, students start their day at school from 7:30 a.m. or 8:00 a.m., and the courses on average end at 5:00 p.m. or 6 p.m.. At school, most of the students act according to the school's schedule, so students basically don't have much time for themselves to arrange their activities. If the school requires a late self-study, it means that the students stay in the classroom after dinner until 9:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m.. In contrast, in Montreal, students may leave school at 3:00 p.m. or 4:00 p.m.. At this time, students actually face a situation that has not happened before, that is, he or she has to learn to arrange his free time from afternoon to the evening, and this is managed by the students themselves without parental supervision.

Moreover, there are also participants who mentioned applying for a CEGEP. Usually, the deadline for students to apply for a CEGEP is in March of Secondary V (Grade 11). For a student who starts in Montreal from Secondary IV, this means that one year and a half after arriving in Montreal, they not only have to adapt to the new learning environment, striving to achieve good academic performance, but also they need to have a glance through the available programs and admission requirements of each CEGEP, which makes them very busy in this eighteen-month period. Besides studies, they have to spare some time out of the adaptation process to think about their future majors or career options.

In the Results chapter above (p. 47), it was found that the Chinese international secondary school students tend to turn to Chinese classmates for help instead of going to a teacher. Culturally speaking, this is partly connected to their inherited image of teachers. Many students have the stereotype they have developed from a typical Chinese classroom, with the teacher as the imparter and students as the listener. Meanwhile, teachers in China are serious about their authority. Although many participants said that they found the teachers they met in Montreal were not like what they thought, this stereotype may hold them back from communicating with a teacher before they are able to change their impression with teachers.

When we talk about the differences between the Chinese and Canadian education systems, we need to look more closely at the differences between the two learning environments and students' habits before and after the transition. The more we understand the students, the more we can help them in the appropriate time offering the effective and appropriate help.

## **Chapter Six Conclusion**

When Chinese international secondary school students first arrive in Canada, they not only enter a new learning environment, they also enter a completely different cultural environment. Inadequate language abilities and limited knowledge of Canadian society and culture prevent many international students from communicating confidently and effectively. When communicating in English, they often experience foreign language anxiety for various reasons, but at the same time, their language anxiety could be aggravated or alleviated due to different factors.

The previous chapters have presented the findings from the data and the discussion regarding the results. In this chapter, I first summarize the results of this study, and then discuss the implications and limitation of it. Finally, I propose some ideas for future research on foreign language anxiety.

### **Results Summary**

1) Foreign language anxiety commonly exists among Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal.

All participants in this study report some experience related to foreign language anxiety, and I found that such experience happened as early as at the time of their arrival in Canada.

2) Under the influence of foreign language anxiety, the Chinese international secondary school students tend to react negatively to it under most circumstances.

Students' reactions include a) avoidance, b) over-studying, c) reluctance to communicate with teachers or failure to achieve mutual understanding, d) preference to stay with Chinese classmates, e) emotional breakdown.



3) There are various factors that cause or increase foreign language anxiety in the Chinese international secondary school students.

The factors revealed from the current study involve a) inability to understand others' responses or explanation, b) fear of not making oneself understood, c) poor pronunciation, 4) feeling it was necessary to speak perfect English, 5) incomprehensible input, 6) lack of confidence, 7) limited vocabulary, 8) peer pressure, 9) fear of negative evaluation, 10) fear of letting parents down, 11) the idea that going back to China without finishing one's studies is shameful.

4) The Chinese international secondary school students have their foreign language anxiety reduced if they receive help in various forms.

The anxiety in the Chinese international secondary school students is reduced with some helpful practice, such as a) talking about something familiar, b) the ability to use aids in exams. In addition, the participants in this study received help from various people, including a) teachers, b) local classmates, and c) homestay hosts, whose efforts to help them have a positive impact on these students. Furthermore, it is found that as time went by, some students became self-aware of their adaptation to the English environment.

5) Due to the differences in the curricula of the Chinese and Canadian education systems, students lack a basic knowledge reserve, and the inadequacy of students' English competency also increases their academic difficulties.

6) The Chinese international secondary school students adopt some learning strategies to deal with the challenges they encounter.

The strategies they have adopted include a) repetition, b) note taking, c) use of key words, d) translation, e) inference, f) asking for explanation, g) actively creating an English environment.

7) Some features between the Chinese and Canadian education systems have an impact on students' mentality and study habits.

The Canadian and Chinese education systems differ in terms of a) the evaluation systems and criteria, b) course content, c) class size, d) self-management, e) inherited image of teachers.

## **Implications**

### ***Implications for International Secondary School Students***

Students first need to understand that foreign language anxiety is a common phenomenon among international students, and it can be alleviated as long as reasonable measures are taken. Therefore, students need to actively reflect on their own situation. If they realize that they are suffering from foreign language anxiety, they should actively seek help to deal with it, rather than evade or maintain the status quo.

In the current study, participants are affected by the significant differences between the two countries, including general design of the educational system, design of curricula, course content, and so forth. The more a student knows about the English school system in Quebec, the less likely he is to feel anxious upon arrival. Basically, the preparations mentioned by the participants of this thesis are all about English language skills, improving English listening, speaking, reading and writing to facilitate future communication. But no one mentioned that before they came, they needed to learn about some common facts of Canadian culture, life and

other aspects. Indeed, the information may not be readily accessible. Schools could help with this.

It is understandable that students like to stay with people with whom they can communicate smoothly in their mother tongue, but they also need to understand that teachers and English-speaking classmates, and homestay hosts, are willing to help out under most circumstances. However, this kindness is not likely to convey if the international students withdraw and will not even give it a try. Therefore, it would be very helpful if the students motivate themselves to take the first step to communicate or at least, take a step to accept others' help. From the findings of this thesis, students can improve a lot in terms of both language ability and emotional experience after receiving help from all sides.

In addition, I found that many differences between the features of the Chinese and Canadian education systems are the root cause of students' foreign language anxiety or academic challenges. Therefore, for international secondary school students, they should realize that some academic difficulties do not result from their inadequate language ability or their insufficient efforts, instead, they emanate from the knowledge gap between two distinctive education systems. They should actively seek help to make up for the gap.

### ***Implications for Teachers and Host Institutions***

If schools and teachers can better understand the students' situation and problems, they can better help them, and also facilitate their own teaching.

In this study, it is found that foreign language anxiety may have started from the moment the student arrived, so if teachers want to reduce the level of students' language anxiety, they need to take measures to relieve their anxiety when they arrive or even before they arrive. For

example, some bridging classes before the academic semester starts or some online classes before they come to Canada could be the possible options.

Apart from bridging classes, offering some electronic materials is more workable and schools can upload them to their websites. The foreign language anxiety students feel is partly caused by the fear of the unknown. Introducing school subjects, sample course materials, and typical daily class schedules to future international students would help to create an image of their future life in Montreal, and thus, possibly help them become less anxious.

In the interviews, many participants were grateful for help from their classmates. A program offering an opportunity for communication between local students and international students might be helpful. As a McGill student, I volunteered in the Buddy Program in International Students Services, which pairs a McGill international student with a future international student. As a current student, I answered my buddy's questions and introduced my student life to him. And I got a chance to know someone from another culture. This practice could also be useful for secondary school students.

Many international secondary school students like to be with classmates who share their mother tongue. Also, because Chinese teachers have an authoritative image for the students, they are unwilling to communicate with teachers, while their lack of language skills has limited their ability to express themselves. I hope that teachers can give more patience and tolerance, observe and encourage students to express themselves, and I found from the interview that the teachers' help was actually very effective, and many participants were grateful to them. Considering that teachers in an English school in Quebec may not be well prepared to teach ESL students, due to the lack of official and systematic ESL teacher training for teachers in English schools, they may well encounter difficulties understanding Chinese students' problems, which could go beyond

the classroom setting. A teacher may not be able to help unless he understands the students socially and culturally.

There are an increasing number of international secondary school students coming to Canada from China now. If Canadian teachers and schools can take the initiative to understand some basic facts of the Chinese education system, it is likely that they can effectively find the cause of students' plights and take some helpful measures.

### ***Implications for Homestay Hosts and Parents***

Underage students need a homestay and a guardian when they study in Canada, while their parents are thousands of miles away. The homestay host is usually the person that the student meets before the start of the school. According to the stories with the homestay hosts shared by the participants in this study, I found that if the homestay host is willing to make efforts to help the students better adapt to their studies, give them some encouragement, or give some hints to the difficulties that the students may encounter, this could be very helpful for the students to regulate their emotions. Their parents, who are thousands of miles away, may be able to better communicate with their children, and emotionally guide their children, if they can better understand their children's situation.

### ***Implications for Agents and Schools in China***

Because secondary school students' and their parents' English proficiency, as well as their understanding of applications procedures, are not very good (in contrast to university applicants), many parents pay an agent to help with their application. In addition, now some Chinese schools offer international programs to better prepare the students for further studies

abroad (although many students still study only in mainstream Chinese schools before going abroad). These schools and individuals get into touch with many international secondary school students, and thus could know more about the difficulties an international student is likely to have and what they should expect to encounter overseas. If they are willing to help, they can give practical advice on what students and parents should expect and prepare for, linguistically, academically, socially and culturally, which would certainly be valuable information for future Chinese international secondary school students and their parents.

### **Limitations**

This study is a qualitative study with seven participants using semi-structured interviews. The limited number of participants is one of its limitations. In this study, most of the participants who participated in the research came from the same school board, and the diversity of sampling may not be enough. As a qualitative study, it also has some limitations compared to a quantitative study, for example, its lack of generalizability.

This thesis adopts autoethnographic besides semi-structured interviews and presents the data of mine as an English tutor. However, the data about the students I have met may only show a limited aspect of this group of Chinese international secondary school students, because some students may not have encountered major academic difficulties or they have the ability to solve their own problems, and thus they do not seek help from a tutor. And some students are troubled so greatly by foreign language anxiety or academic difficulties that they may be too seriously affected to seek help. In this situation, I cannot reach these types of students in my teaching and thus I am not aware of their situation.

Despite the limitations mentioned above, I still consider this study informative and hope the findings may provide some helpful information for the reduction of foreign language anxiety and the integration of Chinese international secondary school students into their studies and daily life.

### **Ideas for further research**

In this study, it is identified that Chinese international secondary school students are a group of students who suffer from foreign language anxiety. Due to the distinctive characteristics of the students themselves and the environment they study in and live in, they should be investigated as a subgroup under the category of Chinese international students. Further quantitative research could be conducted to obtain more generalizable results.

The current study finds that Chinese international secondary school students benefit from help from teachers and classmates. Further research can be conducted to more systematically find out what practices can help international students, and to what extent.

This thesis finds that foreign language anxiety may appear as early as students' arrival in Canada, and it may be caused by the difficulty of transferring between the two educational systems. However, in this study the question of pre-departure preparation was not addressed. Further study could investigate the relationship between Chinese high school students' preparation before setting out and their levels of language anxiety, to determine whether good pre-departure preparation reduces language anxiety.

### *Closing thoughts*

With the steady increase in the number of Chinese international secondary school students in Quebec, this qualitative study sought to investigate and explore whether Chinese international secondary school students in Montreal experienced foreign language anxiety, as well as the causes and their reactions to it, by adopting the approach of semi-structured interviews with the seven participants who are or were studying in English schools in Montreal. This thesis also addressed their academic challenges and coping strategies. Considering the distinctive differences between the two educational systems in Quebec and China, I presented what differed in both systems according to the interview data and my own experience. As a foreign language user, researcher and now a tutor, I also adopted the method of autoethnography, contributing my observations and reflections on this topic. Based on my interpretation and discussion of the research findings, I aimed to present some insights and visions for prospective Chinese international secondary school students, their parents, and both schools in China and hosting institutions in Quebec. I hope that this may help educational practitioners and homestay hosts to better understand this student body, eliminate possible misunderstandings, and create mutual support. Different languages and cultural diversity should be an eye-opener to broaden our scope of understanding the world, and I hope that with everyone's effort, seeking further overseas studies in Quebec can become a pleasant and fruitful journey for Chinese international secondary school students, as well as for the local students and hosting institutions.



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### **Appendix A: Letter of Recruitment**

Hello, my name is Shengwen Xu. I am a graduate student at McGill University in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education. I am currently conducting a research study about how Chinese international secondary students in Montreal feel when living and studying in a second language (L2) environment. I am looking for participants for my study. Participation in this research includes an interview about your feelings and experiences toward your study and life in Montreal, which will take approximately 90 minutes. If you agree to participate in a follow-up interview, that will take about 10 to 20 minutes.

Hopefully, this research will benefit both educational institutions, language and subject instructors, and the Chinese international secondary students themselves as well. This research will recruit students from China who are currently studying in high schools in Montreal. Your participation will be highly appreciated. Please send me a private message if you are interested in this study and I will get in touch to talk about the details of the interview. My phone number is 514-443-9958. And please find in the attachment the consent form. Please read it carefully, and don't hesitate to contact me if you have any question about it. I will prepare a hard copy on the day of the interview for your signature.

Best wishes,

Shengwen Xu

Supervisor: Dr. Mela Sarkar

Department: Department of Integrated Studies in Education

Email: mela.sarkar@mcgill.ca

## **Appendix B: Informed Consent Form**

Dear Participant,

I am a researcher from McGill University (Faculty of Education) currently conducting a research study in which I seek to better understand how students feel as they use their second language inside and outside the classroom. I hope that this work will help us better understand individual differences in the field of second language acquisition and provide insights to problems, helping students who study abroad overcome difficulties concerning emotional factors.

Through this study, I hope to understand how Chinese international secondary students in Montreal feel when living and studying in a L2 environment. This study will lead us to a better understanding of the feelings experienced by students. I hope that this work will help educators to better support students' second language learning by improving teaching methods and helping reduce students' emotional concerns.

Through the study, participants will have a better understanding of international students' emotions and how these emotions, which they may not have analyzed in their daily life, might influence both their learning and their classroom performance. Participation in this research includes an interview about your feelings and experiences toward your study and life in Montreal, which will take approximately 90 minutes. If you agree to participate in a follow-up interview, that will take about 10 to 20 minutes.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research. In the interview, you will be asked questions concerning your feelings when listening to and using English in your classroom and outside the classroom. You can freely express your opinions and share your personal experiences. Every effort will be made to ensure that your confidentiality and privacy is



protected. Your name, personal, and institutional information will be kept confidential. Your real name will not be disclosed in research reports and published articles. Any identifiable information will be stored in a safe place separate from the survey and interview data and only I will have access to this information. I do not foresee any potential risks or discomfort to participants as a result of participating in this study. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You will always have the right to withdraw from this study.

I will be more than happy to share my findings with participants in the present study and a wider audience. I may use data from this study in future in related studies, in which case I will also seek your permission.

Thank you for considering this request. I would greatly appreciate your participation in this endeavor. If you have any questions about this study or future studies, please contact me via phone at 514-443-9958 or e-mail at shengwen.xu@mail.mcgill.ca; or my supervisor, Dr. Mela Sarkar via e-mail at mela.sarkar@mcgill.ca.

Sincerely,

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I have read the above and I understand all the above conditions. I freely give consent and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

I will participate in the interviews during the study.

YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

The researcher may use data from this study in future related studies. I understand that my identity will always be kept anonymous.

YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

Name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Any questions or concerns about your rights or welfare as a participant in this study should be referred to Lynda McNeil of the McGill Ethics Board at (514) 389-6831 or via email: [lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca](mailto:lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca). Thank you for considering this request.

## Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guidelines

### Background Information

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Home City: \_\_\_\_\_

Arrival in Montreal (mm/yyyy): \_\_\_\_\_

Began from which grade in Montreal: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of High School/School Board in Montreal: \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions

1. How do you use English at school?

1.1 What do you do with English at class and after class?

(at class: speaking and listening-group discussion, raise/answer questions, presentations, reading and writing: course materials, writing assignments...)

(after class: talk with peers and teachers, school activities...)

1.2 When doing the things above, how do you feel differently when using Chinese in China and English here? Does using English encourage you to participate or keep you from taking part?

1.3 When you started school here, did you find it different from what you had imagined?

1.4 When you began your study in Montreal, did you think your English is adequate for your study? Do you think your English has improved up to now?

1.5 Before you came to Montreal, did you undertake any form of language training with the purpose of better adapting to the English learning environment?

2. How are your English listening, speaking, reading, and writing?

2.1 How much can you understand the lectures in classroom?

2.2 Do you read much in English after class?

2.3 How do you write your assignments?

2.4 Do you actively find your own opportunities to speak English?

2.4.1 How do you communicate with your peers and teachers, in English? Does English help you communicate with them or not?

2.4.2 Do you actively participate in classroom activities, such as talking in class, group discussion, or presentations?

3. Do you have any problems using English? (in terms of classroom activities, home tasks, examination method, learning environment).

3.1 Among all the subjects taught in English, which one (or ones) do you find easiest and why? Which one (or ones) do you find most difficult and why?

3.2 Do you turn to others for assistance when you encounter some difficulties in your study? To whom will you turn to? Did you get it?

3.3 What strategies do you adopt to solve these problems?

3.4 What did you do to improve your English?

4. What suggestions do you have for Chinese secondary students who would come to study in Montreal?

(Questions are adapted and modified from the interview schedule of

Liu, C. (July 01, 2013). From language learners to language users: A Study of Chinese Students  
in the UK. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 23, 2, 123-143.)