

To Speak or Not to Speak: Silence in Classrooms

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Abstract

The enrollment number of Chinese students in North American universities is increasing every year. Even though graduate courses are discussion-based, many university instructors have experienced the “silent Chinese” phenomenon in classrooms. This study looks through investigating the reasons for Chinese international students’ silence in classrooms. Basil Bernstein’s language code theory was used as a theoretical framework to explain the difficulties international students experience in speaking up in class. From students’ narratives, the aim of this study is to understand genuine reasons for their silence so that the school community can better assist students with diverse backgrounds. Using in-depth interviews, this study explores six international Chinese students’ experiences studying abroad in a graduate program at a large university in Canada. Three themes were identified from the interviews: First, language proficiency; second, previous schooling experience in China; and third, Chinese typical culture of *face*. This thesis concludes with implications on how this study to understand Chinese international students’ difficulties can bring in great learning opportunities to the classroom and also create a multicultural classroom that values diverse ideas.

Keywords: Chinese international students, silence in classrooms, face culture, language codes

Résumé

Le nombre d'inscriptions d'étudiants chinois dans les universités nord-américaines augmente chaque année. Bien que les cours de troisième cycle soient basés sur des discussions, de nombreux professeurs d'université ont expérimenté le phénomène du «chinois silencieux» dans les salles de classe. Cette étude examine les raisons du silence des étudiants étrangers chinois dans les salles de classe. La théorie des codes linguistiques de Basil Bernstein a été utilisée comme un cadre théorique pour expliquer les difficultés rencontrées par les étudiants internationaux pour s'exprimer en classe. À partir des récits des élèves, l'objectif de cette étude est de comprendre les véritables raisons de leur silence afin que la communauté scolaire puisse mieux assister les élèves d'origines diverses. À partir d'entrevues approfondies, cette étude explore les expériences de six étudiants chinois internationaux qui étudient à l'étranger dans le cadre d'un programme de cycles supérieurs dans une grande université canadienne. Les entretiens ont permis de dégager trois thèmes: premièrement, la maîtrise de la langue; deuxièmement, une expérience scolaire antérieure en Chine; et troisièmement, la culture de visage typique chinoise. Cette thèse se termine par des implications sur la manière dont cette étude visant à comprendre les difficultés des étudiants étrangers chinois peut apporter de grandes opportunités d'apprentissage en classe et également créer une classe multiculturelle qui valorise des idées diverses.

Mots-clés: étudiants internationaux chinois, silence en classe, culture chinoise du *face*, codes de langue

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents Jaysook Choi and Chang Oh who have motivated me to come back to Canada for my graduate studies.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of Purpose

The intent of the study is to examine the causes of Chinese international students' silence in North American graduate level classrooms. More precisely, I will look at the causes of silence in two ways: 1) Proficiency in language and background knowledge of the subject, and 2) the typical Chinese 'face culture' aspect. In doing so, I expect to find ways to enhance the school community's understanding and acceptance of students from diverse backgrounds. Two main outcomes are desired from this research: 1) Increased understanding of Chinese international students studying in North America, and 2) Finding ways to help international students' cultural adaptation in North American classrooms. These findings will enrich the current research on international students and multicultural learning environments in higher education. Moreover, I hope that finding the causes of international students' silent classroom behavior can lead to better understanding of their heritage culture and help create an inclusive multicultural classroom.

Current trend of international students in Canada and at a major University in Canada

Due to the immigration policy of Canada, the population has become so diverse that it is impossible to ignore the minor ethnicities. According to Census 2016, it shows that 21.6% of Canadians are immigrants, reaching the highest share in 85 years. The census shows 7.7 million Canadians belong to a visible minority, representing 22.3 per cent of the population. That is up from just 4.7 per cent in 1981 and could rise to about one-third by 2036. Statistics Canada projects that immigrants could represent up to 30 per cent of all Canadians by 2036 (Statistics Canada, 2016). Now Canada has become home to vastly

diverse cultural, linguistic backgrounds, and skin colors (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013).

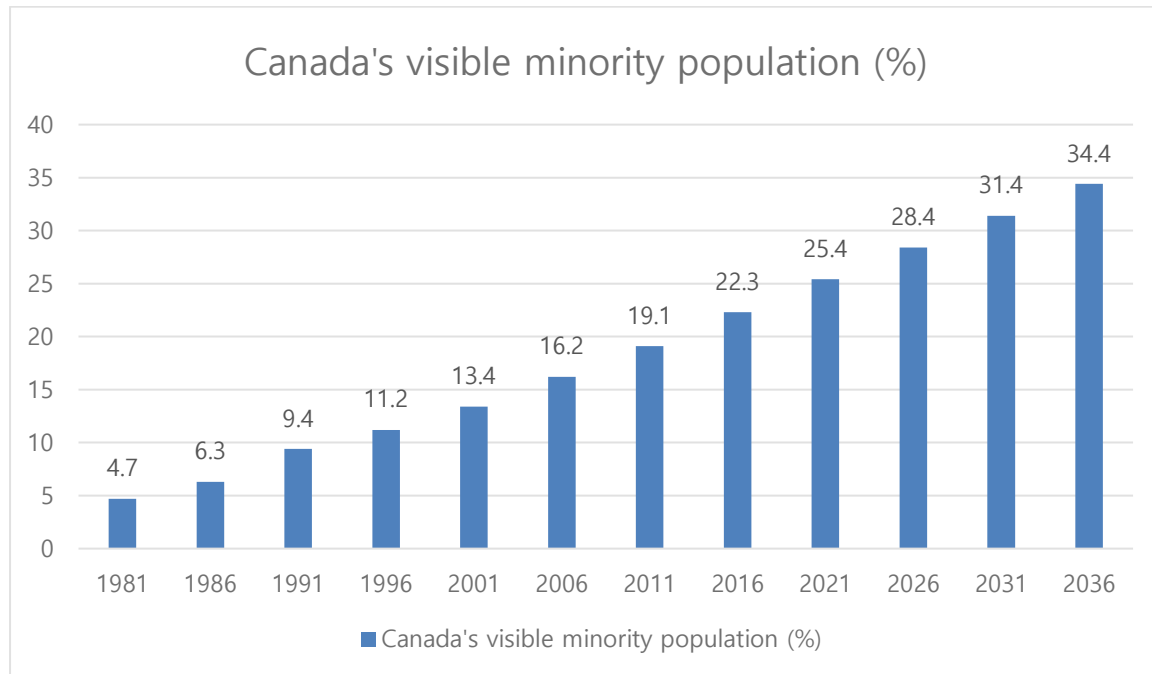


Figure 1. Canada's visible minority population (Statistics Canada, 2016)

This phenomenon can also be seen in universities. The number of international university students in North America has increased drastically over the last decades and have created a multicultural environment. International students are regarded as an important group of young and well-educated people in Canada. According to Statistics Canada (2016), there were 353,000 international students with a valid study permit in 2015 December in Canada. According to Statistics Canada (2008), in years 2005 and 2006, a record of 80,200 international students were enrolled in Canadian universities and made up of 7.7% of total student registration. In 2016, international student enrollment has almost tripled the proportion compared to a decade earlier. International students who are visible minority students, are students from Asian, African, and Latin American countries. Diverse learning cultures enable the school community to benefit from new perspectives, diverse backgrounds,

and enhancement of a multicultural environment. This trend of diversity in universities is not an exception in a major University in Montreal, Quebec, henceforth referred to as M. Among the international population, USA, a neighboring country, and France, a country which speaks one of the official languages in Canada have traditionally been the biggest population of international students at this University. However, according to Enrollment reports (2018) of the University, China has ranked as the number one nationality for the international population in both full-time and part-time students. For the past two years China was ranked second following USA and three years ago, third following USA and France. Especially among international students who are from non-English speaking countries, China is ranked first in number of students enrolled at M University in 2016 and in 2018 ranked first among all international population (M Enrollment reports, 2016; M Enrollment reports, 2018). For the past five years, China was within the top three countries in international student enrollment by nationality. However, it is interesting to note that China has become the largest international population at M University in 2018. This trend of increase in international Chinese students is getting bigger each year. Despite the steady increase of Chinese students, the school community lacks knowledge in international students' challenges in communicating effectively (Li, Mazer, & Ju, 2011). Many schools are not fully prepared in accepting and understanding students from diverse backgrounds (Heng, 2016; Liu, 2001). Especially since East-Asian culture is different from North American, a deeper understanding is needed to help these students' cultural adaptation to North American classrooms.

Table 1. 2018 M Enrollment report on international students - Top 20 countries based on citizenship (Fall 2018).

Country	Number of students	Ranking
China	2864	1
USA	2412	2
France	1886	3
India	736	4
Saudi Arabia	297	5
Turkey	284	6
Iran	265	7
South Korea	258	8
United Kingdom	224	9
Mexico	184	10
Pakistan	177	11
Japan	160	12
Brazil	149	13
Bangladesh	148	14
Germany	116	15
Egypt	101	16
Australia	98	17
Lebanon	96	18
Italy	89	19
Taiwan	82	20
All Countries	12536	-

Table 2. M Enrollment recent five-year report.

Country	Fall 2018 Rank	Fall 2017 Rank	% Change (2018/2017)	Fall 2016 Rank	Fall 2015 Rank	Fall 2014 Rank	Fall 2013 Rank	% Change (2018/2013)
China	1	2	19.6	2	3	3	3	174.1
USA	2	1	-0.9	1	1	2	1	9.7
France	3	3	0.6	3	2	1	2	43.2

Chinese international students in classrooms

According to M University's enrollment reports (Table 1 & Table 2), Chinese international students have become a big part of the university community. Most graduate-level courses which are seminars are discussion-based. Therefore, sharing ideas and perspectives in class discussions is the core of the graduate programs in the field of liberal arts and social sciences. However, sometimes course lecturers and North American peers wonder why Chinese students are always silent in discussion-based graduate level classes. Many Western educators have reported experiencing the "silent Chinese student" phenomenon (Dougherty and Wall, 1991; Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014). Some course lecturers are even confused whether these students are following the class or not. There has been an increasing need for techniques for eliciting Chinese students' participation in classrooms (Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014). We should understand that problems in school are caused by differences in cultural content and practices which includes differences in communication and interaction styles, and cognitive and learning styles of minority culture students. It is assumed that when people from various cultures communicate they are involved in intercultural communication, and understanding is greatly facilitated when cultural experiences are similar; conversely, cultural difference affects interpersonal interactions in ways that often lead to communication problems. Therefore, all community members should help students to adapt to the North American university culture by creating an inclusive multicultural classroom and understanding each individual's background and differences. In order to do this, an in-depth understanding of Chinese students' behavior needs to be discovered. To sum up, the purpose of this research is to understand how language proficiency and the influence of Chinese culture affects Chinese International Students to speak up in class. In addition, the objective of this study is to enhance the M

community understanding; course lecturers, school administrators' and non-Chinese colleagues' understanding of why Chinese students tend to remain silent in graduate level classes.

Study objectives

This research seeks to investigate important topics related to Chinese international student's cultural adaptation, along with how North American universities should adapt new perspectives, diverse backgrounds, and enhancement of the multicultural environment. The objectives of this study are the following.

- Examine current status of Chinese international students in North American universities
- Justify the importance of international students in North American classrooms
- Understand the factors (language and knowledge proficiency, and cultural factors) which cause Chinese graduate students' silence in classrooms
- Investigate ways for the university community can help international students' cultural adaptation

In order to achieve these research objectives, data was collected from several sources including: 1) interviews with Chinese international graduate students enrolled in a university in Montreal, Canada and 2) my observations in graduate level classrooms at M University. Data from research participants and the researcher's observation helped in looking at the phenomenon of "silence in classrooms" from two different perspectives. First, observing Chinese international students in classrooms confirmed previous research findings of silent

Chinese students. In my field notes, whenever Chinese students show any type of activity to participate in class I wrote down notes. Moreover, interview participants' narratives helped the researcher in understanding how Chinese international students feel and think about classroom participation in class. Interviews were conducted after the observations were all done.

Situating the researcher

This section briefly introduces a little bit about myself, the researcher, in order to situate myself in relation to the participants of the study. I grew up in two countries, Korea and Canada, which has two different distinct languages and cultures. I moved back and forth from Korea to Canada several times. I have attended schools and worked in both countries after graduating from my undergraduate program. Recalling my childhood and teenage years, I was always trying to work my way to adapt to new classrooms, cultures, and languages. I had good grades throughout my K-12 education in both countries. My language skills were always above average and while I am bilingual, I never personally felt that I had native-like proficiency in either languages until I graduated from high school. When I was living in Korea, I often felt that people were treating me like an expatriate who was privileged enough to grow up in the West and spoke good English. Despite having a Korean ethnicity, I have never felt that people were treating me as a "true Korean" because of my Canadian nationality, Korean accent, and my way of "Westernized" thinking. Nobody including my family knows that I have been going through such confusion and struggles trying to adapt to cultural differences living in Korea after spending my childhood years in Vancouver, Canada. Relationships with friends and co-workers were different from country to country which eventually made me very talented in catching hidden meanings in conversations. Due to my special personal background in growing up in two different countries, I feel empathy towards

Asian international students studying in western countries because I understand their difficulties in adapting to a new culture. I believe that I was the best person to do research in this topic since I am willing to know more about their emotions and experiences. Moreover, because of my ethnicity and personal background, Asian international students were open to sharing their experiences and difficulties with me about studying abroad in Canada.

Research questions

Following are the three research questions that will guide throughout this thesis.

1. To what extent does the language proficiency related to Chinese graduate students' silence in classrooms?
2. How did previous education in China influence cultural adaptation in a North American University?
3. To what degree does the Chinese culture of *Face* cause Chinese graduate students' silence in classrooms?

Methodologies

The research is a qualitative study which includes two types of primary data: 1) interviews with research participants, and 2) observations. I used in-depth semi-structured interviews and personal narratives in order to learn about participants' educational background in China, experiences studying abroad as a graduate student in Canada, and most importantly, their struggles in North American classrooms and reasons for being silent in class discussions. In addition, I used my observations of Chinese international students'

participation in graduate-level classes at M University. The data was content-analyzed and main themes were identified within the conceptual framework discussed in chapter 2.

Thesis overview

This Master's thesis consists of six chapters in total. In the first chapter, I have provided a statement of purpose, an overview of current trend of international students in Canada, study objects, methodologies and a definition of key terms used in this thesis. Chapter two is a literature review chapter which helps conceptualize this study as well as guide us throughout the research study. Chapter three provides a detailed account of the methodology used in this thesis. Chapter four present the analysis of findings. Finally, in chapter five, I conclude with a discussion based on three research questions, a conclusion including limitations of this research, and suggestions for future research.

Key terms defined

Chinese international graduate student is a student with Chinese nationality who has completed their previous K-12 education and undergraduate program in China that are currently enrolled in a graduate program in a university outside of China.

Cross-cultural adaptation refers to “the process of change over time that takes place within individuals who have completed their primary socialization process in one culture and then come into continuous, prolonged first-hand contact with a new and unfamiliar culture” (Kim, 1988).

East Asian countries refer to the three countries, China, Korea and Japan, which are located in East Asia.

Face is the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for him/herself from others (Ho, 1976). Face is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and when people experience losing face, they feel shame (Cardon & Scott, 2003; Ho, 1976). Many researchers have identified face as an important aspect of Chinese culture (Cardon & Scott, 2003)

Visible minorities in Canada are defined as “persons, other than Aboriginal people, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” (Government of Canada, 1995).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews various streams of literature examining multicultural classrooms, Basil Bernstein's sociolinguistic theory of language codes and causes that hinder class participation including confidence in speaking up, and typical Chinese culture.

First, an overview of the literature on multicultural education explains that there are many difficulties and challenges that derive from the traditional education system. The literature suggests that due to the shift from assimilation to multiculturalism and the increase of the visible minority population in North America, conventional teaching practices need to be revised to meet the diverse situations that students are in.

Although much of the literature on inclusive education in multicultural societies look through the lens of identity, race and gender, few researchers attempt to look through the perspective of language, previous knowledge, and heritage culture combined together. Unlike immigrant students who mostly arrive in North America at a fairly young age, international graduate students have more challenges in their English language proficiency, mismatches of current education and previous education experience, and typical culture in their home countries that is different from North America. Therefore, Basil Bernstein's language codes theory explains the core reasons why Chinese international students tend to be silent in North American classrooms. Moreover, in this chapter, I will cover studies that address Chinese students' typical characteristics that cause silence in classrooms.

Inclusive education in multicultural society: Setting the context

Over the last thirty years we have witnessed efforts to reeducate North Americans around issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and their relation to social justice (Apple, 1996; Ghosh 1996; Ghosh & Abdi, 2013; McLaren, 2000). Education in schools has been affected by this shift to Multiculturalism policy and Act, and social justice legislation which have been acknowledged as facilitating the meeting of different cultures and cultural differences may be negotiated to change the norms of the society (Igoa, 1995; Liston & Zeichner, 1996; Korn, Bursztyn & Kincheloe, 2002). School knowledge should be delivered which is not only inclusive of the values and practices of both minority and majority cultures but are non-hierarchically construed (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013).

Conventionally, the world view and experiences of the dominant group have been perceived to be universal knowledge and as representing the situation. It was required for the visual minorities to assimilate to the Eurocentric world and blend in while hiding their own identity. Especially in North America, the traditional goal in education has been the transmission of the dominant culture which involved assimilation for those who are different (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). The melting pot theory, an idealized and popular way of describing the assimilation of European immigrants coming to the United States in the early 1900s, held that it was necessary to forget or at least submerge the language and customs of the homeland in order to be allowed to participate in the benefits of the United States. Therefore, assimilation has been the price for participation of the U.S. society (Childs, 2017). Traditional education based on assimilation has now shifted to integration. Now there are many challenges to the Western-based knowledge and Eurocentric world view because the assimilation stage has now shifted to integrating diverse cultures. Integration, the fifth stage of the multicultural policy in Canada involves all people to put

effort to build society and represent the vision of a just society with integration of both majority and minority cultures (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013).

This integration should not only be minorities integrating to the majority but done in both directions. Therefore, in the new curriculum it is important to include the history, lived experiences and consciousness of those who differ from the traditionally dominant group (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013), and value their diverse backgrounds because they have become a big part of the society. However, much multicultural education research focuses on reformation of the curriculum. Banks and Banks (1993) refer to this as the ‘infusion approach’ to multicultural education. The infusion approach widens the scope of multicultural content by threading new material throughout the existing curriculum, rather than providing solely add-ons. While the infusion approach takes a holistic view toward curriculum development and seeks to integrate various aspects needed in multicultural education, it retains the structure, content, and underlying assumptions of the extant curriculum. Therefore, an approach that can include international student’s lived experiences with the curriculum and creating an understanding between the dominant and the minority group is needed to shed more light on the actual issues of conflict and misunderstanding of students with difference in schools.

It is important to understand that multicultural education is for all students and all teachers, not only for minority groups. Ghosh & Abdi (2013) point out that it is especially important for dominant groups to have other perspectives because their privileged position tends to make it difficult for them to see the world critically and question what has been granted. Because the way we behave is determined by the way we perceive the world, it is important for us to understand the nature of perception and how our cultural experiences influence our perceptions (Liu, 2001). These researchers assert that multicultural education

is for everyone, especially the dominant group because how we behave is influenced by our social backgrounds and even can develop distorted ideas toward those who are different. However, it does not bring the attention of bringing understanding to the entire school community members including students, teaching faculties, and administrative staffs. It is not only the students that are part of the multicultural education but all people around them that affects their morality, values of equality and justice in relation to other people. Therefore, in order to create an inclusive learning environment, conventional knowledge should be carried out by accepting different world views. Student experiences and their historical, social and cultural conditions must be viewed as primary sources of knowledge if they are to be subjects and involved in the productive educational process. Furthermore, there should be a change in teaching and learning inclusively and the importance of multicultural education should be actively discussed and highly valued.

Kanpol and McLaren (1995) state that the focus of multicultural education should be on developing a discourse that illuminates a greater understanding of the self and the multiple ascribed characteristics that are used to define oneself and understanding others. Understanding the difference in culture is an important part of seeing the world. It enables students to have a mindset of embracing diverse cultures and potentially changing the deficiencies that arise from the differences. In addition, different cultures coming together and coexisting would enable students' development of new ideas. For example, while international students can obtain advanced education or training not available in their home countries, host universities are able to adopt new perspectives, diverse backgrounds, and experience enhancement of a multicultural environment (Liu, 2001). They offer the opportunity for an exchange of ideas and information in an open academic atmosphere which can further cause global understanding (Lusher, Campbell, & Carrell, 2018). Multicultural education in a globalized state should open up the world's cultures and

differences to one another and coexist interdependently. However, if the approach of multicultural education is not dealt with sensitively, it could actually indirectly advance the Westernization of the world. Therefore, the entire school community should take on responsibility in assisting students to create a broader view of the world.

Therefore, students such as international students who come from different backgrounds must be seen in a new light in a system that has excluded and marginalized them. The progressive trend in education is to include the history, lived experiences, and consciousness of those who differ from the traditionally dominant group. In order to achieve more inclusive and effective notions and practices of multiculturalism, the role of education becomes important. And multicultural education would teach how to coexist, peacefully and productively in multiethnic, multiracial, and multilingual setting (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013).

In the current stage, the teacher's role is creating a learning environment which helps students to adapt to the paradigm shift (from assimilation to multicultural and inclusive education). As discussed in the paper, teachers should be aware of the students' diverse cultural background in order to help their cross-cultural adaptation, build a relationship of trust through continuous communication, value what diversity can bring to the classroom and encourage students to share their experiences. Eventually, genuine multicultural education would enable cultural relocation of teachers in the class so that student-teacher interactions become relatively equalized, dialogic, and responsive to the specific needs of the students (Ghosh, 1996). Teachers and students should be interdependent on each other and create a classroom where everyone develops the power to learn and imagine (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013).

Paradigm conflicts that arise along with the transition from assimilation to integration can be alleviated through multicultural education. The gap between the theoretical developments and difference-friendly multicultural education would be narrowed by recognizing the difference in individuals' values, discourses, practices, and visions of society (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). By making comparisons between cultures through transforming own standards, individuals can see the world from their own perspective and have multiple consciousness (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). Multiculturalism involves majority and minority groups alike and creates goals in a new paradigm which enables people to relate across differences. Given the nature and magnitude of changes in society, rather than the traditional curriculum, a new kind of curriculum that incorporates multicultural education to create a better future is imperative (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013).

Theoretical Framework: Language codes

This part of the chapter will look at Basil Bernstein's sociolinguistic theory of language codes on his five volumes of work in "Class, codes and control." In previous research, the main factors that are considered to hinder international students from speaking up in class are language proficiency and typical Chinese culture. Especially in literature, East Asian international students are portrayed as reticent speakers with intrinsic personalities (Liu, 2001; Li & Jia, 2006; Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Jin & Cortazzi, 1993; Song, 1995; Turner & Hiraga, 1996). These factors exclude Chinese students from the majority group of graduate students in North American university classrooms. While having active discussions within their in-group of Chinese students, they remain silent in discussions with the entire class (Atkinson, 2011). This phenomenon can be explained through Basil Bernstein's sociolinguistic theory of language codes; restricted and elaborated codes.

The definition of “Code”

The concept of “code” was central to Bernstein’s sociolinguistic theory. His work on language, restricted and elaborated codes, code refers to a regulative principle which underlies various message systems, especially curriculum and pedagogy (Atkinson, 1985). In *Theories of Human Communication* (2002), Littlejohn & Foss defines the term code as referring “to a set of organizing principles behind the language employed by members of a social group” (p. 278). Bernstein’s theory shows that certain social group’s characteristics are reflected in the everyday language use. Thus, the relationships within the social group affect the way people use language, type of speech and shape conversation. This varies according to which social group a person is affiliated to. In the first volume of *Class, codes and control* (1973), Bernstein’s sociolinguistic code theory was developed into a social theory examining the relationships between social class, family and the reproduction of meaning systems.

Bernstein’s language code theory: Restricted and elaborated codes

Bernstein’s definition of “code” will be used to explain the relationship between different social groups and how they speak languages differently based on restricted and elaborated codes. Bernstein began the development of code theory by introducing the concepts of restricted and elaborated codes (Bernstein, 1962a; Bernstein, 1962b). The restricted code is suitable for insiders who share assumptions and understandings on the topic, therefore creates a sense of belonging to a certain group. Whereas the elaborated code does not assume that the listener shares these assumptions or understandings, and thus the elaborated code is more explicit, more thorough, and does not require the listener to read between the lines.

Bernstein explains the correlation between social class, working class and middle class, and their use of restricted and elaborated codes. In his research, he says that while the working class only uses restricted codes, middle classes have access to both restricted and elaborated codes (Bernstein, 1973). Restricted codes are less formal and exposed through the socialization process. On the contrary, elaborated codes have a longer, more complicated sentence structure that use uncommon words and thoughts. Only the middle class, people who have been exposed to elaborated codes during their socialization process, have access to both the restricted codes and elaborated codes.

For North American classrooms, the classification of working class and middle class in Bernstein's sociolinguistic theory can also be applied to Chinese students (minority) and majority students (native-English speaking students and/or local students). It is because socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity are inseparable and intimately intertwined with each other. In addition, research has shown that race and ethnicity in terms of stratification often determine a person's socioeconomic status (House & Williams, 2000). Therefore, Bernstein's theory of language codes is important in understanding the communication problems and behaviors of Chinese students in North American universities.

Chinese students in North American universities: Restricted and elaborate codes

In groups of only Chinese students, they have active discussions and conversations. However, they remain silent in discussions with the entire class where both Chinese and non-Chinese students are present (Atkinson, 2011; Liu, 2001; Liu, 2002). This phenomenon can be explained through Basil Bernstein's sociolinguistic theory of language codes; restricted and elaborated codes.

Different restricted codes

In the restricted code, speakers draw on background knowledge and shared understanding. The restricted code is important in understanding Chinese students' silence in classrooms. Within the Chinese group they communicate well because they share the same restricted code. It is because they have studied the same Chinese curriculum in their home country, can speak the same language, and share similar cultural backgrounds. However, one of the reasons why international students from China are silent in North American classrooms is because they do not share the same restricted code with the majority group. The restricted codes are unique in the Chinese group due to the socialization process in their families and schools in China. Their typical Chinese cultures in how to behave in class and their past experiences are not shared with the majority students. Students' cultural background results in differences in communication and interaction styles as well as cognitive and learning styles. It is important to have a deeper understanding of the students' individual culture and experience because learning would be built up on it. This will help course instructors with assisting international students.

The lack of belonging and intimacy due to not being able to share the restricted code prohibits international students from being included to the learning culture in North American universities. Thus, Chinese students become isolated by themselves in a Chinese-only group. After trying to immerse to the new culture, they face barriers due to restricted codes and have difficulties overcoming it. After several attempts to join the majority culture, eventually they end up joining a Chinese-only group which makes them feel comfortable because all members share the same restricted codes by speaking the same language, eating similar food, and sharing similar experiences.

Moreover, since the restricted code is short and condensed in nature, a person overhearing a conversation full of restricted codes could be quite lost. This happens frequently to Chinese students because restricted code requires language skills, background knowledge, and culturally relevant information. In this case, the cause is their lack of content knowledge, English proficiency, and information on the majority culture. They have difficulty understanding terminologies or vocabulary used by the lecturer and peers. Thus, they need to search an online dictionary during class or be lost if they fail to understand the word. In instances when people talk about the local news, politics, or make jokes using idiomatic expressions, this makes international students become more silent because it is difficult for them to simply search on their electronic devices and join the conversation. In such environment as an “outsider” it is inevitable to be silent because they are unable to understand fully what the “insiders” are talking about.

The first step that teachers can help with these restricted codes is to learn about the students’ cultural backgrounds. Especially, cross-cultural adaptation is an increasingly important issue with the growing number of international students. Many of these students struggle with feelings of inadequacy and frustration in the changed environment. Some students resist change and cling to their old habits; others desperately try to fit into the target community and yet experience a sense of failure or despair (Liu, 2001). This makes it necessary for the teacher, as mediator in the education process, to develop a knowledge base on which to build understanding (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). This raises the broader question to what degree can teachers be expected to become sufficiently acquainted with the languages and customs of students in increasingly diverse school populations.

Elaborated codes

Elaborated codes have a longer, more complicated sentence structure that uses uncommon words and thoughts whereas restricted codes are less formal and exposed through the socialization process. However, elaborated codes work well in situations where there is no prior or shared understanding and knowledge, where more thorough explanation is required. In a graduate course classroom setting, even though Chinese students do not have the elaborate codes they can understand classroom discussions because the elaborate codes explain so that everyone can understand. Therefore, Chinese students as an observer and listener of classroom discussions can understand well because it is well-explained in the conversation. However, they are not able to speak up in class using elaborated codes because they do not have the ability to explain in detail about complicated concepts using difficult sentence structure and vocabulary. They may know how to communicate with elaborated codes in the Chinese context but not in the North American context. It is because they have not been exposed to the adequate elaborated codes of the English language, Western knowledge, and practices in their socializing agencies: family, peer group, school, or work. Therefore, this explains why Chinese students feel more comfortable with one-way communication such as listening to their peers' conversation or professor's lectures. They can be good listeners of elaborated codes in classrooms but struggle to express it themselves

To summarize, Basil Bernstein's sociolinguistic theory of language codes has been concerned with how communication, cultural, and educational codes function in relation to particular social cultures. Through the analysis of codes, restricted and elaborated codes, I attempted to look at how restricted and elaborated codes explain the phenomenon of Chinese students' silence in graduate level classrooms. For Bernstein's research, there were social

class differences that differentiated communication codes. In the situation of North American multicultural classrooms, differences in restricted codes of North American majority students and Chinese international students arise from background knowledge, information, experiences, and language proficiency level. The fact that two groups do not share the same restricted codes obstruct from communicating with each other. In addition, because Chinese students do not have elaborate codes, they become information consumers but not producers which makes them silent in classrooms. Therefore, Bernstein's theory of language codes is important in explaining the reasons why cultural background acts as barriers in communication.

Chinese students' silence in classrooms

This part of the chapter discusses relevant literature about how a student's language proficiency and differences in culture can hinder amicable communication with people who do not share the same language and culture. More precisely, it focuses on the typical cultures of China and how Chinese students are usually recognized as passive participants in classrooms (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Jin & Cortazzi, 1993; Li & Jia, 2006; Liu 2001; Turner & Hiraga, 1996; Song, 1995) in North American universities.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

Second language (L2) research has taken many approaches including linguistic, communicative, environmental, and psychological to find out why some language learners tend to avoid or seek to communicate in their L2 (Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; Macintyre & Charos, 1996; Tucker, Hamayan, & Genesee, 1976). L2 use is one of the most effective methods in promoting intercultural communication in diverse societies (Hashimoto, 2002) and thus it is important to find the various causes that hinder these

individuals from not speaking up in L2 conversations.

Learners who willingly communicate in a wide range of conversational interactions are able to do so because of their communicative confidence. Series of studies have shown that communicative confidence is shaped by two variables: how relaxed learners are (emotional) and how competent they feel about their L2 ability. For those learners that are not confident in their language ability they may not be willing to communicate with people in their L2. Moreover, students struggling to manage cultural differences and adapting to a new culture might not be emotionally stable and tend not to open up to someone about their true feelings. These factors are considered to be the main contributors to communicative confidence (Clement et al., 2003).

Communication is especially important in multicultural education which can create an interdependent relationship between teachers and students (Ku, Lahman, Yeh, & Cheng, 2008; Liu, 2001; Plakans, 1997). The problems in schools are caused by differences in cultural content and practices which includes differences in communication and interaction styles, and cognitive and learning styles of minority culture students (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). It is assumed that when people from various cultures communicate, intercultural communication, understanding is greatly facilitated when cultural experiences are similar; conversely, cultural difference affect interpersonal interactions in ways that often lead to communication problems (Ku et al., 2008; Liu, 2001; Plakans, 1997). Especially when dealing with these problems, an understanding of the connection between culture and human communicative behaviors is essential. Creating mutual trust between students and teachers and the teacher having a good understanding on students' background will make it easier for international students to speak up and enhance their willingness to speak.

Assisting Chinese students' cross-cultural adaptation

There are stereotypes for East-Asian students including Chinese students that they are silent and not active in class discussions (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Jin & Cortazzi, 1993; Li & Jia, 2006; Liu 2001; Turner & Hiraga, 1996; Song, 1995). Such attitudes towards international students need to be replaced by a critical awareness of the complex nature of cultural understanding (Kubota & Lin, 2009). On the other hand, cross-cultural research has shown that there are some reasonably predictable characteristics that differentiate cultures (Atkinson, 2002, 2011; Matsumoto & Juang, 2013). One of the characteristics of Chinese students is that they tend to rely on the teacher and teacher's opinion rather than their own, independent thoughts. Because authority is important, questioning the professor or teacher's opinion in class is perceived to be inappropriate and show disrespect. For students with such culture, the teacher's role is pivotal in facilitating and creating an environment where students can articulate, defend, and demonstrate values in the process of positive self-concept and empowerment (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013).

According to Ghosh and Abdi (2013), in order to alleviate the difficulties in student's cross-cultural adaptation, the teacher, as a mediator in the education process, should develop a knowledge base to build understanding in student's diverse cultures. Facing numerous contrasts between the familiar milieu of student's home culture and their new location make it necessary for cross-cultural adaptation. Understanding the cross-cultural adaptation process is complex and diverse. It has to be viewed from multiple facets and dimensions which include individual perceptions, attitudes, behavioral patterns, linguistic proficiency, communicative competence and change in social, ethnic, or cultural identities (Liu, 2001). The majority of books written on multicultural education are reported to be written for classroom teachers. Importantly, teachers are seen as the primary agent of

change (Kanpol & McLaren, 1995). However, not much research stresses the importance of peer students and school administrator's role in international students' cross-cultural adaptation. Therefore, it is important to create an environment where students can freely express and share their ideas.

Helping students to express and share their differences

The main point of multicultural education is not just acknowledging cultural differences but should enable us to express our differences (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). It requires that teachers and students develop confidence and competence to speak what has previously been unspoken, to identify sources of individual and collective oppression, and to work to eliminate discrimination (Kanpol & McLaren, 1995). Different voices and perspectives as representing diverse opinions about the world create more inclusive and productive possibilities for all students. The aim for multicultural education is to connect people and provide learning that gives voice and personal control along with being democratic towards all students (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013).

Valuing the diversity that students bring

Diversity should be regarded as a creative force rather than as a deficiency or annoyance. Multicultural education must recognize the politics of difference and culture and the potential offered by difference. (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). Instead of constructing differences as liabilities, we can harness the positive forces of different world views and experiences to create a new learning and social well-being horizon that brings well-being and full value to everyone else. This understanding and deployment of differences would imply a variation in the ways diverse students learn best and discover best possible education for all students (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013).

Understanding Chinese culture of *face*

There is a Chinese saying, “a person needs face like a tree needs bark” which indicates the importance of face and how this aspect of culture is essentially a part of their lives. Therefore, face is perceived as one of the unique aspects of Chinese culture (Cardon & Scott, 2003; Ho, 1976). Many researchers identify face as an important aspect of Chinese culture (Cardon & Scott, 2003). Face is the direct English translation of the Chinese word *mien-tzu*. Ho (1976, p. 883), he defines face as “the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others by virtue of relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct.” The degree of each individual’s sensitivity toward face differs by their social status and position. However, it is a claim asking for adequate respect to ones that judge them. It is usually assessed by how others think of them rather than how each person thinks of themselves (Ho, 1976). This interpretation aligns with Goffman’s (1959) definition of face, “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (p. 213). It is not about individual's characteristics but a collection of judgements that the society passes upon a person (Ho, 1976).

While people are not too sensitive in trying to gain face (Kim, Cohen, & Au, 2010), it becomes a sensitive and complex situation when it comes to losing face. There is a desire to avoid losing face, and to save face in any social interaction (Ho, 1976). According to Ho (1976, p. 873), “the possibility of losing face can arise not only from the individual's failure to meet his obligations but also from the failure of others to act in accordance with his expectations of them – that is, not only from the individual's own actions, but also from how

he is treated by others.” In the situation of international students studying in North America, they experience losing face from not being able to meet the requirements that are asked to be in a graduate-level classroom. They face barriers in actively participating in classroom discussion because of their lack of fluency in speaking in English, lack on content knowledge in the topics discussed, as well as cultural differences. They try not to make mistakes so that they are not judged by other students and professors in classes (Liu, 2001).

As Ho (1976) described, the concept of face could be difficult for Westerners to understand. Especially in order to have effective communication with the Chinese, or East-Asians, it is important to understand their communication style which heavily depends on face. Cardon & Scott (2003, p. 10) said that Westerners may experience challenges in understanding “how Chinese conceptualize face.” According to Ho (1976), Westernized behaviors such as individualism is not favorable to the concept of face because it only makes sense when face is considered within the context of the entire society and relationship with others. This shows the struggles of communication of Chinese people residing in North America. Since face is related to one’s social status and how others view them, it is important to understand that it is complexly intertwined in the social structure (Cardon & Scott, 2003).

Summary

Previous research on Chinese international students, multicultural education, and Chinese typical culture of *face* show that there are many underlying causes for Chinese students’ silence in classrooms. Despite the complexity of Chinese international students’ silence in North American classrooms, I was able to identify several overarching rooted causes for silence that stems from communication style, learning preferences, and cultural background. Based on the conceptual framework and review of literature, I have created a semi-structured interview questionnaire and conducted an interview study. In chapter three, I

will discuss the research method used in this study. Moreover, in chapters four and five, I will report on the research findings and discuss the findings based on guiding research questions.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In Chapter Two, a review of the literature tells us that international students experience challenges studying abroad in North American universities. Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore the causes and reasons why Chinese international students are experiencing difficulties. In addition, this research aims to provide insights for improving the culturally diverse learning environment of universities through an internationally renowned university in Canada.

In this Chapter, I begin with an overview of my methodological approach followed by data related to the three main research questions addressed in this study. Then I provide specific guiding questions addressed in this inquiry. Next, I explain the detailed information of each component of the research design, procedure, research participants' demographic information and methods of data analysis. Finally, I provide ethical considerations that I include in this study along with my role as a researcher.

Methodological Approach

In order to answer the below research questions, a basic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was used in this study in order to get an in-depth understanding of Chinese international students' lived experiences studying at a major Canadian University (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In-depth interviews and researcher's observations were used in this research. The following are the guiding research questions.

- To what extent does the level of language proficiency related to Chinese graduate students' silence in classrooms?
- How did previous education in China influence cultural adaptation in a North American University?
- To what degree does Chinese culture of *Face* cause Chinese graduate students' silence in classrooms?

The first main question I asked was: To what extent does the level of language proficiency related to Chinese graduate students' silence in classrooms? This question was to find out whether interview participants felt their English language proficiency and/or academic knowledge of the course influenced their silence in classrooms. Along with this main question, I asked about the validity of submitting English language proficiency exam scores such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) when applying for the graduate program.

The second question was: How did previous education in China influence cultural adaptation in a North American University? This research question was built up on the assumption that previous education in China is different from the one in North America. It is because this difference leads to difficulties in cross-cultural adaptation. Therefore, participants were asked to share their experiences studying in a North American classroom and compare those with their education in China. In addition, participants shared their thoughts on the reasons why such differences hindered the cultural adaptation process.

Lastly, the third question asked was: To what degree does Chinese culture of *Face* cause Chinese graduate students' silence in classrooms? This question was an open-ended question

in order to understand what participants personally thought about which cultural background affected Chinese International student's silence in classrooms. After the open-ended question, I asked probing questions in order to clarify information and to hear about their stories more in-depth. Along with the probing questions, I asked questions specifically about the typical Chinese culture of *face*.

Data Sources

I have chosen qualitative approaches for this study in order to gain a deeper understanding of the rooted causes of silence among Chinese International students. One of the main purposes of this study was to create an internationally friendly environment by enhancing understanding of the entire school community. It was important to listen to the participants' stories, experiences, and thoughts towards their graduate education. In order to understand their challenges, it was important to build trust between the participants and the researcher (Creswell, 2007). Participants were graduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Education of a research-oriented University in Canada. They took classes with me during the last two years from 2016 to 2017. I have talked about my research topic casually to some of the participants. When informally asked to be part of the study, all participants volunteered to be part of the research and showed interest in the research topic. Since I know the participants for one to two years, we had a respectful relationship and mutual trust. I conducted face-to-face interviews on the university campus. While the participant's in-depth interviews are the main sources of research data, additionally I included my personal observations of a graduate classroom from a non-Chinese student's point of view.

Procedure

My research has been approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB) at M University in April 2017 (see Appendix A). The selection criteria for interview participants was to be a Chinese international graduate student. They should be enrolled in a graduate degree program in North America. Moreover, they should have done their K-12 education and undergraduate degree in China. I recruited participants in two ways. A recruitment email was sent out to graduate students enrolled in the education program at M University. In addition, I personally emailed my colleagues who fit the criteria to be participants in this research. Once a participant agreed to participate in the study, we decided on the time and meeting place for the interview. The interview took place at a private study room at a university's main library where privacy was kept secured. When more than one interview was conducted in one day, the following interviews were scheduled in a different study room at least an hour after the previous one. This was to secure privacy of the interview participants and to ensure that the interviewer was prepared for the latter interview.

Before the interview, I presented a letter of consent (see Appendix B) for the participant to read and sign. The letter of consent explained the study and gave an assurance that the information provided through the in-depth interview would be confidential and used only for the researcher's research purposes. I also asked whether the interview can be audio-recorded using a digital device. After the participant read through the consent form, they were asked to provide their signature and the interview began. In addition, this information was provided once again orally in the beginning of the interview and the entire interview lasted no longer than an hour per participant.

The interview was guided and semi-structured into three main research questions. From the literature review, it was shown that Chinese International Student's silence is

mainly caused by the differences in language, education style and culture of China and North America. Therefore, it was important to gather their experiences in both China and North America in order to create a more inclusive learning environment for the emerging number of international students studying in North America.

First main question was about personal information regarding their past and current education. In order to develop a deep understanding of participants' experiences as an international student in North America, I asked them to compare the differences between education in China and North America. Afterwards, questions regarding the possible causes of silence in classrooms were asked which includes English language proficiency, knowledge confidence and Chinese typical culture of *face*. Since it was semi-structured, the order of the main questions differs based on participant to participant. Probing questions and follow-up questions were asked to gain more in-depth understanding on their experiences and to clarify their answers.

Research Participants

Participants for this research include Chinese International Students enrolled in a master-level graduate program. Chinese students consist of a big portion of international students in North America. In fact, China is the largest group of non-English speaking country among international students in M University, Canada. Therefore, understanding their heritage education background and culture is important for the school community in creating an inclusive learning environment. Chinese International Graduate Students are defined as a Chinese national student who has completed their previous education including undergraduate program in China and currently enrolled in a graduate program in a university outside of China. Since these students have completed previous education in China, they face challenges studying in a new environment and curriculum as an international graduate student

in Canada. Especially since China and North America have significant differences in culture and language, Chinese International Students are facing difficulties in communication and class interactions.

I interviewed six participants who had shown interest in volunteering to participate in this research. The interview was conducted in April of 2017. The participants were enrolled in a graduate program in the Faculty of Education at M University, Canada. The age range of the participants was between mid-20's and early 30's. Three females and three males were interviewed. All participants were master's students; five were in the non-thesis (project) track while one was in the thesis track. Two participants were in the Education and Leadership program and four participants were in the Education and Society program. The participants have previous higher education in the various disciplines of translation, sociology, English literature, TESOL, business, classical Chinese and English. The participants were in their fourth or second semester when the interview was conducted which means they had lived in Canada for approximately 8 to 20 months for their master's program. All participants had taken more than 6 graduate level courses in Canada. Participants' names presented in this study are all pseudonyms. I have provided them with Chinese names which also identifies their gender.

Methods of Data Analysis

After the interviews were conducted in April 2017, I transcribed the interviews using my interview notes and repeatedly listening to audio-recordings of the interview. I went through three-rounds of review process to ensure the transcripts fully captured participants' stories. I used a manual coding method for analyzing transcribed interviews using Microsoft Office Excel and Word. I analyzed participants' personal narratives through two steps of the coding process. In the first step, I went through developing categories and administrative

codes by going through all interviews. After coding, I manually grouped the matching codes together and then identified emerging themes. In the second step, I classified the themes which answers my three research questions. Sample coding process can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. *Sample coding process of interviews.*

	Silent? (yes/no)	Self-evaluation of English Language proficiency	Difficulties	Knowledge competence	Reason for silence in classrooms	School's support for international students	Comments
Han Bin	Yes. The majority are silent.	Nervous, jot down things because English is not my L1 (language is a major issue of silence)	Complicated and difficult to fully immerse yourself – western people in general voice up	<p>If I don't know something for sure, I won't talk -> I don't want to seem stupid -> I don't want to speak</p> <p>Example) in Intro to educ phil class, I did not know what 'personal autonomy' is so I didn't voice out. However, after I know about the topic I started to speak out</p>	Student-teacher relationship is different	<p>More activities to immerse</p> <p>Employment opportunities</p> <p>More presentations – opportunities to speak and share experiences</p> <p>Support with academic writing – writing center service open to all international</p>	People judge by the name Chinese name – label as not competent in languages

						students Create a comfortable learning environment – help students to open up – then they won't care about mistakes	
Liu Xia	It depends but I don't talk too much	My language skills are so bad – I'm not satisfied with my participation and I don't talk too much compared to undergrad. Language tests does not represent true language ability. Especially speaking (maybe the school should have an oral interview to test speaking skills).	Language is the biggest barrier (80-90%) – other people's ideas are not that good but can express it well. I don't have confidence and the vocabulary to explain.	I can search on the web. And get professors and classmates' help	I feel like they might judge me Lack of confidence due to language proficiency	I really want to share -> small workshops can help, volunteering Welcoming program (orientation) – lack of information Writing center, writing courses	I am isolated in class – it's not opened or welcoming – quite conservative to international students Speaking Mandarin is my comfort zone – I look for it Chinese students are still minority despite the large population in the school
Wang Lei		English exams do not prove the true language ability because in real	Miss the words or questions – miss the chance to communicate	(Not a big problem) will search right away			Study abroad education agencies choose the program that might

		classrooms – there is not time to polish ideas					fit the students – so the students do not have a lot of information about the school because they did not do the research – the agency did it
Sun Qiang	Yes	English exams are needed because it's fair but it doesn't mean that it can evaluate true language proficiency because there are tricks in getting good scores. (China) Good – especially in writing (Canada) difficult to even order at a restaurant – very discouraging – I just couldn't speak – the English in China is differed from here	Practicing English was difficult – classmates were nice but distant. Had difficulty having an intimate connection with the teachers	N/A	Not confident in English anymore – even got depressed	Many resources but no access (mental health center) No Chinese staff at the international student office Writing center – not opened to non-thesis students – need to pay additionally	
Zhou Ying	Yes	English exams – to some extent “yes” but it's just a matter of technique so better scores does not mean good		Need more time to understand the concept. I get lost.	(Chinese) skilled and knowledgeable but lack “interpersonal skills” whereas	Professors were nice and helpful. Classmates were considerate	Went to “speech clubs” (@Concordia) and workshops

		language skills. I think before I speak (about grammar, pronunciation and meaning) – it depends on whether I’m with familiar faces, atmosphere (strange or comfortable) and group size			NAs are not as skilled as Chinese but seems to be confident.	and willing to help	
Li Na	Yes.	Anxious to speak out. My English is not good. Class time is difficult because I don’t have time to prepare (readings: I can prepare in advance). Group size matters – in small groups everyone has a chance to speak and it’s less nervous	It’s difficult to speak up. 1. working experience; not much to share compared to teacher-students	Western knowledge – don’t know what they are talking about ex. Jokes: don’t get the point or “religious policies” – I don’t know about the policy – people assume that everybody knows and do not explain the terminologies Second language education courses: did not know anything about it before because I never studied before	Professors: don’t care about international students – don’t take time explaining certain terms	People are less opened than I thought – people have difficulties accepting others with differences – “Quebec” specific maybe. Not many chances to speak	I would privately ask western classmates – I don’t want to waste classroom time asking questions (because everybody else seems to know) – if I ask them they will explain the term. I want to participate a lot because I’m paying a lot of money for the program and I think it’s a valuable experience.

Ethical Considerations

Though there was no major risk for research participants in being part of the study, efforts have been made to keep their personal information confidential. I cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. However, no information which could identify the participant was shared in this research and will not be identifiable in further publications related to this study. All names are pseudonyms. Audio recordings of the interviews were kept in a secured platform which only the principle investigator has access to.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is greatly important in qualitative studies (Golafshani, 2003). Interview participants have known me for one to two years and have maintained good relationships in the personal level and professional level. My role was to create a comfortable environment which enables them to freely share their experiences as international students. I took time in explaining the scope of the study and that they can share anything that they would like to address to the university, the program, teachers, and fellow students. My role was important in ensuring that they would not be identifiable in the study. After gaining the trust of interview participants, I was able to hear their struggles and hidden reasons for being silent in classrooms.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

The aim of this study is to understand Chinese International Students' difficulties in speaking up and discuss about the causes and hidden reasons for their silence in North American classrooms. Considering the fact that sharing experiences and opinions is important in discussion based graduate level classrooms, this research focuses on Chinese International graduate students which have now become a majority in population enrolled in North American Universities. This study specifically focused on how English language proficiency, previous experiences in China, and cultural factors have influenced their participation in classrooms. Semi-structured interview questionnaires were used as a qualitative data collection method in the interviews for this research. The interviews were conducted in April of 2017 with six Chinese international graduate students enrolled at M University located in Canada. Interviews were conducted individually at a private study room located on the campus of M University. They described and shared their experiences studying abroad in Canada as a graduate student. In addition, they compared their education with their previous experiences in China and gave suggestions on how the school, teaching faculty and administrators can help international students studying in North American Universities.

Based on all of the six interviews, participants experienced difficulties that arose from the English language proficiency, cultural differences and mismatch in their expectations towards studying abroad in Montreal, Canada. The following are the dominant themes that were discussed in the interviews.

1. Language proficiency
 - 1) Lack of confidence in their language proficiency
 - 2) Lack of support groups
 - 3) Discrepancy between English exams and real classroom languages
2. Previous experiences in China
 - 1) Knowledge competency (content knowledge in the course subject area)
 - 2) Instructors' different teaching styles
 - 3) Relationship between the instructors and classmates
3. Cultural background
 - 1) Losing face
 - 2) Difficulties in integrating into the majority culture

This chapter is mainly organized in two-fold. First, a brief background information about the interview participants is provided in order to gain a better understanding of their experiences in China and Canada. Second, the findings of the interviews along with my observations in classes would be analyzed by main themes.

Information on interview participants

Han Bin

Bin is in his late 20s and a second-year master's student in Education and Society at M University. He has completed his coursework and now working on writing up his master's thesis. Among six interview participants, he is the only student in the thesis-track. He has a master's degree in translation from China.

Liu Xia

Xia is in her early 20s and came to M University right after finishing her undergraduate program. She is reaching towards the end of her second-year of her master's

program in Education and Society (non-thesis track). Before coming to Canada for her masters, she has experience living abroad for a study-abroad program to Sweden.

Wang Lei

Lei is a 31-year-old male in his second year of Educational Leadership master's program (non-thesis track). He is pursuing his second master's degree. He did first master's degree in TESOL in the United Kingdom. He has 3 years of English teaching experience in China.

Sun Qiang

Qiang is a 31-year-old male in his second year of Educational Leadership master's program (non-thesis track). He did his undergraduate degree in business and worked as a teacher and manager an educational institution for four years.

Zhou Ying

Ying is 24 years old in her second year of master's program in Education and Society (non-thesis track). She did her undergraduate in classical Chinese and English. She also has work experience in the HR department in Disney China.

Li Na

Na is a 23-year-old female in her first year of Education and Society program (non-thesis track). She recently switched from TESOL program to Education and Society program. She came to Canada after getting an undergraduate degree in English literature. She has experience working part-time at a private institute.

Table 4. *Interview participants' background information.*

	Gender	Age	Current Program (year of study)	Previous education	Previous work experience	Comments
Han Bin	Male	27	MA (Education and Society - Thesis): second year Working on thesis writing now	Undergraduate: English Literature Masters: Interpretation and Translation (English and Mandarin) – 2015 in China	Master's degree was a practice-oriented program: did field practice. Part-time job: Education Consulting (3 years) - China	Switched from Non-thesis to thesis program Second master's program
Liu Xia	Female	23	MA (Education and Society – non-thesis): second year	Undergraduate: Sociology	None	Study-abroad during third year in undergrad to Sweden
Wang Lei	Male	31	MA (Educational leadership – non-thesis): second year	Undergraduate: English Literature Masters: TESOL (thesis in UK)	English teacher (3 years) - China	Second master's program
Sun Qiang	Male	31	MA (Educational leadership – non-thesis): second year	Undergraduate: Business	Teacher & manager at an educational institution (4 years)	
Zhou Ying	Female	24	MA (Education and Society – non-thesis): second year	Undergraduate: Classical Chinese and English	Disney, HR department (7 months) – in China	
Li Na	Female	23	MA (Education and Society – non-thesis): first year	Undergraduate: English Literature	Part-time: Teaching assistant at a private institute	Switched from TESOL program to Education and Society

Based on interviews with six Chinese international students, all six interview participants (100%) agreed that Chinese students are usually silent in classrooms. There were some commonalities across most participants which were related to language proficiency, differences with Chinese classroom experiences, and cultural background. The following are the dominant themes that were discovered from the interviews.

Theme1: Language proficiency

One of the biggest challenges in speaking up in North American classrooms was related to English proficiency. Most of the students reported that they lacked confidence in speaking up because their English was not good enough to express everything that they wanted to. There were not many support groups that helped the students to improve their language ability. In addition, discrepancy between English in English proficiency exams and real classroom languages hindered their class participation.

Lack of confidence in their language proficiency

All six participants pointed out that lack of confidence in their language proficiency was the biggest barrier of silence in classrooms. Most students described that since English is not their mother tongue, it is difficult to instantly express whatever they want after they were asked a question. Before they speak out in class, they needed to jot down their ideas and think about the grammatical structure of the sentence as well as vocabulary. Lei mentioned:

“Sometimes once there’s a question, the student has to think about different words and grammar structure and once they are ready to answer to the question the professor just moves on. So, they miss the chance to answer the question.”

Xia mentioned that language barrier consists about 80 to 90% of the reasons that hinder participation in class. She said that she does not have the confidence to speak or have enough vocabulary to present her ideas. Ying also described:

“English is not my first language. Sometimes I need to think before I speak. But if I speak Mandarin I don’t have to worry about it because it’s my native language and I don’t have to think and can speak as long as I want. But for English I need to think if I use the right grammar and my pronunciation is right, if it is logically correct. I have too many things to consider. And you know, when you consider too much, sometimes you’ll just give up.”

She expressed her frustration in speaking up in class that when there are too many things to consider in speaking up in class, she would give up the opportunity because it is difficult. In addition, language barriers are intertwined with emotional stress which leads to nervousness, anxiety, and depression. Bin mentioned that he prefers to voice out his ideas but often times would feel nervous. Na described:

“Sometimes I feel anxious to speak out because my English is not very good I think. Because my listening and reading is not very good so when I do my homework and read articles, it’s difficult for me to understand. And even during the course time, sometimes I don’t understand what the teacher is talking about.”

Moreover, Qiang experienced a great amount of frustration leading to depression because he lost confidence in speaking up in class. He received professional help from the Mental Health center to overcome his stress and depression due to frustration in speaking English. He said:

“English wise, I was very quiet in class because I was not confident in speaking in English anymore. It was really difficult to deal with it. I think I was really depressed. But then I think

I hit the bottom and bounced back. Especially my speaking and writing is not that strong, but I kept reading course packs and I took notes and memorized all of my notes. So I think I was equipped with requisite knowledge.”

Lack of support groups

Along with lack of confidence in speaking English, students mentioned about the importance of support groups within the university such as peer classmates, professors, and the university itself. First of all, there were contrasting views towards their classmates in graduate level courses. Qiang mentioned that he felt distant and had difficulty building connections with his classmates.

“I remember that during the first two months in Montreal, it was really hard to practice English because my classmates seem nice but a little bit distant. Because I’m in the leadership program and my local (Canadian) classmates, they are either teachers or vice principals. And they are not students anymore and they do not live in the center of Montreal (downtown) so it’s really hard to build a connection with them.”

Oppose to Qiang, Na mentioned about her friend who was from Vancouver. She repeatedly referred her as “Vancouver friend.” She gained a lot of confidence in coursework and speaking in English from the help of her friend. She said:

“I have a Vancouver friend here and she is eager to help us (Chinese students). When she discovered that we were confused then she will actively explain the term. She will ask, did you understand? And would give the explanation. Classmates were friendly and helpful when I asked questions to them. For example, last semester my solution was that I would discuss with my Chinese friends and will discuss with the Vancouver friend and share our ideas about the required articles. And then my Vancouver friend would correct our misunderstanding part.

Or she will help us to read through all the required articles and conclude the main points. I was able to understand better and to speak up more. After I discussed with my friends, it's easier to share my ideas in group discussions in class. My Vancouver friend told me that it's okay and they don't care about my mistakes and they are happy to help me."

Na's experience shows a good example of support groups in classrooms. She really appreciated her friend's help in being very understanding and supportive. Even though she was not confident in speaking in English, her friend's continuous encouragement helped her gain confidence and prepared her with prerequisite knowledge before going to class which enabled her to be more comfortable. While Na was positive in regards to peer support, she did not feel the same towards the professors. She said:

"Sometimes I feel like the professors, they don't care more about the international students. Because they would not spend too much time on explaining the terms because the rest of the western students all understand. When we (Chinese students) encounter with this situation, we'll privately ask the western classmates sitting next to me. Because it's may not be too important for the entire class so we don't want to waste time and ask the professor to explain it."

On the other hand, Ying felt that both classmates and professors were helpful and considerate towards Chinese international students. She described:

"I think the professors are all very nice and take care of our feelings. I don't think they treated us differently because we are Asian or Chinese. The standards are the same. The professors and most of the classmates were helpful and very considerate. They are willing to help and when you ask any kind of questions they will listen to me and help. They are all teachers."

When asked questions whether the university was welcoming and supportive to international student's cultural adaptation, Bin said that the university has a very welcoming environment. People in the Faculty of education were also very friendly because most of the courses that he took were taught by experienced professors who were tolerant even though he makes mistakes during the class and when he handed in his work.

Participants mentioned about the services that the university offers for international students. They said that it was difficult to find information about writing centers, free courses, and international student services. There are many resource available that can support students throughout their studies. However, they did not know how to access it. Xia said that she heard about the writing center in her final semester. In addition, Lei and Qiang criticized about the accessibility of the writing center. They said that the writing center is free only for thesis track students and requires non-thesis students to pay extra for the service. However, most Chinese international students are enrolled in non-thesis track and thus need to pay more for the service along with high international student tuition. Moreover, students felt that there were not many Chinese working in the university compared to the number of students enrolled in school. Qiang said:

“In ISS (International Student Service) there are only four employees taking care of thousands of international students. I understand that it is difficult for them to provide one-to-one service for students but it is good to have Chinese employees as well so that they can provide a lot of good services for Chinese students without getting stressed about speaking in English and in a more comfortable environment.”

Discrepancy between English exams and real classroom languages

When international students apply for graduate programs in North America, they are required to submit their English language proficiency exam scores such as TOEFL or IELTS. Most of the participants feel that English exam scores do not reveal someone's true language ability. They say that there are tricks in solving questions and Chinese students are good in taking exams which enables them to have higher scores than their true language ability. In addition, they felt difficulty in North American classrooms because of the discrepancy between English exams scores and real classroom languages.

Ying described how Chinese people think about their own language abilities even if they have high standardized test scores. She thinks that the score is more related to technical skills than the language ability. She says:

“In China, not all people can speak English well. In my experience, most of the students they don't think they can speak English well. Even though they get high marks in standardized tests, they all think that they are not good. To some extent standardized test show one's language ability but I don't think if you get over 100 (in TOEFL), it doesn't make any difference whether you got 120 or not. But 60 would be definitely different from 100. Because taking examinations need techniques. So, it's more technical because the more tests you take, you'll know how you should organize your answers, for the writing part. The more you write, the more likely you would get high marks. The same for the oral test, as long as your pronunciation is right and you can speak non-stop (fluently) they will give you a high mark. It is all about technique not about the true language ability.”

Xia said that her English score is higher than her actual English skills.

“There are a lot of institutions in China that teach you how to pass the exam and to get very high scores. Maybe my English (real English ability) is 6.5 but actually I got 7.5 in IELTS. The score does not match with my skills. When I went to Sweden, I didn’t speak English at all for the whole week.”

However, the participants admit that the universities should keep the language score requirement because it is one of the indicators of showing their language proficiency. Xia said:

“These tests evaluate one’s language level to some degree but not the whole. Maybe many measures should be taken. Maybe through interview phone call to test your real language proficiency. Not just the score.”

Moreover, participants said that there is a distinct difference between English used in exams and real-life conversations. Lei said:

“Those tests they can reveal someone’s English ability for sure but those are on paper. For example, like if the student knows the structure or certain words they can take the exam. However, once they participate in the real classroom communication, they don’t have the time to really polish their language. Not like preparing for an examination, you know at least what topic would be covered so you can prepare for them for months and be confident. But once you are in the real world, you just don’t have enough time. So that is the factor. The English exams can tell the student’s language ability in only extent.”

While there is time to prepare for exams, real-life conversations require instant response which international students cannot prepare in advance. Qiang talked about his own experience:

“Before I came to Canada, I thought that my English was pretty good. Especially my writing

because I took IELTS (exam) and my writing, listening and speaking results show that I was pretty good. But here, what's funny is that it is even difficult for me to order a simple meal at Subway or McDonalds. Yeah, I think this is really strange and a little bit discouraging as well. And all of a sudden, I felt that I couldn't speak the English that I was using in China, Beijing. It's different from that of here."

Theme 2: Previous experiences in China

Knowledge competency (content knowledge in the course subject area)

There were two contrasting views towards whether content dealt in classrooms challenged participants' participation. Some students said that it was definitely one of the reasons while others said that it was not a big deal. Bin said that lack of content knowledge was definitely one of the reasons for being silent. He mentioned that Chinese curriculum is more extensive not intensive which does make him know about a lot of things but not in detail:

"I feel like it is definitely one of the reasons. The education, public education that we received before the university level are pretty much extensive. So, we actually covered a lot of topics... geography... physics, which provide us extensive amount of knowledge so we have certain understanding about certain things. But it's not like we know everything in detail. Like I said, it's extensive. It's not intensive."

In addition, Qiang said that he is more familiar with topics related to China not about North America. When the class discussion was about Montreal specific content such as English school boards in Montreal, he had no idea what to say.

"Because in China we are more familiar with topics related to China. We were talking about

basically what was happening in China. So, that's why people would love to participate (in China). They have got much to say. But here, again for local students, they know a lot about the schools, education systems here so they are very active. But for me or other Chinese students, it is quite difficult. If we can talk about the education system in China, then of course we would love to contribute and be active. I stayed only two weeks here but the instructors asked to talk about the English schools in Montreal."

Ying who said that lack of content knowledge was the biggest barrier of participation added that she needs time to think about what people are talking about in class when it comes to technical terms or Quebec specific knowledge.

"They (local students) don't need time to think but I need time to think: what is that term, what is CEGEP, what is English school board... and why are English and French school boards fighting with each other? I always have to find out 'why' first. But for them they don't need any time to think. They can speak everything because they know everything."

Students often felt confused because while their local peers seem to know everything because they either grew up or work in Montreal, international students were not able to join or understand the conversation in class. Na said that the class assumes that everybody knows and do not provide further explanation on the topic:

"Last semester in a course they talked about one of the religious policies (in Canada) but we don't know about that policy. Sometimes I feel that I don't participate in the class because I don't know what they are talking about. Because all of the other classmates understand what the topic is about it, nobody explains it for us. It's because I don't have too much working experience. In our class, some of our classmates are teachers or administrators. They have too much experience and things to share. So, when the professor asks questions and ask us to relate to our work experiences, that is the most difficult part because I have no experience."

For Chinese students, it was not only content knowledge but also difficulty in understanding jokes made them silent. Na said:

“Because the courses here are based on the western culture and the western knowledge, for example, when the teacher tells a joke and most time we don’t get the point so when the rest of the classmates laugh the Chinese students most of the times keep silent because we don’t know why they are laughing. And sometimes for the second language education courses that I took the last semester, I seldom knew about the knowledge before so it’s difficult for us to answer the teacher’s questions.”

On the other hand, some students felt that lack of content was not a big barrier in participating in class. They said that it was not a big deal because they can get help from technology by searching technical terms right away whenever it confuses them. Xia said:

“I remember a course that was one of the most difficult courses that I’ve ever taken here. The concepts like ‘inclusive education,’ I’m really not familiar with it. But for me it is not a big issue. Because when you Google it, you can get an idea about it. And it’s not difficult because I can imagine what it is (after looking up on the web). And the professors, they are very helpful. They ask questions to confirm whether everybody understood or not. Then you can raise up your hand and they (the professors) will explain it to you. Because they know that there are a lot of international students here and Canada is an immigration country. And when you go to group discussions, I think classmates are really nice. They will also explain it to you because if you are from china, it’s normal that you don’t know what the culture is here. It’s very normal so for me it was not a big issue.”

Lei also mentioned that not knowing about the discussion topic or concept was not an issue because he can look up a book or google it. He said:

“It’s not a huge problem because every time I have my laptop with me in class. So, I would check (search) instantly when I don’t know something. With the help of the technology, it is not a huge problem but the thing is if there are a lot of technical terms then that’s a problem.”

In addition, Lei provided his own idea of why Chinese students have difficulties in North American classrooms. He asserted two points: one is the lack of research on the program before studying abroad and the other is lack of work experience before going to graduate schools. He said that most of the students apply schools through an agency company. The students do not really know which program they are applying for. In addition, when students come straight from their undergraduate program without any work experience, they struggle because they do not know exactly what they want to study or do research on. He said:

“I think I know the cause of this problem. If you ask Chinese students, I can guarantee you that more than 95% of the students they chose universities through an agency. Some of those agencies don’t really know what the program is about. They recommend those programs to their clients because it is easier for them to apply to that program and so that they can make money. So, sometimes students they walk into an area (discipline) that they have no idea about. A lot of students they just tell agencies that they want to study Business. But they don’t specify the area: accounting, HR, or marketing. They have no idea. And then the second question that the agency asks is do you want to come back or do you want to live in that country. So that means, if you want to come back, the name of the university is the most important part. If they want to stay there, then they will find the like the highest quality or the one that is the most competitive in the job market. A lot of Chinese students they go to university, they study in a program but they have no idea beforehand. The agent will collect information (English score, GPA etc.), analyze, and recommend universities that is the easiest

for them to apply for. I think that's the cause of the problem.

What I like about my program is that in order to apply for this program you need at least two years of experience. That's very helpful because once you have worked for some time you have a clearer mind of what you want to do in the future. And you know what you need.

For those who went straight to their master's program from their bachelor's program. They have no idea. To sum up, the agencies would not give all the information that the student needs and the students they don't really have a clear idea of what they want to study."

Lei said that he had a specific goal on what he wants to do in graduate school and earn from this program for the future. He had more to share compared to people who directly came from their undergrad. However, he has already been through the difficulty before in U.K. in his first master's program. But now since he has gone through it already and had a mentor friend who inspired and guided him, he knew what he wanted to do.

"After three years of working in China, I had an idea. I knew that I want to have a master's degree in management or leadership because later after graduation if I go back to China with the degree and the experience, I can have a managerial position in my old (former) company. With that goal buried in my mind, when I came here, when I started, whichever course I take, I think about how I could apply what I have learned to my former company. For example, my project, I first thought about the most serious problem that I have encountered during my work and I did a literature review to find a solution and for my second part of my project, I developed a working manual for myself. So, in the future, if I want to apply for a job, I can use that as my leadership model. That's why I think it's very helpful. It's very important and helpful if you have work experience. You know what you want."

Instructors' different teaching styles

Students felt that instructors in North America and China had different teaching styles. They described that the differences derived from China more focusing on exams, grammar, and regarding silent classrooms as a virtue. In addition, there were voices in the need for creating a more inclusive classroom in North America.

Bin talked about how Chinese classrooms focus on grammar and exams:

“Tests I think is one of the reasons for English education back in China. We tend to focus more on the grammar part because we think that grammar is like the foundation of learning a new language. So, the teacher will usually talk more on how to organize written language but not verbal language. And also, for those standard tests, I think there are some kind of rules that can apply to those multiple-choice questions. You can pretty much predict the answer from certain angle, so that's why some students can get very high scores but maybe they just can't apply those skills that they learned along the way.”

Lei added that Chinese classrooms were exam-oriented and finding the correct answer was the most important thing. He compared Chinese peers with non-Chinese peers along with his experience with professors in North American classrooms.

“Because you know, we make mistakes for sure. But right after each and every sentence, my friend would check with me. Not about the content but about the grammar. He would ask whether this is right grammar. And I would answer, nobody cares. The reason for this is because the educational system in China is very much examination oriented. That means you have the correct answer or you don't. There is no margin for mistakes. So naturally, we would care a lot about the accuracy of our message instead of fluency. That's a huge difference here. I have seen that non-Chinese speakers in French class, they express themselves confidently

but I can detect a lot of grammatical mistakes but that doesn't matter to them. So, that's the big difference between Chinese students and students from other cultural backgrounds.

Once I had feedback from my professors, I found it very helpful. Professors are really intelligent so even if I sometimes make mistakes, it doesn't hinder them from understanding the message. And also, sometimes they check the vocabulary or change the question to see if I understood correctly. And this made me very comfortable. They will paraphrase the sentence in a correct way. And sometimes, I will ask a question and if I made mistakes in grammar or vocabulary, other students may have problems with that. Since the professors paraphrase the question, it makes other students to understand well. That's why it's helpful. It helps to develop further conversation.”

Na talked about teacher-centered Chinese classrooms and quietness being a virtue of a good class. She shared her experience and compared Chinese classrooms with North American classrooms.

“Yes it's very different. Here, it has a lot of class discussions and most students are quite talkative. But in China we are supposed to be quiet. Most of our classes are teacher-centered and the teacher reads the slides or we use the text book and we just follow the teacher's instructions, do quizzes, and memorize stuff. So, Chinese education especially focuses on memorization. We're supposed to remember all the concepts, dates, ideas and everything. But here, I don't think memorization is important. The critical thinking is more important. We're supposed to contribute in every class. We have to present our own ideas. However, in China if we cannot say the right answer or speak logically, the teacher would criticize us and even punish us. So, for us I think it is better and safer to remain silent and listen to what other people said and take notes and to see what we could learn from them. I know that it is a little bit non-sense still deeply in our heart maybe it is the tradition. So, we're trying really hard to

get rid of it but it really needs practice. Because in China, K-12 schools are really strict. The only thing that matters is scores. So, expressing your feelings or arguing with other people is non-sense. The only thing you need to do is to sit down, listen to the teacher and do your examination. For most teachers, it is really time-consuming because teenagers can have a lot of ideas and they can argue with you for quite a long time but the teacher won't bother to do so. And I found that this kind of skill is hard to develop if you come from a traditional Chinese school. It's really hard."

Xia also had a similar experience in North America.

"Professors always encourage students here. Even if you are saying something that is not related, they would say, 'okay it's fine, it's interesting.' They are always encouraging you. I also experienced that when one student raises their hand (they raise the hands really high), 'I want to speak,' so it's really different from what I have experienced in China. When I just came here (in Canada), I just felt that it's different. In China, in primary school the teacher would say that we should sit like this (sit up straight) and raise your hand like this, and you do like this. But here, students don't have a lot of rules (to follow). You just have to be yourself. But in China, from very young, we have a lot of rules and even competitions in the school. For example, if there is class A, B, and C, there's a competition of which classroom is quieter, the students behave better. Quiet classrooms and whether you are working hard was highly valued. In high school, we have college entrance exams which are really important in our educational system. We really experience high pressure. The principles want us to be quiet and study. We can only go home after 10pm."

Qiang shared his frustration with the curriculum of courses in his graduate program in Canada. He said that the curriculum is not inclusive enough to include international students to participate.

“I think teachers here are really nice, knowledgeable and approachable. But I think the problem is the curriculum. The first course I took, actually I was really uncomfortable being in that classroom because we talked a lot about English schools here in Montreal and parenting. So, for many Chinese international students here that arrived in the end of August, their first class was September. So basically, I stayed only two weeks here but the instructors asked to talk about the English schools in Montreal. It is very difficult for us to contribute in class, right? So yeah, I think the curriculum should be more inclusive so it can guarantee that every student has something to contribute. When I was in China, because all my classmates were Chinese, it was not a problem it was very comfortable and at ease in the classroom talking and sharing my ideas. But here at M University, it’s really hard to open up and join them.”

Table 5. *Comparison between Chinese classrooms and North American classrooms from participants’ experiences.*

	Chinese classrooms	North American classrooms
Teaching style	Focus on exams, grammar, and memorization	Value sharing ideas
Teaching method	Exam-oriented, teacher-centered	Discussion-based, approachable
Classroom atmosphere	Silent, strict	Talkative
Teacher’s reaction to mistakes	Take off points, either right or wrong, give a bad expression, affect final score	Active feedback, paraphrase, encouragement, will not judge and try to help

Students' attitude toward teacher's ideas	Respectful, obedience	Challenge teacher's ideas, express individual values
Fellow students' attitude towards each other	Try to save face	Indifferent to international students, do not waste time explaining obvious concepts, feelings of isolation in class, difficulty having good relationships with other students, conservative

Relationship between the instructors and classmates

Most of the students had difficulty having close relationships with the instructors and non-Chinese classmates. They often felt distant and thought that this is due to differences in personal values such as individualism, collectivism, and unfriendly attitude toward internationals.

Many students have emphasized the importance of teacher-student relationship in speaking up in class. Bin said that if he liked the professor or wants to impress him or her, it is more likely to participate.

“Depending on the professor, on the lecturer, like I think teacher-student relationship from a Chinese sense is more different. It is kind of different compared to things here in Canada. So, if you want to impress the teacher, if you want to, maybe let's say you want to work with this teacher after your master's program to pursue your Ph.D. or something like that, this might affect your participation as well. You've got to have something that the teacher know that you exist. So, I think impressing the teacher or just if you like the teacher very much, probably

this will affect your participation as well.”

In addition, professor’s attitude towards international students affected heavily on Chinese students in speaking up. Xia said,

“I think it also has to do with the professor’s attitude. Sometimes if a professor asks a question, actually he or she is expecting a certain answer. And even if the students volunteer to answer the question, but if the answer is not what he/she really wanted, sometimes some professors might say it’s good but not relevant. I think it is really discouraging. If a student is experiencing this in his or her life, I guess maybe in the future they will be very careful in answering questions. So, the student’s confidence would go down and think I will never answer questions again. In any question, there could be many interpretations and answers. But sometimes some professors (not all of them), they have the problem. It’s a really bad experience (that a student would go through).”

While professors in North America value sharing ideas in class, Chinese professors would not be fond of incorrect answers that does not answer his or her question. Chinese international students that are used to this system and teacher-centered classrooms makes them hesitant to speak up when they are uncertain about things. They have difficulties in adjusting discussion-based classrooms which does not have a right or wrong answer. Lei said,

“In China, we rarely challenge the professor in the classroom. So, that means we expect the professors to give us the answer somehow. But here (in Canada) the professors want to hear our opinions and they want to guide us to find the answer. I think that’s something that some of the students know or understand. Like for example in China, if you have a wrong answer that means you make a bad impression and maybe affect your final score. But here if you have a wrong opinion the professor would not judge you, but they will help you to find the correct answer. That’s the difference and one of the cultural barriers.”

Na also explained how Chinese students adjust their behavior in North America which combines both western values and Chinese values.

“After a Chinese student come to a new cultural environment, they have to adapt themselves to the environment and Chinese students choose the middle way. That middle way combines the western values and the Chinese values. For the Chinese values, we respect our teachers and maybe we prefer to listen to others first and professors first rather than interrupt the others when they are speaking. And the western values here are individualism. Because they want to share their individual ideas. They want to expose their individual values. So, the international student, they prefer the middle way between these two.”

Moreover, there were contrasting views towards teacher-student relationship in North American Universities. Some mentioned that the professors were helpful in every way, whereas other students said that the curriculum was not inclusive to international students and have shown an indifferent attitude toward Chinese students. Qiang mentioned about the curriculum of his program.

“I don’t know if this is an issue of the curriculum or something else. I think it is their (professor’s) responsibility to build an inclusive curriculum so that every student, even those who have different backgrounds can contribute and have something to say. But sometimes I can feel that teachers they are nice but they are indifferent to Chinese students as well. Maybe because they are busy, have their own projects to do. So, they don’t want to spend too much time and attention to Chinese students. They focus on top students. Even though many times, Chinese students are very good, that’s why they are here at M University but they (the professors) are looking for top students who can do their own project. So again, the language is a big part.”

Na added,

“And sometime I feel like the professors, they don’t care more about the international students. Because they would not spend too much time on explaining the terms because the rest of the western students all understand. So when we encounter with this situation, we’ll privately ask the western classmates sitting next to me. Because it’s may not be too important for the entire class so we don’t want to waste time and ask the professor to explain it. So we will ask our classmates. Sometimes I will ask the professor privately but most of the times I would ask the classmates.”

Ying felt that professors were helpful and approachable. However, she felt distant to fellow students that were similar to her age. They were not patient enough to understand international students because they did not have much working experience. She felt that more experienced classmates were very helpful and understanding.

“I think the professors are all very nice and take care of our feelings. But I don’t think they will treat us differently because we are Asian or Chinese. The standards are the same. And you know, we work hard. So overall, for Chinese students did pretty good. The professors and most of the classmates were helpful and very considerate. They are willing to help and when you ask any kind of question, they will listen to me and help. They are teachers.

However, one course that I took in the summer offered in MATL program, the students are similar age as us. They are fresh graduates from college and universities and almost most of them have no working or teaching experiences. So, most of them are very arrogant, aggressive and they don’t know about the outside world. So they think we came from somewhere in Asia and ask me very stupid questions. Me and my friend, only two of us were Chinese students and the rest were local people. My friend even cried during the class and rushed out the classroom and professor had to stop the class and had to say something to her.

They asked really stupid questions and it really hurt her feelings.”

In addition to having good teacher-student relationships, relationships with classmates were different and often times found it difficult. Na mentioned that in China students try to save each other’s faces and consider themselves as family members. According to Lei, it has also have to do with taking courses together and living in the dormitory which creates an environment to build strong friendship. Na said,

“(In China) When the professor asked my friend a question and she has difficulty answering, then I might be able to help her to answer. Sometimes my friend would help me to answer the questions. We consider ourselves as family members. We rarely think about losing face.”

Lei also said that,

“In China, basically we have classmates that are living together. For example, we have a dormitory and sometimes 4-10 people live together. So we know each other well. And if I have a question, probably half of the class would have the same question as well so I just will ask.”

However, many students often felt isolated and had difficulties having good relationships with local classmates. Bin mentioned that interpersonal relationships affect student’s participation.

“Interpersonal relationship, how you feel in this class, how you feel with the classmates in this class might affect your participation as well. Like for me, in some of the courses, where I had really good interpersonal relationships with all my peers, whether they are Chinese or non-Chinese, I feel more comfortable sharing my ideas because I know that even though I make some mistakes, nobody will laugh at me, I won’t lose face, I won’t... you know I won’t expose my stupidity. Something like that. So I would say that interpersonal relationship could

be another factor whether it is your relationship with your teacher or your relationship with your peers.”

Xia asserted,

“I felt kind of isolated in class actually. But I don’t care because it will pass away. A lot of students are Québécois, they are a little bit conservative. I don’t think they are very helpful or very glad to help you. They are nice but not so welcoming compared to my European classmates. Professors I think are good. But some classmates, I feel that they are opened in the outside but if you go deeply they are conservative. I don’t have a lot of experience working with them. So, I don’t know what to say. But you can just feel the atmosphere.”

Qiang also mentioned that it was difficult to make friends in North America because of differences in culture: collectivism and individualism.

“I think for Chinese students, it’s difficult to make friends here. I think because again, collectivism and individualism. For example, in China if there’s a meeting in school with students and professors, after that meeting, usually all of us would go to a restaurant and have lunch together. It’s very natural. But here at M University, after the meeting, you say goodbye and that’s it. Even though we had a very nice conversation during the meeting, you just go home. They don’t invite you and they are always busy and you have to respect each other’s privacy and time. But in China, you go out for meals and coffee. But here, it’s difficult to earn people’s trust.”

Lei shared his experience that he did not have that much difficulties with classmates. He thinks that it has to do with communication skills and positive personality. Overall, he had positive impression towards his classmate’s efforts in not making him feel awkward or lost. However, he appreciated people who tried to save his face adding his friend’s experience.

“So far so good. They don’t point out your mistakes in front of you. And if they do not understand, they would ask what you mean by that. It’s helpful. I think it has to do with communication skills. I had no problems with in-class communication and discussions. I’ve heard that a friend of mine wanted to participate in class but the non-Chinese student has shown no interest toward his opinion. My friend felt embarrassed. The experience hurt his feelings. That’s part of my personality, I try to be positive and when someone’s sarcastic, I can’t really tell.”

Theme 3: Cultural background

Losing face

“Face” is one of the biggest Chinese typical cultural factors that hinder Chinese students from speaking up in North American classrooms. All interview participants said that they were silent in classrooms to not lose face. Students often felt afraid to talk in English because they were worried about making mistakes or being judged by their peers. Since Chinese international students lack confidence in their language abilities and their ideas, they are hesitant to speak up and feel that being silent would prevent them to lose face.

Bin expressed that he does not want to seem stupid in front of new people. He feels that he represents his country and family. Thus do not want to be a shame by showing embarrassment because of his lack of fluency in English or not knowing about something correctly. If he does not know about something completely, he will not talk about it in front of people. He wants to show a good image and leave a good impression to people that he meets in North America.

Bin stated:

“For me, if I don’t know something for sure, I would not speak up my point of view. Because I feel like that will create an image to other people, they might think that I’m kind of stupid. I don’t want that kind of embarrassment to happen to me. So I think for people like me, if they do not know for sure on this topic, they prefer not to share their points. But I also find actually there are several students in the program and it’s like even if they didn’t have a very deep understanding of a certain topic but they would prefer to share their opinions. And I’m referring to Chinese students. And then, it is just not me but other Chinese peers might think they are saying non-sense. So I don’t want that to happen to me. Knowledge competence can be a reason. It depends on the person’s understanding, personality, and how he/she interprets knowledge competence.

I think it is related to losing face. It is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Like let’s say family education and public education in schools, you are constantly exposed to this idea that you better know something very good before you voice out your ideas. I always want to be seen as a decent guy and leave a good impression to new people and friends and family. I don’t want to be a shame to my country and culture and my family.

I definitely would recognize myself as a very important resource that can represent China. I do feel that from my education, there are many patriotic elements in our public education, so I think I’m very proud of being Chinese especially with the outstanding achievement that China has made for the past four decades. So, I am proud of my Chinese identity. So I tend to believe that my words and my behavior represent china to some extent. I feel like in general there is a huge misunderstanding of China like the politics. For me, if I don’t know something for sure about China, I don’t want to say something. I would like to have some comprehensive understanding about topics. For example, when I was taking a course in

philosophy of education, personal autonomy is a totally new to me. If I don't know let's say 'personal autonomy,' when I was in the class, I tend not to share my views. But after I got to know about what personal autonomy was referring to then I was able to share."

Xia felt that professors or peers would be judging about her language proficiency. She mentioned that she has a personality that considers personally about what other people think. This personality made her more conscious about speaking up.

"I'm not sure if they were judging me. But in my heart, I feel that they might judge me. That's more of my thoughts. I think my lack of confidence and my language abilities are influencing each other. So if my language, if it's not good enough, then I lose more confidence because I'm not confident so I'm not talking. It's affecting each other.

That's my personality I think. Some people they just don't care about what others think. But I'm a person who thinks about what others think. So, it has to do with my personality characteristics. Other students whose English is not as good speak up and even get jobs here. I think it's my personality.

Sometimes I would relate to my country. They would say, "oh, those Chinese students they are like this, their English is poor, they just spend a lot of money coming to Canada." Because I know a lot of foreigners (Canadians) in Toronto or Vancouver they judge Chinese in that way. I read a lot of media reports about that. So I don't want to lose face on my country. Okay let's just be silent here. At least I will not lose face."

Ying and Na used the word "afraid" to explain why they would keep silent. Speaking in front of people that they do not know well made them feel uncomfortable in sharing their ideas. Ying said that she is afraid to jump into conversations with "aggressive" native English speakers.

“Sometimes it’s really hard for me to stand out and speak something because as Asian I feel so afraid in front of those aggressive native English speakers. I will feel ashamed if I cannot speak well. Because it’s in our tradition of being afraid of losing faces. So, we would feel better being silent. Sometimes what they (native-speakers) are talking is not that good but since they are native speakers they can really speak a lot and they are pretty confident about what they are saying but we have the idea of speaking the truth and the right answers because we have been brought up to do so.

I think it also depends on who you are with. Sometimes I think it is easier for me to express what I think with close friends or with a group of familiar people. But if you put me in a completely strange atmosphere and surrounded by native English speakers who are aggressive, I would definitely remain silent. I feel safer in a small group.”

Lei mentioned that not knowing classmates well enough hindered from voicing his opinions in class. Since he did not know his North American peers, he was worried about being judged. He did not want to be embarrassed in front of people that he does not know by asking a question that everybody knows except for him or maybe making mistakes with English.

“And also for the cultural barrier, in China basically we have classmates that are living together. For example, we have a dormitory and sometimes 4-10 people live together. So we know each other well. And if I have a question, probably half of the class would have the same question as well so I just will ask. But here since we rarely interact or communicate with each other outside of the classroom, there is a concern that “what if my question is too stupid to ask and what would the others think of me.” So because of that Chinese students sometimes they refuse to ask questions or share opinions. It has something to do with face and stuff.”

Na also added that she prefers to listen to other students' opinions before she speaks up. In addition, small group size helped her to share ideas whereas speaking in front of the entire class made her anxious and embarrassed. Because of the fear of losing face, Chinese students take time in preparing their thoughts. Sometimes when they think their ideas are more thoughtful than North American peers then they will speak up immediately after the question.

"If the teacher asks the individuals to share their ideas with the whole class, I feel a little afraid because during that time I would be a little anxious about the language and expressions. Honestly, I will feel embarrassed firstly, and I'll try to forget about that and would be more careful when I speak. Sometimes I'm afraid of making mistakes because I care about others' opinions. But actually, they don't care about my mistakes. And my Vancouver friend told me that it's okay and they don't care about my mistakes and they are happy to help me.

After those western students share their ideas, maybe there is no time left for the Chinese students. And so maybe if you want to hear Chinese International Students' opinions, you should concentrate on the small group discussion. Because in small group discussions mostly everybody has a chance to speak out.

After a Chinese student come to a new cultural environment, they have to adapt themselves to the environment and Chinese students choose the middle way. That middle way combines the western values and the Chinese values. For the Chinese values, we respect our teachers and maybe we prefer to listen to others first and professors first rather than interrupt the others when they are speaking. And the western values here are individualism. Because they want to share their individual ideas, they want to expose their individual values. So the international student, they prefer the middle way between these two. They prefer to listen to others first.

Then when they are ready, they will express the ideas. So, sometimes it will take time to speak out. I noticed a phenomenon in the classroom. For example, after the professor asks a question, the western classmates will immediately express their ideas but I feel that sometimes what they are talking about has no relation to the professor's questions. But for the Chinese student, if you take more attention to them, you will find out that they will prepare for more time and they will maybe spend more time discussing the issues with their friends and after that they will express their ideas. Sometimes we feel very confused because the western people they always emphasize critical thinking but actually I think sometimes what they are saying does not include critical thinking. It feels that they just want to show their participation in the class. And what they say have no relation to the course or the questions. And you can find that Chinese students, their answers focus more on the questions. There are not chances for every student to speak out.”

Qiang also mentioned about the differences in collectivism and individualism. He said that since China is a collectivism society, they take care of other peoples' faces. However, he has experienced cold shoulder from his classmates which made him feel discouraged in speaking out anymore. This experience had made him become more silent throughout his studies in North America. When asked whether face affects Chinese students from being silent, he answered,

“Exactly. I think since China is collectivism society, I feel like if we were in China, we can take care of each other's faces. We give each other compliments. We try to achieve harmonious state. Everybody would be comfortable and not be afraid of being judged. But here, especially in the first year at M University, I received cold shoulder which means that people don't care about you. So, I felt that I was embarrassed or ashamed of myself by receiving these discouraging attitudes from my classmates. Sometimes I felt pretty strong

because when I was talking, they turned their heads aside. So of course I felt that I lost face. I think that's part of the reason why many Chinese students in English speaking countries, they like to buy luxury items because by showing off that they can buy these stuffs, they can earn people's respect and face. I think these are the reasons behind this phenomenon. Even though my English is not good, I can afford this and I can have this, I can have a really good life without you guys. So, some people think that this can compensate the face issue."

Difficult to immerse to the majority culture

Chinese international students had difficulties in immersing to the majority North American culture. They tried their own ways to immerse themselves but often confronted with difficulties. Students felt that Canada was less opened to foreigners then they thought it would be. Participants especially thought that the Province of Quebec was more conservative towards immigrants compared to other provinces in Canada.

Language proficiency again was a barrier in immersing to new culture. Interview participants were students enrolled in the Province of Quebec which is a place where French is dominantly spoken. They had to not only work on their English but also on French which made the cultural adaptation process more difficult.

Bin repetitively mentioned that he was nervous when speaking in class because of his language proficiency. And because he was not able to voice out his ideas, he thinks that it was difficult to fully immerse to the new environment.

"Here in Canada, it's hard for us (Chinese students) to fully immerse ourselves to the new environment. And in this academic environment because local people here, or I would say western people in general they tend to voice out their ideas more often and this tends to give less opportunities for us to speak out especially when you are feeling nervous in class

because English is not our first language and in this environment nervousness would become bigger. It's not like teacher or professor here are always encouraging you to speak in the sense there are already a lot of responses to his or her questions. So maybe that's actually making Chinese students feel reluctant to speak up."

Xia talked about how living in Quebec made cultural adaptation more difficult. She was discouraged to see that Canada was not too opened as she thought. This made her stay in her comfort zone and speak Mandarin with her Chinese friends.

"Honestly, I didn't put a lot of effort (in improving English). Because at the same I had to learn French and after I learned French, I feel that my English is getting worse.

But here, sometimes I feel that many Québécois are a little bit conservative and not opened. Quebec, unlike other provinces in Canada, are more conservative but also multicultural. If I was in Toronto, I think I would have experienced differently. The classmates are from the school board, 30, 40 years old. They just come to class one or two times a week at night and just don't care. They have their own work, they have their children and life.

I think Canada is already a multicultural country. But the atmosphere among the people, they are not so opened as the country is. They have a lot of immigrants. But the immigrants are just the minority group even if they are a big population.

Yes. I really feel comfortable speaking in Mandarin. Everybody have their comfort zone. Sometimes I just don't want to stay out of my zone. I want to treat myself well and be comfortable."

Na also felt that Quebecois are less friendly than people in other provinces. She thought that Francophones are more indifferent toward expats. She had to ask for help because they would not offer help voluntarily.

“Sometimes I feel that the people here, it is difficult for them to accept other international students. Maybe because of their (French) culture. The people here are not as opened as I thought it would be. And I’m not the first person to say this. Like my friends they all talk about this issue including Chinese and non-Chinese friends talk about this issue that the people here are not friendly and nice here. They feel that the people here are a little strange. And because I took the leadership course this semester, a lot of administrators and one of them is from Europe, and then she immigrates here. She told me that she feels Quebecois don’t know how to respect others. Quebec people focus more on their own community. And it’s hard for others to integrate to their community. So, last semester I felt that people will help you if you ask but they will not help you even if they notice that you need help. They are a little indifferent. People here are different from people in English speaking places.”

In addition, Qiang pointed out a critical issue of power relation of people from the dominant culture. He thought that privileged people who are from dominant culture with good language skills have the power to look down on people who does not and say why can’t you do as good as us. Since most Chinese students are well-educated, they were the majority culture when they were living in China. Now they come to North America and experience this gap of power which makes them more difficult to adjust to the new environment.

“Students here at M Univeristy, we’re all like superstars. I think for many Chinese students, they were superstars in China like Beyonce or Britney Spears. However, when they are here at M University, they are not. So, can you imagine the gap between the attitude that their peers and teachers treat them here and in China? Sometimes you can feel that your teachers do not expect much from you. They put you into this (non-dominant) social category already. Local students, they are already in this dominant culture but Chinese students, they are not. Students who are from the dominant culture, they can manipulate the rationale in the class.

They can judge and are given the right to judge international students. Concerning their incapability, why can't you share with us? Why can't you contribute your ideas? Why are you always quiet? So, if I need to do a presentation, I don't want to do with you guys right? So they have the power, the privilege to judge."

When asked what was helpful and what could be helpful for future international students in immersing to new culture, participants provided ideas on what the university could possibly do to help. Xia said that information was not easily accessible.

"Welcoming programs. I recently knew about the writing center while I was working on my project. I found out that they have a lot of writing courses, but I knew about it very recently. Maybe do more notifications."

Bin mentioned that more working opportunities and extracurricular activities that can create a community would be helpful for international students to adapt to new culture.

"I think from my personal experience, I would like to say if more internships or more working positions to Chinese students, it might improve this situation to a certain point. Actually I feel like sometimes, by judging from our name, sometime they will label us as "you are silent" or "you are not good at English." So I feel like this is hindering me from extensive development. If more opportunities could open to students regardless to the nationality, I'm not just saying this for Chinese students, it might be more comfortable for us to actually fit in the environment and also I would say we should have more presentations, activities focusing to international student community. Especially for those whose first language is not English or for those who is not comfortable using English because M University is one of the English universities in Montreal and English is the predominant language on campus and as I've said language skills is for sure is one of the reasons so we can pretty much provide more opportunities for international students to get involved in

certain kind of activities. I'm not specifically saying that this is good for language proficiency improvement but maybe we can conduct some other activities where we can improve this idea where you have to let the student to talk to communicate with other people in a very simple sense, maybe just providing more chances to mingle with people. With people who have very good English knowledge. For me, I really feel very unconfident about my academic writing, so more help can be provided to international students regarding to academic writing, that would be perfect. Not focusing on thesis students. I know that thesis students are entitled to enroll writing classes. But it's not like it is accessible to every international student whose first language is not English. So, I would say from the perspective of living on campus, more activities should be conducted to international students to immerse themselves to the environment and providing more employment or internship opportunities for those international students because actually a lot of international students are really competitive and really adequate in terms of working. We shouldn't just judge them from their language skills. We should conduct more activities regarding to international student's writing skills because it is really important and M Univeristy is a really research-oriented university."

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of findings from in-depth interviews and review of literature, this chapter starts off with a summary of significant findings discussed in Chapter Four. The findings are based on in-depth interviews with Chinese international graduate students enrolled in a university located in Montreal, Quebec. Afterwards, I will discuss themes and interesting topics that derived from interview participants by responding to research questions. It would be answered based on the findings and review of literature discussed in previous chapters. This research paper is guided by the following questions: 1) To what extent does the level of language proficiency related to Chinese graduate student's silence in classrooms? 2) How did previous education in China influence cultural adaptation in a North American University? 3) To what degree does Chinese culture of Face cause Chinese graduate students' silence in classrooms?

Summary of Findings

This research aims to explore Chinese international students' experiences in studying in North America as graduate students as well as understand their difficulties in speaking up and figure out the causes of being silent in classrooms. It will assist western universities in better understanding these students' behaviors in classrooms so that the school, administrators, and instructors can help Chinese students' cultural adaptation.

Chinese international students have admitted that Chinese students including themselves are usually silent in classrooms. They face difficulties and experience challenges in immersing to new culture as well as western classrooms. Despite the fact that they are willing to share their ideas and experiences, they often felt barriers due to their English language proficiency, differences between education in China and Western schools, and

typical cultural background. Many students have pointed out that language and face was the biggest barrier in participating in class. They felt that English learned in China was more exam-based and did not reflect real-life conversational components which made them difficult to speak well in English when they came to Canada. Along with difficulties with English, Chinese cultural aspects such as face was a barrier in speaking up. Students often felt uncomfortable speaking up because they did not want to speak when they were not sure about something and was reluctant to make mistakes. This led to lack of confidence, isolation, and alienation in classrooms which hindered voicing out and being more active in discussion-based classes.

Moreover, the role of teachers and peers was an important factor in Chinese students' classroom adaptation. Students with positive experience with teachers and peers gained confidence in speaking up and tried being more active while those with negative experiences such as cold shoulder or discouraging comments were devastated with their language proficiency and lost confidence in speaking up. This often led to depression, lack of confidence, and isolation. Negative experiences include gaps between education in China and North America. Cultural differences were also a factor in creating and maintaining relationships.

It was evident that causes for this phenomenon is not simple. Factors that cause difficulties for Chinese students to speak up are intertwined and differs by student to student. However, it was interesting to discover Chinese international students' experiences and their genuine thoughts toward this phenomenon through in-depth interviews. The following sections will discuss three main research questions accompanied by literature discussed in previous chapters.

1. Language proficiency
 - 1) Lack of confidence in their language proficiency
 - 2) Lack of support groups
 - 3) Discrepancy between English exams and real classroom languages
2. Previous experiences in China
 - 1) Knowledge competency (content knowledge in the course subject area)
 - 2) Instructors' different teaching styles
 - 3) Relationship between the instructors and classmates
3. Cultural background
 - 1) Losing face
 - 2) Difficult to immerse to the majority culture

Research Question 1: To what extent does the level of language proficiency related to Chinese graduate student's silence in classrooms?

From six interviews with Chinese international students, participants have all acknowledged that Chinese students were silent compared to other students; native-speaker students, local students, and non-Chinese international students. Findings show consistency with research on the “silent Chinese student” phenomenon (Dougherty & Wall, 1991; Hodgkinson & Poropat, 2014). Lack of Chinese students' participation in classroom discussions as well as teaching and learning activities was a concern for classroom educators. In addition, Chinese students including East Asian international students are portrayed as reticent speakers with intrinsic personalities (Liu, 2001; Li & Jia, 2006; Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Jin & Cortazzi, 1993; Song, 1995; Turner & Hiraga, 1996). However, from in-depth interviews, I was able to find out that the “silent Chinese student” phenomenon was greatly

related to language proficiency, but the rooted causes were not fragmentary. From the findings in Chapter 4, it was evident that language was one of the biggest barriers in classroom participation for Chinese international students. Struggles in classroom participation derived from language proficiency, lack of support from peers and professors, and emotional stress. In this part of the chapter, I would discuss about how language proficiency influenced Chinese students' behavior and kept them silent in classrooms.

As this study's theoretical framework on Basil Bernstein's language codes outline (Atkinson, 1985; Bernstein, 1962a; Bernstein, 1962b; Bernstein, 1973; Littlejohn & Foss, 2002), language codes show that there are codes within a language that people speak, and which differs based on the socioeconomic group that you belong to (House & Williams, 2000). Therefore, it is not only about language but also sharing the same cultural codes are important in communicating, joining majority culture, and eventually adapting to a new environment for international students. Chinese international students, coming from a totally different culture experience difficulties because they do not share the same code with other non-Chinese students. Often times, they do not understand completely on what people are talking about. They need time to think carefully about the questions asked in class and when they answer to a question, consider grammar and vocabulary that they intend to use.

Xia mentioned that language barrier consists about 80 to 90% of the reasons that hinder participation in class. She said that she does not have the confidence to speak or have enough vocabulary to present her ideas. Ying also described:

"English is not my first language. Sometimes I need to think before I speak. I need to think if I use the right grammar and my pronunciation is right, if it is logically correct. I have too many things to consider. And you know, when you consider too much, sometimes you'll just give up."

It is evident that international students need more time to gather their thoughts before asking or answering a question. While preparing to answer a question, the instructor moves on and students easily lose the opportunity to be part of the discussion. This is the reason why students express frustration toward being fluent in conversational English. When applying for graduate programs in North America, most schools require international students to take an English language proficiency exam such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System). Interview participants all mentioned that language proficiency tests do not show a student's true language ability. When they have received a good score on written language proficiency exams, they were full of confidence about their English. However, when they come to study in North America, they realize that exam score is not identical with language fluency skills. It is because while there is time to prepare for exams, real-life conversations require instant response which international students fail to do because they cannot prepare in advance. Qiang talked about his own experience:

“Before I came to Canada, I thought that my English was pretty good. Especially my writing because I took IELTS (exam) and my writing, listening, and speaking results show that I was pretty good. But here, what's funny is that it is even difficult for me to order a simple meal at Subway or McDonalds. Yeah, I think this is really strange and a little bit discouraging as well. And all of a sudden, I felt that I couldn't speak the English that I was using in China. It's different from that of here.”

Being an alien of a new country as a student with lacking language skills and culturally-adaptive knowledge makes their social status lower compared to when they were in their home country. It is because, coming to a new country to attend graduate school requires a great amount of cultural adaptation (Lewthwaite, 1996). This creates great amount of stress

for international students (Church, 1982; Dyal & Chan, 1985).

Na described:

“Sometimes I feel anxious to speak out because my English is not very good. Because my listening and reading is not very good so when I do my homework and read articles, it’s difficult for me to understand. And even during the course time, sometimes I don’t understand what the teacher is talking about.”

Moreover, Qiang experienced a great amount of frustration leading to depression because he lost confidence in speaking up in class. This made him become silent in class discussions.

While the phenomenon of silence in classrooms was evident among Chinese International students, students who made satisfactory support groups and establish good relationships with native-speakers have shown more general satisfaction towards their studies and non-academic experiences (Klineberg & Hull, 1979).

Na’s experience shows a good example of establishing good support groups in classrooms. She really appreciated her local friend’s help with being continuously encouraging her, helping her to gain confidence, and prepared her with prerequisite knowledge before going to class which enabled her to be more comfortable in class.

However, some students felt distant toward their peers and course instructors. Qiang mentioned that he felt distant and had difficulty building connections with his classmates. He said that it was difficult to practice speaking English with classmates for the first several months in Montreal because his classmates seem nice but a little bit distant. Na thought that professors do not pay attention to and do not care more about international students in class. Instructors would easily move on without explaining terms that are difficult for Chinese

students to understand. However, Chinese students do not want to cut in between the class and ask questions even if they do not understand something.

As described above, Chinese international students experienced difficulties in adapting to new culture especially because they were not fluent in English. Even though they have fulfilled the requirements to have a certain score in an English language proficiency exam, real-life conversation was different because they were not able to prepare in advance. In the next part of the discussion, I will describe how education in China is different from Canada and how this has influenced their attitudes in Canadian classrooms.

Research Question 2: How did previous education in China influence cultural adaptation in a North American University?

Chinese international graduate students experience challenges studying in North America because of different teaching and learning styles used in two countries: China and Canada. All participants of the study had been educated in China from pre-school to undergraduate university education. They said that in China, being silent in class and getting correct answers in exams was a virtue. It was considered as a bad thing for them to make mistakes or share incorrect ideas. Since they have strong foundation of their heritage language and culture, from K-12 schooling experience studying in their home country, it becomes a great challenge when they need to adjust to a new learning environment. They realize what they have thought to be a norm or taboo is considered differently in North America.

Literature has shown that while some students try to take part in class discussions, many educators in North America have experienced the “silent Chinese student” phenomenon (Dougherty & Wall, 1991; Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014; Liu, 2001). The biggest difference between Chinese and North American education is that Chinese education puts great

emphasis on memorization (Rao & Chan, 2009). Participants have pointed out that China focus on exams, memorization, and regard silent classrooms as a virtue. Especially English education in China is mostly about grammar, structure, memorizing vocabulary, and about accuracy rather than fluency in language proficiency. Knowing that their English language proficiency is not high enough, this fact hinders them in speaking out because they do not want to make mistakes. Participants compared their classroom experience in China and North America and provided their thoughts on why Chinese students are silent in classrooms.

Lei mentioned:

“The reason for this is because the education system in China is very much examination oriented. That means you have the correct answers, or you don’t. There is no margin for mistakes. So naturally, we would care a lot about the accuracy of our message instead of fluency. That’s a huge difference here.”

“Here (in Canada) the professors want to hear our opinions and they want to guide us to find the answer. Like for example in China, if you have a wrong answer that means you make a bad impression and maybe affect your final score. But here if you have a wrong opinion the professor would not judge you but they will help you to find the correct answer. That’s the difference and one of the cultural barriers.”

Na pointed out:

“Chinese education especially focuses on memorization. We’re supposed to remember all the concepts, dates, ideas, and everything. But here, I don’t think memorization is important. The critical thinking is more important. We’re supposed to contribute in every class. We have to present our own ideas. However, in China if we cannot say the right answer or speak logically, the teacher would criticize us and even punish us.”

Xia said

“Here, students don’t have a lot of rules (to follow). You just have to be yourself. But in China, from very young, we have a lot of rules and even competitions in the school. For example, if there is class A, B, and C, there’s a competition of which classroom is quieter, the students behave better. Quiet classrooms and whether you are working hard was highly valued.”

Because China values accuracy in content knowledge and memorizing concepts, students were hesitant in sharing ideas that are not polished because it may be inaccurate information. Na said it is “non-sense” in China to share ideas, express feelings, and debate about other peoples’ ideas because getting good scores is all what matters.

From the results, Chinese international graduate students acknowledge the differences in teaching style of the two countries. They also understand that it is because they are familiar with the typical content-based instruction of prior education in China. Despite of understanding the differences and knowing how to behave in North American classrooms, they feel that it is difficult to change or break their habit in staying silent in classrooms. They choose to be silent in the classroom and tend to stay on the safe side.

Na said, “So, for us I think it is better and safer to remain silent and listen to what other people said and take notes and to see what we could learn from them. I know that it is a little bit non-sense still deeply in our heart maybe it is the tradition. So, we’re trying really hard to get rid of it. But it really needs practice.”

She also said that Chinese students choose to be in the “middle way” which means they try to adapt to a new cultural environment but rather than completely immersing into the North American classroom. They try to find a middle ground which combines the western

values and Chinese values.

Chinese international students choose to stay silent mainly because of their experiences in K-12 schooling and undergraduate program in China. This led them to become afraid of making mistakes because they are not sure about the content knowledge and whether they are using the right language to express their thoughts or not. As discussed in the conceptual framework, Basil Bernstein's language codes explain the causes for Chinese international students' silence in classrooms. It can be explained that Chinese international students experience difficulties because they do not share either restricted codes or elaborated codes with the majority culture. Restricted code is background knowledge which creates inclusiveness that can be found in intimate groups. This language code does not require special explanation for the in-group members to understand. On the other hand, elaborated codes refer to language that is used in situations where there is no prior shared understanding or knowledge (Bernstein, 1973). Therefore, it requires more explanation and elaboration on the topic. For Chinese international students, everything is new to them – language, culture, communication style, learning preferences, and background knowledge. For them, simple conversation or jokes can be processed as elaborate codes. However, the instructor in a graduate-level classroom and fellow local students perceive as a restricted language code and just move on without any explanation. Chinese international students feel puzzled about the discussion topic or the conversation happening in the classroom. However, they often times choose to stay silent because they do not want to bother the entire class in explaining a term that he/she may be the only person that has not fully understood. Chinese international students felt that the curriculum was not inclusive enough to include students with diverse backgrounds (e.g., different cultures, backgrounds, disciplines) to engage in classroom discussions.

Table 6. *Examples of Chinese International Students' Perceived restricted codes and elaborated codes*

Examples of Chinese students' Elaborated Codes	Examples of Chinese students' Restricted Codes
Quebec-specific background knowledge (e.g., English school boards, debates between English and French school boards, CEGEP)	China-specific background knowledge (e.g., Chinese school boards, high-stake tests)
Quebec-specific content knowledge (e.g., Religious policies, refugee students, inclusive education)	China-specific content knowledge (e.g., Chinese politics, education system in China)
Work experience as a classroom teacher (e.g., Most international students freshly graduated from their undergrads and do not have formal teaching experience prior to their master's program in North America)	Experiences in K-12 and undergraduate program in China (e.g., competition in schools, getting good grades, living in the dormitory with classmates)
Jokes, humor in classroom (e.g., Idiomatic expressions, television shows, local news)	Chinese food and culture (e.g., lunar holiday, Chinese television shows, food)

Chinese students have pointed out that their participation in class depends on instructor's attitude towards international students. Ghosh and Abdi (2013) and Liu (2001) emphasize the importance of the teacher's role for international students and in creating an inclusive classroom. Their encouraging comments and patience in paraphrasing their sentences made international students feel comfortable in class.

Qiang mentioned about the curriculum of his program.

“I don’t know if this is an issue of the curriculum or something else. I think it is their (professor’s) responsibility to build an inclusive curriculum so that every student, even those who has different backgrounds can contribute and have something to say. But sometimes I can feel that teachers they are nice but they are indifferent to Chinese students as well. Maybe because they are busy, have their own projects to do. So, they don’t want to spend too much time and attention to Chinese students. They focus on top students. Even though many times, Chinese students are very good, that’s why they are here at M University but they (the professors) are looking for top students who can do their own project. So again, the language is a big part.”

Na added,

“And sometimes I feel like the professors, they don’t care more about the international students. Because they would not spend too much time on explaining the terms because the rest of the western students all understand. So when we encounter with this situation, we’ll privately ask the western classmates sitting next to me. Because it’s may not be too important for the entire class so we don’t want to waste time and ask the professor to explain it. So we will ask our classmates. Sometimes I will ask the professor privately but most of the times I would ask the classmates.”

Students have also pointed out the inclusiveness of the curriculum toward international students joining the graduate program. They felt that they were cash cows that helps the program and school financially. Overall, it would be important to change the curriculum which can include opportunities for international students to speak up and share their experiences in their home countries. We need to acknowledge that international students in North American countries make valuable educational contributions (Andrade, 2006; Liu,

2001).

Despite the long effort to reeducate North Americans, students felt that Canada is still not opened (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013) which makes international students difficult to adapt to new culture. The teacher's role is especially important in creating a more inclusive curriculum and have more diverse discussion topics in classes so that international students also have something to say in class discussions.

Lastly, in the next part of this chapter, I will discuss about Chinese cultures that international students thought have hindered their participation in classrooms. Main theme was the culture of *face* and how *face* culture makes it difficult for international students to immerse to the majority culture,

Research Question 3: To what degree does Chinese culture of *Face* cause Chinese graduate students' silence in classrooms?

When asked which typical Chinese culture hinders Chinese international students from speaking out in classrooms, most commonly interview participants pointed out that they were worried about losing *face*. They explained that it is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Therefore, Chinese students do not want to talk about something that they are not sure about. Speaking in English was also a barrier because they were not comfortable with it because of the fear of being judged and losing face. In previous literature on Chinese people and their typical culture, face has been viewed as an integral part of Chinese culture and society (Cardon & Scott, 2003; Ho, 1976).

Bin said:

“If I don't know something for sure, I would not speak up my point of view. Because I feel like that will create an image to other people, they might think that I'm kind of stupid. I don't

want that kind of embarrassment to happen to me. So I think for people like me, if they do not know for sure on this topic, they prefer not to share their points.”

Moreover, students were worried that their mistakes or showing stupidity will harm China’s reputation because they feel that they represent their country.

Bin said:

“I definitely would recognize myself as a very important resource that can represent China. I am proud of my Chinese identity. So, I tend to believe that my words and my behavior represent china to some extent. For me, if I don’t know something for sure about China, I don’t want to say something.”

Xia said:

“Sometimes I would relate to my country. They would say, oh, those Chinese students they are like this, their English is poor, they just spend a lot of money coming to Canada. Because I know a lot of foreigners (Canadians) in Toronto or Vancouver they judge Chinese in that way. I read a lot of media reports about that. So I don’t want to lose face on my country. Okay let’s just be silent here. At least I will not lose face.”

Especially, speaking up in class with native English-speaker students that actively participate in class made them feel less willing to communicate. Research has shown that second-language speakers feel intimidated to speak in their non-native tongue in a group of native speakers. This attitude relates to Chinese peoples’ tendency to avoid losing face in any social interaction (Ho, 1976; Kim, Cohen, & Au, 2010).

Xia said:

“In my heart, I feel that they might judge me. I think my lack of confidence and my language

abilities are influencing each other. So if my language, if it's not good enough, then I lose more confidence because I'm not confident so I'm not talking. It's affecting each other."

Ying said that:

"Sometimes it's really hard for me to stand out and speak something because as Asian I feel so afraid in front of those aggressive native English speakers. I will feel ashamed if I cannot speak well. Because it's in our tradition of being afraid of losing faces. So, we would feel better being silent. Sometimes what they (native-speakers) are talking is not that good but since they are native speakers. They can really speak a lot and they are pretty confident about what they are saying but we have the idea of speaking the truth and the right answers because we have been brought up to do so."

While they feel more comfortable having active discussions within their in-group of Chinese students, they remain silent in discussions with the entire class (Atkinson, 2011). In order to enhance students' willingness to communicate in class and participate more in discussions, it can make students feel more comfortable when talking in a small group and especially being with people that they are familiar with (e.g., people that they have communicated before).

Ying pointed out that it depends on the discussion group members.

"Sometimes I think it is easier for me to express what I think with close friends or with a group of familiar people. But if you put me in a completely strange atmosphere and surrounded by native English speakers who are aggressive, I would definitely remain silent. I feel safer in a small group."

Na also said that she felt comfortable speaking in a small group of people.

“If the teacher asks the individuals to share their ideas with the whole class, I feel a little afraid because during that time I would be a little anxious about the language and expressions. Honestly, I will feel embarrassed firstly, and I’ll try to forget about that and would be more careful when I speak. Sometimes I’m afraid of making mistakes because I care about others’ opinions.”

From the findings, I was able to find out that Chinese students’ willingness to communicate had a lot to do with language barriers and being uncertain about the content. It was exemplified when speaking in a big group, in front of the entire class, with a lot of English-speakers where they are the only ones that are not fluent in English.

Moreover, it becomes difficult for Chinese international students to immerse to the majority culture (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). Most Chinese international students come from a high socio-economic status in their home country (Liu, 2001). However, after they come to North America to study, they realize that they do not have the same social status that they had when they are in their country. The differences in their social status make them become more difficult to adapt to the new culture and accepting that they are not part of the majority culture anymore (Cardon & Scott, 2003). Interview participants’ thoughts were consistent with the research findings.

Xia said:

“I think Canada is already a multicultural country. But the atmosphere among the people, they are not so opened as the country is. They have a lot of immigrants. But the immigrants are just the minority group even if they are a big population. I really feel comfortable speaking Mandarin. Everybody has their comfort zone. Sometimes I just don’t want to stay out of my zone. I want to treat myself well and be comfortable.”

Qiang mentioned:

“Students here at M University, we’re all like superstars. I think for many Chinese students, they were superstars in China like Beyonce or Britney Spears. However, when they are here at M University, they are not. So, can you imagine the gap between the attitude that their peers and teachers treat them here and in China? Sometimes you can feel that your teachers do not expect much from you. They put you into this (non-dominant) social category already. Local students, they are already in this dominant culture but Chinese students, they are not.”

Face culture has a strong influence on Chinese international students’ behaviors to stay silent. They worry about what others think about them and decide not to speak so that they do not lose face. Since we know about how strongly Chinese people think about the face culture, it is important that we create a learning environment where students are more comfortable and feel less sensitive about losing face so that they can speak up and share their ideas whenever they want. In the final part of this thesis, I will conclude the paper with conclusion, implications, and limitations and suggestions for future research.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to understand the genuine reasons for Chinese international students’ silence in classrooms. From a review of literature on international students in higher education and interview findings, I have looked through three main angles to understand the silent Chinese phenomenon: First, language proficiency; Second, previous schooling experience in China; and Chinese typical culture of *face*. Overall, it is evident that Chinese international students are experiencing difficulties in adapting to new cultures and classroom environment. They are eager to immerse and take part in the majority culture by speaking up in class and blend in with other students. However, since it is almost their first

time living outside of China, they are afraid of making mistakes and being judged at by other people. This led them to stay silent in classrooms. However, since more Chinese international students are joining graduate programs in North America, it is important to understand their difficulties so that they can share their fruitful experiences from China to the entire class. Starting from a small effort to understand Chinese international students' difficulties, it will bring in a great learning opportunity to the classroom and also create a multicultural classroom that values diverse ideas.

Implications

This study focused on understanding Chinese international students' experience studying as a graduate student in Canada. In order to genuinely understand their difficulties and help in their adaptation to a new culture, studying in a foreign country, it was important to hear from students that have experienced more than two semesters in a graduate program in Canada. Their genuine experiences were valuable in understanding the "silent Chinese" phenomenon in higher education. Moreover, their narratives were essential in understanding their lived experiences studying in China and Canada. Among international student population, international students with Chinese nationality is ranked first at M University in 2018. Since the number is growing every year, it is difficult to avoid the huge population of Chinese international students. Therefore, from this research, I was able to find out that it is important for the organization (the school), teachers, administrators, and fellow local students to understand international students' difficulties and culture so that they can help their cultural adaptation process.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The study was to understand why Chinese international students are silent in classrooms and now I know that the main reason for silence is because of lack of English language proficiency. I feel that the interview process itself could have stressed out the interview participants because they had to speak in English. If I was able to speak Mandarin Chinese, they could have opened up and talked more about their feelings because they can express freely in their first language.

In the future, it will be interesting to see how teachers or fellow local students or non-Chinese international perceive about Chinese students' silence in classrooms. Since Chinese students care a lot about what other people think, it will be interesting to see how non-Chinese students and teachers think about their silence. Moreover, out of the findings of this research, it would be good to evaluate the curriculum of the graduate programs and see whether it meets the requirements in creating an inclusive learning environment for all students and not only for local school teachers and administrators.

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APPENDIX A. RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD (REB) APPROVAL

 McGill

Applicable Research Ethics Board
REB-I REB-II REB-III

Application for Ethics Approval for Research Involving Human Participants
(please refer to the [Application Guidelines](http://www.mcgill.ca/research/researchers/compliance/human/) [www.mcgill.ca/research/researchers/compliance/human/] before completing this form)

Project Title: The effects of language proficiency and typical Chinese culture of speaking up in class:
Research on Chinese Graduate students in Montreal

Principal Investigator: Jihae Park **Dept:** Integrated Studies in Education (DISE)

Phone #: 514-434-3029 **Email:** jenniferjihae.park@mail.mcgill.ca
(a McGill email MUST be provided)

Status: Faculty ☐ Postdoctoral Fellow ☐ Other (specify) ☐
Ph.D. Student ☐ Master's Student ☒ Undergraduate ☐

Type of Research: Faculty Research ☐ Thesis ☒
Honours Thesis ☐ Independent Study Project ☐
Course Assignment (specify course name and #) ☐
Other (specify) ☐

Faculty Supervisor (if PI is a student): Ratna Ghosh **Email:** ratna.ghosh@mcgill.ca

Co- Investigators/Other Researchers (list name/status/affiliation):

List all funding sources for this project and project titles (if different from the above). Indicate the Principal Investigator of the award if not yourself.

Awarded:

Pending:

Principal Investigator Statement: I will ensure that this project is conducted in accordance with the policies and procedures governing the ethical conduct of research involving human participants at McGill University. I allow release of my nominative information as required by these policies and procedures.

Principal Investigator Signature: Jihae Park **Date:** February 22, 2017

Faculty Supervisor Statement: I have read and approved this project and affirm that it has received the appropriate academic approval. I will ensure that the student investigator is aware of the applicable policies and procedures governing the ethical conduct of research involving human participants at McGill University and I agree to provide all necessary supervision to the student. I allow release of my nominative information as required by these policies and procedures.

Faculty Supervisor Signature: Ratna Ghosh **Date:** 22-02-2017

Research Ethics Board Office (REB I, II, III), James Admin. Bldg. Rm 429, Montreal, QC H3A 0G4
tel: 514-398-6193 fax: 514-398-4644 ; www.mcgill.ca/research/researchers/compliance/human/ (version 01-2013)

APPENDIX B. LETTER OF CONSENT

Consent Form

The effects of language proficiency and typical Chinese culture of speaking up in class: Research on Chinese Graduate students in Montreal

You are invited to participate in a study that will explore classroom participation behaviors of Chinese international graduate students in Montreal, Canada. The purpose of this research is to understand the influence of Chinese culture in speaking up in class. The goal of this study is to enhance course lecturers, school administrators and non-Chinese colleagues' understanding of why Chinese students tend to remain silent in graduate level classes.

Procedure

If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed once for a period of about 45-60 minutes on the McGill University campus. Questions related to experiences of graduate level courses in Canada will be addressed. During the interview, the researcher will take written notes and will also record the conversation with a digital recording device. Follow up questions may be asked via email. The results of this research will be used for an MA thesis and possibly for conferences, research presentations, and publications.

Benefits

As a participant for this study, you would have the opportunity to share your experiences as an international student in Canada for research that intends to work toward the understanding of why Chinese international graduate students tend to be silent in class discussions. Also, results of this study may inform programs aimed at helping international students integrate into their new environments. Additionally, as an international student yourself, you can gain insight into graduate level qualitative research methodologies by participating in this study.

Rights and Confidentiality

Your rights and confidentiality will be respected and upheld in the following ways. All data will only be used for the purpose of analysis and will be kept for archival purposes. The researcher will keep any information strictly confidential. The data will be stored on the researcher's personal USB drive to which she has sole access. Interview data will remain confidential throughout and after the study. Participation for this study is entirely voluntary. It is important that you do not feel obligated to answer any questions that may make you uncomfortable. You have the right to withdraw from this study at any point without suffering any consequences. You also have the right to address any questions or concerns to the researcher about this study.

The researcher for this study is Jihae Jennifer Park, who is completing a thesis for a Master of Arts degree in the Education and Society program within the Department of Studies in Education (DISE) at McGill University. The supervisor is Dr. Ratna Ghosh. If you have any questions regarding this study, do not hesitate to contact the researcher by email at jenniferjihae.park@mail.mcgill.ca. The supervisor can also be contacted by email at ratna.ghosh@mcgill.ca. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights or welfare as a participant in this research study, please contact the McGill Ethics Manager at 514-398-6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca.

I have read the description of this study and I am aware of my rights as a participant.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

I agree to participate in an interview that will be audio-taped. Yes: ____ No: ____