

**The Experiences of Bilingual Chinese International Students Studying in English at  
a Small Canadian University**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

in the

Faculty of Education

Lakehead University

Thunder Bay, Ontario

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## Abstract

This study explores the experiences of ten Chinese students learning in English at a small Canadian university using Linguistic Portrait Silhouettes and semi-structured interviews in a phenomenologically-influenced case study. Five major themes were summarized: (1) The Language Portrait Silhouette (LPS); (2) The overall experience of studying in English at a Canadian university; (3) Transformation: Expectations, changes in expectations, changes in motivations, biggest changes and success; (4) Resources and support; and 5) Technology applications and learning experiences.

The Language Portrait Silhouette proved useful in understanding participants' linguistic identity, learning challenges, and cultural understanding. In terms of overall experience, although the majority of participants viewed the opportunities to use English to study at a Canadian university positively—including the cultural experience—the challenges and dilemmas faced by students were many, including culture shock and linguistic barriers. Most participants underwent transformations while studying in terms of motivations and expectations, with career prospects and personal growth seen as important. Participants made extensive use of technology to support their learning and offered suggestions for its use. Professors, for example, were expected to provide some advice and support in their teaching to help students make better use of these technologies.

Recommendations are made for professors, universities and future Chinese students studying at Canadian universities. Recommendations are also made for future study.

## Acknowledgements

Embarking on this research journey, exploring the intricate experiences of bilingual Chinese national students studying in English at a small Canadian university, has been a profound personal and academic odyssey for me. With a heart brimming with gratitude, I extend my most profound appreciation to those who have supported and guided me along this path.

First and foremost, I express my sincerest gratitude to my family, particularly my mother, Fen Cui, and my uncles, Shijie Cui and Gang Jiang. Their unwavering belief in my academic pursuits and their endless encouragement has been the cornerstone of my perseverance. Their faith in my abilities has been a constant source of strength, propelling me forward despite adversity.

Dr. Paul Berger deserves special recognition for his pivotal role in this endeavour. Beyond being a dedicated supervisor, Dr. Berger has been a beacon of inspiration and guidance. His commitment to academic excellence is matched only by his genuine care for his students' well-being. Dr. Berger's classes were not just lectures but transformative experiences filled with innovative activities that ignited my passion for education and environmental activism. His mentorship transcended academic boundaries as he generously shared his wisdom on navigating career paths and life's challenges. Dr. Berger's patience, kindness, and unwavering support have shaped my scholarly and personal growth. For these reasons and many more, I am profoundly grateful to have had Dr. Berger as a supervisor, mentor, and friend.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to the faculty and staff of LU, especially Dr. Tram-Anh Bui, whose invaluable support and encouragement paved the way for my transition from a course-based to a thesis-based program and offered me an emergency loan to support me. I am deeply

grateful to Dr. Ismel Gonzales, a committee member, for his passionate engagement with my research topic and invaluable guidance throughout this journey.

Dr. Meridith Lovell-Johnston, an internal examiner, your cheerful and exciting feedback has been invaluable in shaping the direction of this thesis.

Thank you to Dr. Tim Anderson, an external examiner; I am grateful for your insightful feedback and constructive criticism, which have enriched this work immeasurably. Your guidance has not only strengthened this thesis but has also shaped my scholarly trajectory.

I am immensely grateful to my ten participants, whose willingness to share their experiences and insights has been instrumental in shaping this research. Their openness and candour have immeasurably enriched this study, and I sincerely appreciate their contributions.

Special mention must be made of Saad Ahmed, whose emotionally and financially, unwavering support has been a constant source of strength throughout this journey. I am also grateful to Aayush Kamble and Arsh Shaikh for providing me with a conducive environment for study and assisting me in participant recruitment.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt thanks to all those who have offered their support, encouragement, and belief in my abilities. Your profound faith in me has fueled my determination to complete this challenging yet rewarding adventure. As I embark on the next chapter of my academic journey, I carry the invaluable lessons learned and the cherished relationships forged. Thank you, from the depths of my heart, for participating in this transformative experience.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### Overview of the Study

International students' importance in Canada has grown recently due to the country's vigorous promotion of the internationalization of higher education as a crucial national priority (Altbach, as cited in Burton, 2016; T. Anderson, 2020a). China is the country that sends the second-highest number of international students to Canada, and the number of Chinese students is expected to climb further (CBIE, 2020), which is in line with the worldwide trend of cross-border educational mobility (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2020) and China's vital role in Canada's multicultural society (P. Wang, 2016).

English is not typically the first language for Chinese international students (Burton, 2016). Limited English proficiency may make it difficult for them to understand cultural differences and adequately integrate into local community life (Zhao et al., 2023), posing challenges on various levels for their study and life in English-dominant Canadian universities (Burton, 2016). These issues may include poor English language skills, cultural unfamiliarity, inadequate study techniques, scholastic anxiety, low social self-efficacy, financial hardships, and homesickness (Huang & Brown, 2009). These variables also affect how Chinese-born national students perceive and comprehend the English-language classroom experience in Canada (Zhao et al., 2023).

Although research on the experiences of Chinese-born international students has been conducted, most has concentrated on Europe and the United States (Leu, 2010; Zhang-Wu, 2018). Most of the literature examining the experiences of Chinese international students in Canada focuses on their difficulties with language acquisition and cultural adjustment (Mao, 2021; F. Wang, 2016; Xiao, 2021), academic performance (Huang et al., 2022; T. Liu, 2016; Moore,

2010), and emotional difficulties (Lou et al., 2022; Montsion, 2020). The experience of Chinese national students studying in English in Canadian universities needs more study.

Current society generally views the lived experiences of Chinese international students as a private matter or not worthy of in-depth investigation (Zhao & Bhuyan, 2023). Although some studies, such as Zang (2007) and Gao (2005), have investigated the experiences of Chinese international students in Canada, the focus of attention has been mainly on expectations, outcomes, contributions to Canadian society, and advice for the final year. In contrast, there has been insufficient research on Chinese international students studying in English at small Canadian universities, exploring culture shock, transitions, expectations, motivations, the use of technology, and reasons for choosing a university, providing advice for the university, professors, and prospective Chinese students.

The current study looks at these and also focuses on participants' emotions and experiences as expressed through their Language Portrait Silhouettes, a particular way to help people talk about their language experiences (Busch, 2018). The current work should lead to better academic support and advice for this particular Chinese national group, and guidance for research in cross-cultural contexts (Mao, 2021).

## **Rationale**

Canadian universities have prioritized internationalization of the student body as one of their most important enrollment strategies (T. Anderson, 2020a). Among international students, the number of Chinese students rose strongly until a decade ago (T. Anderson, 2016) and remains high. This cannot be overlooked, nor the necessity to comprehend their linguistic identity and how they study in English. Their adaptation processes and experiences learning in English reflect the quality of teaching and socialization services offered by their classmates,

professors, university personnel, and even the community with which they interact (T. Anderson, 2016).

The goal of this study is to fill a gap in the research concerning Chinese bilingual students studying in English-speaking classrooms from a social justice education perspective. This study aims to provide useful information for Chinese bilingual students, university faculty, and universities in Canada to help them better understand and meet the linguistic identities, needs, interests, and expectations of this group of students, and to give appropriate instruction to potential bilingual Chinese students so that they may better grasp their language identities and integrate into the classroom, university, and society.

### **Personal Grounding**

As a bilingual educator and a Chinese international student studying in English at a Canadian university, I am interested in this topic since I have needed help expressing myself in English. I am very aware of the difficulties that arise when moving between various linguistic and cultural contexts, especially given that I previously spent most of my time studying in China. In that country, English was not the prevalent language. Personal experiences teaching children in various language situations in China have further spurred my desire to research bilingual Chinese pupils. Having taught English myself while in China, yet still struggling sometimes while studying in a Master of Education program in English, has made me curious about others' experiences.

Many bilingual students require a greater awareness of how negative transfer hurdles and bilingual expression affect them (Hambly et al., 2013). In a small study during my first year of graduate school, I used the Language Portrait Silhouette (LPS) tool to look at the experiences of bilingual students of Chinese origin and Chinese Canadian residents at a Canadian university

regarding their identity, learning processes, strategies, and challenges. That work increased my knowledge of how language, culture, and social variables interact to create multilingual identities. Encouraged by that modest study, I committed to investigating this issue more thoroughly, concentrating on the experiences of Chinese-born international students enrolled in degree programs at a small Canadian university.

I conducted the current study with ten bilingual Chinese international students in Canada. My interactions with Chinese participants have improved my ability to comprehend their viewpoints, consider language preferences, and analyze the effects of multilingualism (Dressler, 2014). I endeavoured to conduct this research and critically evaluate the perspectives I already have in understanding these complex phenomena, aware that my experiences as an international student and bilingual education practitioner may have influenced my perspectives.

Ultimately, I hope my insights from this study can help bilingual university students, especially Chinese international students, better understand their feelings, experiences, and the challenges they face while studying in Canada, while suggesting solutions to improve their experiences.

### **Research Question**

This study focuses on answering the key question: *What is the experience of bilingual Chinese national students studying in English at a small Canadian university?*

### **Definition of Terms**

The words and phrases defined below offer crucial context and a conceptual framework for investigating the “experience of bilingual Chinese students studying in English at a small Canadian university.”

### ***Language Portrait Silhouette (LPS)***

Language Portrait Silhouettes were described by Busch (2018):

Participants imagining their linguistic repertoire with silhouetted outlines of their bodies were initially developed as a language awareness exercise in education, and now they are increasingly being used as an investigation of how speakers themselves experience and interpret their heterogeneous linguistic practices and repertoires as research tools. (p. 2)

In recent years, Language Portrait Silhouettes have been used by educators and researchers as a tool for investigating linguistic repertoire, language awareness, and linguistic identity in multilingualism (Busch, 2012, 2017; Dressler, 2015; Prasad, 2014).

### ***Language/Linguistic Identity***

Linguistic identity is defined as an individual's views and experiences with language including their attitudes, feeling of belonging, and language competency (Dressler, 2014; Leung et al. 1997; Terminology Coordination Group, 2020). Many scholars believe that language is a crucial component of identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Fought, 2006; Labov, 1973). As stated by Norton (2012): "language is more than a system of symbols; it is a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities are negotiated" (p. 1). Yuan and Fang (2008) state that "identity is social and interactive, and the speaker-subject possesses multiple identities" (p. 62).

Linguistic identity may be understood from a variety of viewpoints, including degree of knowledge (linguistic competence), sense of belonging (formal or informal engagement), and legacy (family links) (Leung et al., 1997). The establishment of linguistic identity is impacted by the language environment, socialization processes, and personal preferences. As a result, language serves as both a cultural carrier and a source of identity (Lee & K. T. Anderson, 2009). Understanding and exploring linguistic identity is extremely important in multiculturalism

because it involves the link between the person and society, as well as the development and preservation of identity (Yuan & Fang, 2008).

According to Anchimbe (2007), people are unlikely to review their identities in homogenous societies, but they may reconstruct their identities to maintain distinctiveness when interacting with other communities. Language becomes a key indicator of this process. Linguistic identity refers to language speakers' attitudes, acceptance, and opposition to a language, and it contributes to the community's internal cohesiveness as well as the recognition of exterior distinctions.

### ***Bilingualism***

The capacity to communicate successfully in two languages is known as bilingualism (Richard, 2020). This skill may appear to various degrees, with some people being more fluent in one language than the other while others are equally fluent in both. Canadians often refer to English and French fluency as bilingualism in Canada (Canadian Encyclopedia, 2015).

### ***Chinese Nationals as International Students***

According to Andrade (2006), many international students do not speak English as their first language and are enrolled in post-secondary schools on a student visa. International Chinese students are born in China, speak English as a second language, and have a valid study permit to attend a post-secondary institution in Canada (Burnham, 2017).

### **Research Design and Methodology**

In order to answer the research question, I utilized a “snowball” sampling technique and a phenomenologically-influenced case study approach. Data were collected using a combination of Language Portrait Silhouettes (LPS) and semi-structured interviews as a research method.

Participants were first asked to fill in a blank LPS, a creative visualization process that offered

them the possibility to use pictorial representations to reflect on linguistic practices and preferences that are often below conscious awareness (Busch, 2018, p. 6), and then a semi-structured interview was conducted, with questions about the LPS, asking participants for interpretations, followed by questions about experiences of learning in English, being a bilingual Chinese student, and questions about technology. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data were collected over a one-week period and analyzed using NVivo software.

### **Limitations**

The study had a small sample size ( $n=10$ ) and a concentration of the study participants between the ages of 20 and 35, resulting in a limited ability to generalize. Also, seven of the 10 participants were students at the Faculty of Education, meaning students from many faculties were not represented. Still, valuable information was gained.

### **Significance of this Study**

This study provides insights for professors, university administrators, and prospective Chinese students that can help to meet the academic, administrative, and cultural needs of this population more effectively, echoing findings of Brown and Baker (cited in Burnham, 2017). The findings emphasize the importance of creating more culturally inclusive and supportive educational environments to promote a progressive and culturally inclusive Canadian higher education system (Lin, 2023). A greater understanding of Chinese students' experiences may help to improve their cultural and educational experiences, thereby increasing enrollment and promoting multiculturalism (Burnham, 2017). Additionally, the process of drawing Language Portrait Silhouettes (LPS) allowed for a visual exploration of the language identities and emotions of the participants (Lin, 2023). This study examines experiences, feelings, ideas, challenges, and discrimination to provide a foundation for creating social justice educational

practices and policies that accommodate Chinese bilingual students studying in Canada in order to build a more vibrant and adaptive learning environment.

### **Thesis Overview**

This thesis is divided into five chapters. This chapter outlines the topic of study, background details, personal perspectives, motivation for the study, a summary of the research design and methodology, a definition of terms, limitations, and significance of the study. In Chapter 2: Literature Review, I discuss the study's theoretical framework: the intercultural adaptation model and second language socialization (SLS), as well as the ecological perspective of language learning and the application of (second language) socialization theory. I then discuss the effects and trends of internationalization of higher education in Canada on Chinese students learning in English. After that, the difficulties encountered by Chinese national students in the process of learning in English at Canadian universities, such as social difficulties and psychological adaptation, language barriers and sense of belonging, cultural adaptation, academic pressure and ethnic discrimination, are discussed, and from second language learning to identity construction, as well as the literature on LPS, the use of technology to assist learning, and coping strategies and research gaps. Chapter 3: Methodology discusses the research design, the research process including participant selection, data collection and analysis, ethical issues and limitations of the study. In Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion, I present the main findings, which are discussed in detail in five themes. Chapter 5: Conclusions, provides a summary and implications, as well as suggestions for future research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Introduction

Due to globalization, more and more students are choosing to pursue degrees abroad (Zhang-Wu, 2018b). Canada is known globally for its excellent quality of higher education, which is one of the reasons for its popularity among international students (F. Wang, 2016). Not only do international students bring linguistic and cultural diversity to campus communities, but they also energize the local economy by generating significant income to local businesses, while providing Canada with a pool of highly skilled and trained individuals (Honourable & Baird, 2012). According to T. Anderson (2016), this group deserves attention due to the large (and growing) number of Chinese students in Canada and globally. According to F. Wang (2016), the governments of China and Canada reached a bilateral agreement on multiple-entry and long-term visas in 2015, now making it easier for Chinese students to pursue their studies and reside in Canada. Despite a decline in applications due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of biometric measures, China remains an important source of international students for Canada, maintaining its position as the country's second largest source of international students (Packer, 2023).

Although Canadian universities are actively taking steps to attract more students (T. Anderson, 2020a), the presence of Chinese students in universities presents a number of challenges. These challenges include the need for developing a more comprehensive understanding of their cultural backgrounds and experiences, providing English language learning support that is tailored to their specific needs, implementing more effective educational methods that promote the development of their personal qualities, and assisting them in successfully integrating into the local community (F. Wang, 2016). Before exploring the

challenges that Chinese students face in Canadian universities, it is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of their learning experiences. However, there is relatively limited research on Chinese international students at Canadian universities, particularly in the areas of language, identity, and second language training (Yang, 2018).

To address this gap, the current study investigates the experiences of bilingual international students from China pursuing degrees taught in English at a Canadian university, with a particular focus on the challenges they face, their emotional experiences, their changing identities, and their coping strategies. To increase richness of data, the Linguistic Portrait Silhouette (LPS) technique was utilized to help gather their perspectives.

The next sections will describe the use of the LPS and will present the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study, Berry's (1997) model of Cross-Cultural Adaptation and the Theory of Second Language Socialization proposed by Duff (2011). The subsequent section will examine the patterns and consequences of internationalization in the context of Canadian higher education and the final section will provide an overview of the scholarly literature on international students from China studying in English in Canada.

### **Search Strategy**

I conducted literature searches using the following electronic databases: Education Source, CBCA Complete (Canadian Business & Current Affairs - via ProQuest), ERIC (via ProQuest), Omni, Google Scholar, and Theses Canada. I employed various keywords and search terms to acquire material relevant to the research issue to ensure the study's breadth and depth. First, I used the primary search phrases “Chinese national student,” “Chinese student,” “Chinese

international student,” or “Chinese” in connection with “experience\*<sup>1</sup>,” “identity,” “discrimination\*,” and “bias,” “stereotype,” “technology,” “ChatGPT\*,” “LPS,” “Language Portrait Silhouettes,” or “Language Portrait.” This list of keywords assisted me in focusing on the experiences, identities, discrimination, prejudices, stereotypes, and technology use of international students of Chinese descent, which may affect their learning experiences. Simultaneously, I paired the contextual terms “higher education” and “university or college” with “Canada” or “North America” to identify the study's geographic and educational environment. This strategy ensured that the literature discovered applied to the Canadian higher education context.

I also conducted a literature search in several higher education journals using the same search terms, including the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *International Journal of Multilingualism*, and *Linguistics and Education*, which frequently contain research in the field of language and multilingual education that is relevant to the experiences of Chinese bilingual international students. I utilized the following criteria for reviewing the papers obtained. First, only empirical articles written in English and published in peer-reviewed academic publications were included to ensure the quality and reliability of the material. Second, I set a time constraint on the publication date and chose only works published after 2012 to make the literature relevant to the contemporary environment. Furthermore, I focused on literature about international students of Chinese origin because China has been a prominent source country for international students in Canada since 2000 (Zhang & Beck, 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> The asterisk is a symbol that means the search finds words that start with the same letters or have the same root words, such as “stereotype” and “stereotypes” (Shin, 2021).

Furthermore, I conducted a content review of the remaining articles to eliminate articles that dealt with different populations (e.g., Chinese-Canadian immigrants, K-12 students) or focused on various aspects (e.g., online learning, parental involvement), as well as articles focusing on international students studying outside of Canada (e.g., China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Australia).

### **The Use and Relevance of Language Portrait Silhouettes in Research**

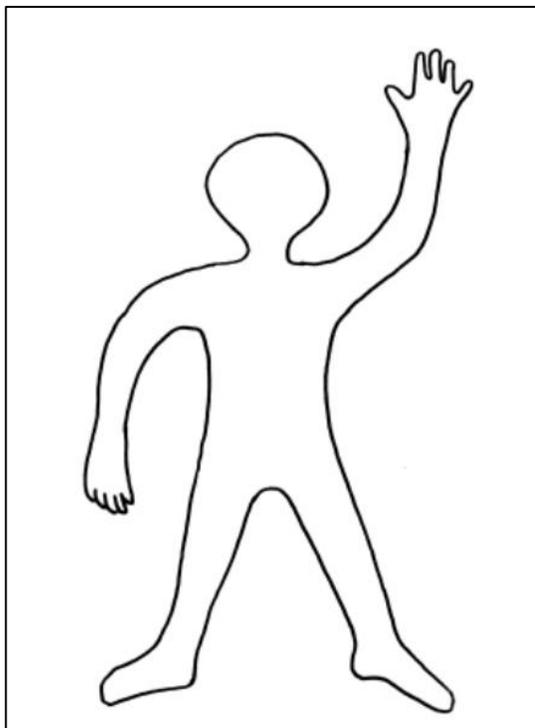
The Language Portrait Silhouette (LPS) is a tool to gain insights into an individual's daily linguistic practices as well as ideologies towards a particular language or way of speaking. In addition to expressing linguistic attitudes and emotions, language portraits have been used as a tool for exploring linguistic diversity, consciousness, and identity (Busch, 2012, 2017; Dressler, 2014; Prasad, 2014).

Early research on language portraits focused on elementary school education, where children were asked to draw the body contours of language portraits in different colours in order to understand their perceptions and emotions towards different languages (Krumm & Jenkins, cited in Busch, 2018). Since then, Krumm and Jenkins have further promoted the use of language portraits in schools in an attempt to demonstrate the relationship between language and emotions, belonging, and biographical experiences (cited in Busch, 2018).

In the current study, I used the LPS method that Busch (2018) used rather than the LPS Dressler (2014) used. Busch (2018) altered the previous silhouette to exclude not only all gender-related, appearance-clothing features, but also all information relating to the “perfect” character in order to encourage participants to add their own elements. The outlines did not depict any specific bodily motions. Busch's (2018) blank portrait drawing had one side of the hand raised with no facial characteristics such as eyes, mouth, or ears. The head of Busch's (2018)

and Dressler's (2014) LPS was somewhat bigger than life-size proportions (1:7 for adults), allowing the participant to draw more freely (Busch, 2018).

**Figure 1**



*Template of the body outline of the Language Portrait Silhouette by Busch (2018)*

In Canadian study, Dressler (2014) used a language portrait approach to study the linguistic identity of young multilingual children. She used an older version of the LPS with both arms down. Lin (2023) explored the use of language portrait silhouettes in conjunction with written narratives and argued that language portrait silhouettes served as an exploration of the full range of linguistic competencies of students in Taiwan, as well as their personal relationship with language as a tool. The LPS provides a multi-modal platform for researchers to gain insights into the ways in which individuals reconcile and express their bilingual or multilingual

identities in different contexts, as well as their understanding of their linguistic competence, language use, and linguistic emotions (Busch, 2012).

Lundell (2010) utilized the LPS to analyze the visual representation of English in Finnish children's linguistic identities. Martin (2012) provided an understanding of the different responses of students in the classroom by examining questionnaires from German fourth grade language education students and their LPS. Gouvi (2023), working with 10 junior high school students in Germany, found that “silhouettes created a pattern that provided participants with an extended range of interpretations from inspirational visuals to basic representations” (p. 39). In recent years, the LPS has been used by educators and researchers as a tool for investigating linguistic repertoire, linguistic awareness, and linguistic identity in multilingualism (Busch, 2012, 2017; Dressler, 2014; Prasad, 2011, 2014). However, current LPS research focuses on its applications and potential impacts, with research on specific groups (e.g., Chinese international students studying at Canadian universities) still to be completed (Mu et al., 2023).

As mentioned previously, the Language Portrait Silhouette is a multimodal task that provides participants with multiple forms of representation, verbal, visual, and textual, producing metaphorical symbolic representations including colors, shapes and flags (Kress, cited in Dressler, 2014). Busch (2018) explains that “one of the strengths of a language portrait is that it can help to extend and modify a person's view of his or her linguistic tendencies” (p. 10). She writes that “body parts correspond to different metaphorical frames; for example, the head is the place of reason, the abdomen is the place of emotion, the heart is the place of intimacy, and the hands are the place of social activity” (p. 10). Placement on the LPS can also signify what is familiar, important, and close or distant, while people also often use things such as arrows and flags. Lundell’s (2010) wrote: “the children make a concrete connection between the colors of

national flags (and other colors used in their socio-cultural environment) and colors of languages” (p. 42).

Additionally, colour plays an important role in LPS because students associate colour with their emotions and link colour to their language practices (Soares et al., 2020). According to Busch (2018), “the way a color is experienced is to some extent continuous, but it is not possible to match color meanings and preferences to individual ‘cultures’. These meanings are usually associated with particular types of surfaces, specific customs and contexts” (p. 10). For an individual, the same colour may be associated with multiple connotations, as Fisher et al. (2004) demonstrated in a large-scale questionnaire study. For example, green was simultaneously associated with hopefulness, toxicity, bitterness, and soothing by several participants. What the individual elements of the visualization represent and how they relate to each other is not immediately apparent from the picture in the case of linguistic portraits but can only be revealed through the interpretation given by the author.

Dressler (2014) encourages educators to make posters of their own LPS and put them up around the school to encourage students to think about the different linguistic identities of adults in their learning environment. LPS can also be used as a classroom activity where students provide the story behind each language by presenting the outlines they have drawn. Providing a story extends the task into a written activity that utilizes the students’ language repertoire (Cummins, cited in Dressler, 2014). Overall, the use of the LPS was relevant in understanding the language experiences of participants in the current study, students at a small English-language Canadian university. The metaphorical representation of language through the LPS framework provided a unique perspective for an exploration of how bilingual Chinese international students perceive and embody their language experiences in an English-speaking

academic environment. The LPS literature provides a basis for understanding the potential benefits and complexities of utilizing the LPS to study the experiences of bilingual individuals in different linguistic and cultural contexts. While the LPS helps to understand linguistic identity, I turn now to theoretical frameworks that will help to understand participants' experience of studying in English.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

This section explores Berry's (1997) cross-cultural adaptation model and Duff's (2011) conceptualization of second-language socialization.

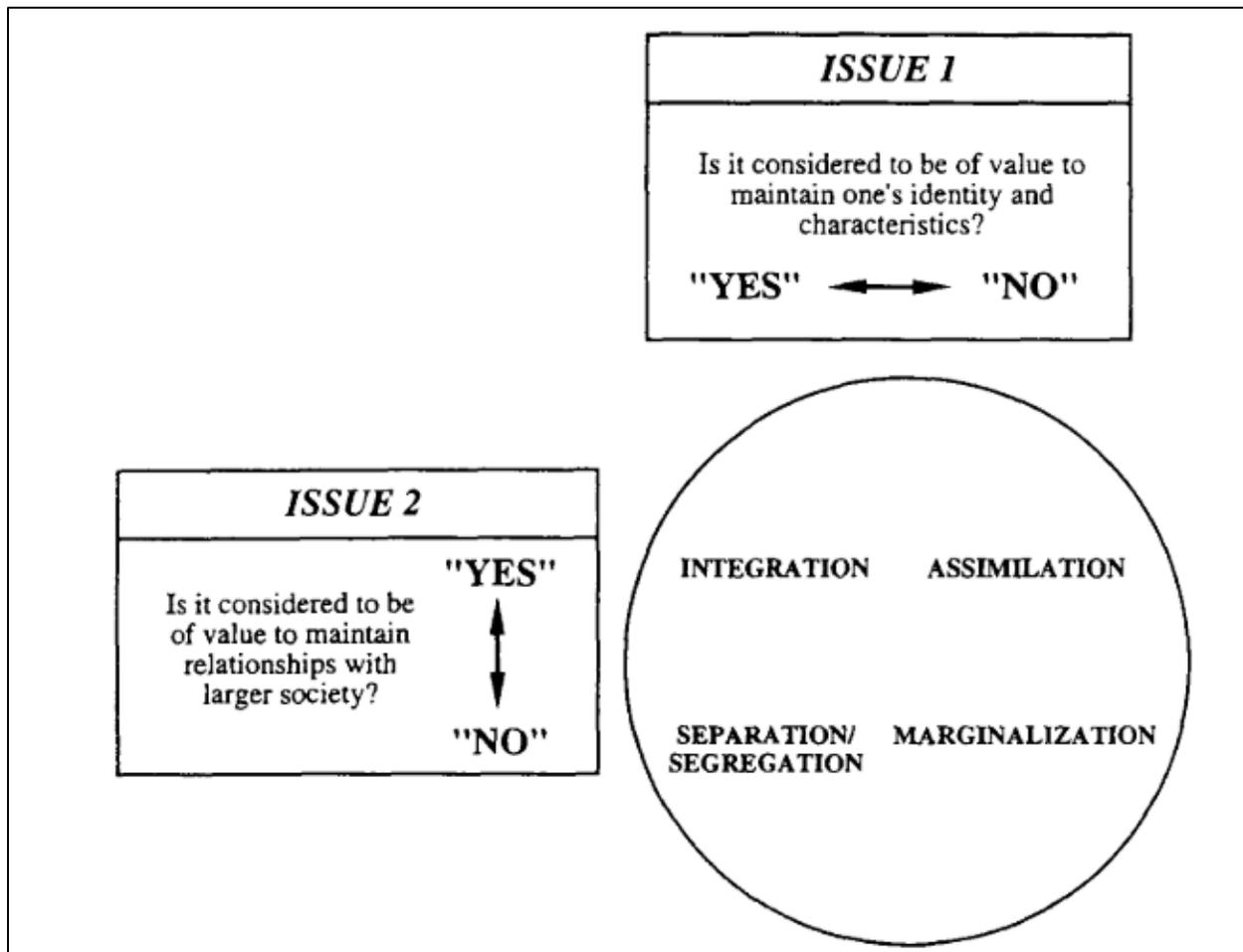
#### ***Berry's Model of Cross-Cultural Adaptation***

Berry's (1997) model of cross-cultural adaptation, as a widely explored and researched two-dimensional model (Cabassa, 2003; MatSudaira, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2011), provides an excellent framework for studying the acculturation of Chinese international students at a small Canadian university. The model examines people's acculturation skills in a new cultural context.

Berry (1997) raised two issues of acculturation: maintenance of culture (the extent to which cultural identities and characteristics are considered important and efforts are made to maintain them); and contact and participation (the extent to which people should be involved in other cultural groups or remain mainly among them). Additionally, based on these two questions, he proposed four acculturation strategies: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization (see Figure 2). These strategies/outcomes reflect how well an individual accepts the new culture and how well he or she maintains the original culture.

### **Figure 2**

*Berry (1997)'s Acculturation Strategies*



Note. Adapted from Berry (1997)

The assimilation approach refers to the individual's acceptance of the norms of the dominant or host culture while ignoring his/her own native culture. However, not all international students of Chinese background adopt this approach because they may try to assimilate into the new culture while preserving their cultural heritage (Cheung-Blunden & Juang, 2008). Conversely, the separation strategy indicates that individuals conform to their own culture while rejecting the new social norms (Berry, 1997). While a separation strategy may be advantageous in some cases, research has shown that Chinese international students prefer integration strategies, which involve maintaining one's own culture and integrating into the new

culture for better adaptation outcomes (Berry, 1997), also known as biculturalism (Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008). According to Berry (1997), “Marginalization is defined when there is little likelihood or interest in cultural maintenance (usually for reasons of enforced cultural loss) and little interest in establishing relationships with others (usually for reasons of exclusion or discrimination)” (p. 9). Fox et al. (2013) explains that individuals who are marginalized are those who have lost all cultural affiliation and have neither rejected their original culture nor embraced the practices of the new dominant culture, which can lead to psychological distress. Even though these individuals enter the cultural transition period to begin the process of acculturation, they are never able to achieve a new, clearly defined cultural affiliation and leave this transitional state.

According to Cao et al. (2017) who surveyed 183 Chinese international students in Belgium, integration was the most common adaptation strategy used, followed by isolation, marginalization, and assimilation. However, they also suggested that the ways in which different Chinese international students adapt may vary according to individual differences, with potential factors including the individuality of the Chinese cultural immigrant, the cultural distance between Chinese and host cultures, and the host nationals' perceptions of Chinese minority groups. The Chinese concept of paradoxical fusion adds an interesting perspective to the study, with fusion emphasizing the mutual connection and harmonization between opposites (M.J. Chen , 2002). This concept can be seen as an approach to cross-cultural adaptation; that is, how to adopt new cultural norms while preserving the local culture. This paradoxical integration paradigm provides a new theoretical perspective on the acculturation of Chinese international students in Canada.

By examining the acculturation experiences of Chinese international students, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of their experiences in the English language learning environment in Canada and how they integrate and are socialized into the new culture while maintaining their own.

### ***Second Language Socialization (SLS)***

The study of language socialization, which is informed by the fields of linguistics, education, psychology, and human development, was initially formed in the 1980s as a topic that tried to enhance the neglected linguistic and cultural background of socialization processes. The activities and methods of learning and understanding the cultural knowledge of the target language community through interactions with people who are proficient in the target language and cultural practices are referred to as second language socialization (Duff, 2011).

Academic discourse socialization is a sub-field, a form of language socialization that “examines the social, cognitive, and cultural processes, ideologies, and practices involved in higher education in particular” (Kobayashi et al., 2017, p. 239). It focuses on the ways newcomers learn to take part in academic discourse – “to perform meaningful actions in institutionally and socioculturally valued ways as they participate in their disciplinary communities” (Kobayashi et al., 2017, p. 240), during things such as small group discussions or academic presentations.

From macro to micro viewpoints, second language socialization may be applied to understand various cultural settings, social backgrounds, beliefs, emotions, and identity factors through language (Duff, 2011). Due to their typically more significant levels of cognitive and affective expressiveness and feeling of agency compared to younger learners, adult bilingual learners are more likely to integrate into the community (T. Anderson, 2015, 2016). Adult

bilingual learners must still study more about the second language's cultural contexts and other related issues. Second language socialization is a sophisticated and variable process influenced by various circumstances and may result in unexpected effects (Mao, 2021). According to Duff (2011), the process comprises socialization, identity conflict, unclear future trajectories, and negative ambivalence (such as defiance, resistance, or rejection of negative repercussions on the second language, culture, or community). Despite being a complicated and extended process, second-language socialization may provide new possibilities and practices when things go smoothly (Duff, 2011).

The cross-cultural adaptation model and theories of second-language socialization intersect. They stress how identities are negotiated and how new cultures or groups are embraced through language learning (Maon, 2021). The second language socialization theory focuses on sociocultural learning through language, whereas the cross-cultural adaptation model focuses more on psychological adaptation and identity development (Steffensen & Kramsch, 2017).

### **From Second Language Acquisition to Identity Construction**

Many Chinese students' English learning experience in Canada involves two key domains: second language acquisition (SLA) and identity construction. SLA is an academic field focused on how people learn to use a second language in academic and social contexts, while identity construction involves how people see themselves in a bilingual environment and express their identities in different languages. The interplay between these two domains is complex and profound (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016).

### ***Conceptualizing and Characterizing Identity***

Identity is a matter of being and becoming (Hall-Lew & Starr, 2010) and a socialization process of constant change, adjustment, and adaptation (F. Wang, 2016). History, culture, and

power profoundly affect identity (Hall-Lew & Starr, 2010), making identity diverse, dynamic, and negotiable (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

The identity development process becomes particularly complex in bilingual environments (Fielding, 2016). X. Chen and Padilla (2019) emphasize that bilingual identity refers to the identity of individuals fluent in two or more languages. This identity experience includes identification with these languages and a sense of positioning and belonging in both cultures (Grosjean, 2010). Kanno (2003) argues that bilingual identity refers to how individuals position themselves in multilingual environments and incorporate these languages into their self-concept. Cummins (2000) notes that the development of bilingual identity is the result of social negotiation between bilingual learners and their surrounding social interactions, particularly between teachers and students.

Identity is a concept that has received much attention in recent years, particularly in the fields of language learning and education. Academics have a variety of views on identity. Some argue that identity is complex, multidimensional (Block, 2007; Fielding, 2015; Lin, 2023), dynamic and contested (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Joseph, 2016; Salimi & Abedi, 2022), rooted in beliefs, traits and characteristics ( Drummond, 2021; Kanno, 2003; Norton, 2012), and is contextualized and explicit (Bagguley & Hussain, 2017; Blackdge, 2004; Omoniy & White 2006).

Identity building is a social process that happens via developing and reconstructing diverse social ties (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Identity creation, in particular, entails forming and reshaping social relations connected to the individual's experiences and features of gender, ethnicity, culture, and class.

Chinese international students at small Canadian institutions go through identity formation while improving their English proficiency during their studies. They may believe they must integrate more into Canadian society and the academic atmosphere (Lay & Verkuyten, 1999). Identity formation is complex and varied for these international students, and it can be influenced by factors such as skin color, language differences, behavioural patterns, cultural values and norms, social stereotypes, misconceptions and anxieties among parents (Guanipa-Ho & Guanipa, cited in F. Wang, 2016).

Examining this issue can contribute to a better understanding of the experiences of this particular group, as well as help the field of higher education to better support their learning and identity development.

### ***The Impact of Bilingualism on Identity***

Recently, there has been a growing interest in identity-related research in language learning. Language and identity are closely linked, and the more languages a person masters, the more identities they may possess, which means that bilingual learners usually have multiple identity perspectives (Benzehaf, 2023). Pavlenko (2004) argues that bilingualism affects an individual's self-perception because language learning is how learners construct diverse identities. Research has shown that bilinguals may experience identity shifts when using different languages. For example, Bakic and Škifić (2017) found that bilinguals may exhibit other emotions, attitudes, and behaviours in different language environments. Due to the differences between different linguistic and cultural environments, language speakers may have different expressions of identity when using other languages, making identity a fluid concept that constantly changes and adapts across different linguistic environments (Benzehaf, 2023).

In addition, bilingualism may trigger uncertainty and conflict in an individual's identity. When referring to globalization, Duff (2011) suggests that bilingual learners often resort to identity fusion, blending, or imposing one linguistic identity on another. With the rise of global English and the increasing status of English as a global lingua franca, learning it has become increasingly important. Bilinguals are often challenged to choose which language and culture to use when communicating in different linguistic environments. This choice may lead them to express different identities and express themselves in different ways in various linguistic contexts, making them feel confused and uncertain.

### ***Approaches to Bilingual Identity Negotiation***

Negotiation of bicultural identity in bilingual contexts is usually done through code-switching or language choice (Cantone & Müller, 2005). Fielding (2016) states that language is an essential tool for bilinguals to negotiate interpersonal relationships in their interactions and that they often use code-switching or other language choices.

**Language choice.** Language choice is the process by which bilinguals thoughtfully decide to use a particular language over some time. According to Fielding (2016), language choice has implications for identity negotiation and can also be used to negotiate social power. This choice can be manifested as a change in identity in different contexts.

**Code-switching.** According to Gardner-Chloros, "code-switching is the existence of bilingualism", which is defined as "the practice of switching between two languages, or between two dialects or registers of the same language and is more likely to appear in conversation" (cited in Shay, 2015, pp. 462-463). Code-switching ability may compensate for lack of language competence (Heredia & Altarriba, 2001, p. 165).

## **Difficulties Faced by Chinese International Students**

This section will review literature on language barriers, culture shock, academic difficulties, socialization difficulties, and discrimination during Chinese students' study in English in Canada.

### ***Language Barriers***

Research points to language barriers as the main problem many Chinese international students face when learning in English in Canada (Guo & Guo, 2017). Specifically, students' difficulties with the English language, including a lack of listening and speaking skills, have been identified as a fundamental barrier to establishing meaningful relationships with host country students (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Scott & Scott, 2015). During English language learning, Chinese students often face language barriers, especially when they may need extra help in communicating and interacting with others, which can lead to fear and confusion (J. Liu, 2017). Academic difficulties are also often accompanied by language barriers, as language limitations can lead to academic struggles, especially in the early stages of an academic career (Guo & Guo, 2017).

Language barriers associated with Chinese identity can become a foundational challenge for Chinese international students entering Canadian universities (Grabke, 2013; J. Liu, 2001; Tsai, 2017; Xiang, 2017; Zhao & McDougall, 2005). For example, Li's (2012) study found that the influence of Confucian learning styles makes some students tend to be silent in the classroom, which may hinder their active participation in an English-speaking environment. The Confucian educational philosophy of Chinese students learning through rote memorization may lead to their lack of confidence, low oral engagement, and deficiencies in listening and speaking skills in English language learning (Tsai, 2017; Xiao, 2021). Yang (2018) argues that Chinese students

need to make continuous efforts to improve their academic and social English language skills, which includes actively learning a new language and culture norms while attending a Canadian institution, finding support systems, and gradually adapting to the unique cultural and academic environment.

### ***Culture Shock***

In addition to language barriers, culture shock also affects the academic performance of Chinese students. According to Zhu (2007), Chinese international students may go through a process of transition when adapting to a new environment and culture. Since the transition encountered is culturally relevant (Mao, 2021), it is also referred to as culture shock, which can lead to emotional problems such as depression, homesickness, loneliness, and dissatisfaction (H. Liu, 2005). Culture shock usually occurs when a person encounters a new socio-cultural environment that is contrary to his or her cultural background (Burton, 2016). According to Oberg's (1960) theory of culture shock, students may go through four stages: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adaptation. Chinese students must overcome cultural barriers, especially traditional, educational, and moral differences (P. Wang, 2016). Chinese students attending schools in Canada may experience low levels of confidence, low oral engagement, poor listening and listening skills, and a lack of communicative competitiveness as a result of this process, which largely ignores Chinese culture, Confucian learning styles, and weaker English—all of which are influenced by the Chinese educational system (Xiao, 2021) and may be largely ignored by Canadian institutions. Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) have suggested that establishing communities of the same ethnicity may be an effective way to mitigate culture shock.

### ***Academic Difficulties***

Due to language and cultural barriers, Chinese students are sometimes limited in their ability to actively participate in academic tasks and may be less engaged inside and outside the classroom (Xiao, 2021). There are also students who feel a lack of confidence and fear of participating in class discussions, which further exacerbates their language barriers (Mukminin & McMahan, 2013; Xiao, 2021). At the same time, the dominant Western cultural ideology creates significant language barriers that marginalize non-native English speakers and make them face greater difficulties in the academic environment (Xiao, 2021). Educational support programs, such as tutoring centers and writing workshops, are critical to addressing these issues (Wilson et al., 2021). The site for the current research provides some tutoring and writing support, academic skills and peer workshops, events and academic resources, and advising appointments to help students be more successful.

### ***Socialization Difficulties***

As stated in previous sections, research has shown that some Chinese students have difficulties in interacting with native English speakers and local communities due to language and cultural barriers (Xiao, 2021; Wang, 2009). They are undergoing language socialization and academic discourse socialization at the same time (T. Anderson, 2017; Kobayashi et al., 2017). They may avoid active participation in social activities because they are not fluent enough in English. With limited social circles and recreational opportunities, many Chinese students may feel lonely on weekends while worrying about connecting with classmates and teachers. Psychological adaptation for international students is crucial in the English learning experience (Berry, 2017). Psychological adaptation is the state of one's mental health during the process of acculturation, which is influenced by coping skills and factors that influence cultural adaptation

(Hirai et al., 2015). Cultural differences can lead to mental health problems such as confusion, worry, and depression (Preston & A. Wang, 2017; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Chinese students and other Asian international students often report high levels of acculturation stress in Canada (Yeh & Inose, 2003). This is especially true when experiencing difficulties in their studies (Chataway & Berry, 1989; Heine & Lehman, 1995). For example, J. Liu (2016) found that when international students face difficulties such as language limitations and communication problems, they may develop self-doubt, which can lower their self-esteem. Lower self-esteem may affect their academic performance and learning experience, and it is therefore recommended that more opportunities for interaction with peers and teachers be provided to promote friendships and academic success (Zhang & Zhou, 2010).

### ***Marginalization and Discrimination***

Chinese language racism is a type of prejudice based on assumptions and preconceptions about the Chinese language and culture. Discrimination against Chinese speakers, devaluation of the Chinese language and culture, and limitations in social status and opportunity are all examples of how it manifests itself (Lee & Rice, 2007).

In Canadian university settings, the dominance of English may marginalize students who do not speak English as their first or dominant language, including Chinese students. This marginalization may manifest itself in unfavorable treatment of non-native English speakers in terms of participation, which can lead to discrimination and emotional distress (Dei, 2023; Tweed & Lehman 2002; Xiang 2017). Dominant Western ideologies stereotype non-native English speakers as silent and passive participants in the classroom, marginalizing Chinese students' identity and culture (Xiao 2021). Chinese students in Canada are heavily influenced by Chinese values and culture and are stereotyped as being less verbally and culturally engaged in

and out of the classroom than domestic Canadian students (J. Liu 2001; Xiang 2017). Students are often stereotyped as being proficient in math but less proficient in English, an impression that can negatively impact their learning and integration (Guo & Guo, 2017; Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Yang, 2018).

Linguistic racial discrimination manifests itself in the form of prejudice against an individual's language use, accent, and language proficiency, and may even lead to ridicule and ostracism of students of Chinese descent when they use their native language in public (Dovchin, 2020; Wang & Zhou, 2021). As J. Liu (2001) describes, in the classroom, Chinese students express silence as a way of showing respect to the teacher or from a concern about wasting other students' time, but in Western countries it is considered as a lack of respect or lack of participation in the classroom.

Sterzuk (2015) writes about the “standardization” of English as the property of white settlers. This perspective can be understood as “reproducing the racial hierarchy of the settler state and serving as a symbolic investment in whiteness” (p. 56). The dominant Western educational ideology that expects active participation from students discriminates against many Chinese students, further affecting their social and academic engagement (Xiao, 2021).

Negative media coverage may frame Asian students as a threat (T. Anderson, 2020b), especially after the 2019 COVID-19 outbreak further exacerbated linguistic racism against Chinese students. Reports blaming Chinese students for spreading the “Wuhan virus” and the “China virus” have led to them facing more discrimination (ABC News, 2020, as cited in Dovchin, 2020). Such discrimination may have a negative impact on students' academic life and mental health, including causing anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Lou et al., 2022). Therefore, valuing the experiences of all language speakers is essential to achieving

social equality (Xiao, 2021). There is a need to further investigate these difficulties. Concerns such as stereotyping and ethnic and language prejudice that Chinese people face in Canadian schools may have a significant impact on their academic life and identity. These broad and diverse challenges require additional research and discussion to foster multicultural and multilingual respect and equality.

When investigating linguistic racial discrimination, it is necessary to consider its diverse and complicated causalities in various social, cultural, ethnic, national, and educational contexts that shape minority bilinguals' language practices. According to Skutnabb-Kangas, (2015), in many countries people who do not speak English or do not know it well are stigmatized and viewed as deficient. Similarly, people whose mother tongue is not a “standard” dialect of the spoken language are frequently stigmatized.

To summarize, linguistic racism and anti-Chinese racism may be problems for Chinese students in Canadian universities. Research and discussion may help to promote a fair and equitable multicultural and multilingual society. Technology also affects Chinese students' experiences.

### **The Use of Technology to Assist Learning**

The widespread use of technology has had a profound impact on the English learning experience of multilingual Chinese students. Artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT, provides multifaceted assistance but also raises many ethical concerns (Li, 2023; Liebrez et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2023). It is common for international students to use a variety of technological tools, including online dictionaries, translation tools, and internet searches, to overcome language barriers, improve academic performance, and expand their social circles and gain support through social media (Heng, 2018). Technology serves as a mediating mechanism that helps to

reduce the reliance on cooperative learning, especially when overcoming language and cultural barriers (C. M. Zhao et al., 2005). In addition, the use of technology provides international students with access to educational resources and information across geographical boundaries (Cun & Huang, 2023).

At a time when digital transformation is having a significant impact on universities and other educational institutions, the rapid development of generative AI is leading to the digital disruption of the educational system (L. Anderson et al., 2023; García-Peñalvo, 2023). The popular artificial intelligence program ChatGPT helps with academic writing and more by creating conversational, meaningful responses in context (Kung et al., 2023; Rozenewajg & Kantor, 2023). However, AI raises a number of issues in the field of education, including ethical concerns, issues of academic integrity, and the impact on academic thinking. The use of ChatGPT may lead to stress and anxiety among students, and while some innovations in teaching and learning have been generated, there is a need to pay attention to the negative impacts that they may lead to (Conner et al., 2023; Dwivedi et al., 2023; O'Connor, 2022; Sallam, 2023).

Developing a voice in a second language is a holistic and challenging process that takes time to develop. Many Chinese students may not have strongly developed a conversational voice in English, or a strong academic voice. As a result, Chinese students may resort to overreliance on sources such as ChatGPT to convey the meaning of what they want to say without appearing incompetent in comparison to their native English-speaking counterparts (personal communication, I. Gonzalez, March 2024).

Chinese students may use patchwriting (restating a phrase, clause, or one or more sentences while staying close to the language or syntax of the source), something often automatically assumed to be academic dishonesty. Second language speakers may imitate the

writing of other scholars and, sometimes, copy phrases and sentences that convey the meaning they want to convey in what they believe is the accepted academic form (personal communication, I. Gonzalez, March 2024).

It is important to study the experiences of Chinese students in using technology to support their learning in English. Doing so will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the needs and challenges they face in the academic environment, as well as the potential advantages and limitations of technology in meeting these needs.

### ***Recommendations***

In order to help Chinese international students overcome challenges, it is recommended that a pedagogical transition from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach that better meets the needs and characteristics of the students (Brown, 2003). Encouraging positive learning environments, greater development of competencies in the host culture, and clearly structured classroom learning processes are also recognized as necessary to help second language international students become more engaged in collaborative learning (Alfred, 2003; Poyrazli et al., 2002). In addition, developing students' self-confidence and academic self-efficacy can also help to improve the overall adjustment level of international students (Poyrazli et al., 2002; Xiao, 2021).

Overall, many Chinese international students may face multiple challenges such as language barriers, culture shock, academic difficulties, socialization difficulties, and discrimination in their experience of learning English at Canadian universities. In order to provide better support and improve the experiences of international students, measures need to be taken to address these social issues. Providing more academic support programs, creating

positive social environments, and valuing the experiences of all language speakers are recommended to promote students' psychological adjustment and academic success.

The next section delves into the coping strategies Chinese international students have developed in order to succeed in the absence of the supports I previously mentioned.

### **Coping Strategies**

Several studies have examined Chinese international students' concerns and challenges when studying in English at Canadian universities. These studies, however, have limitations in analyzing coping skills (Gram et al., 2013). One study focused on how Chinese students actively deal with academic challenges and how educational institutions and professors assist them in overcoming these obstacles (Heng, 2018).

First, Chinese students use various personal techniques to deal with their difficulties. They may seek to cope with academic obstacles while identifying appropriate stress reduction and mental-health-maintenance measures (Heng, 2018). They may overcome linguistic barriers and isolation in various ways, including reading repeatedly to boost reading speed and fill comprehension gaps. To handle academic stress and anxiety connected with a new setting, some students developed self-help methods such as procrastination, multitasking, and exercising (Heng, 2018).

Berry (2006) explains that Chinese students can also choose to integrate into their culture and society by trying to forget their background, actively integrating into local culture and lifestyle and strengthening their capacity to adapt to novel surroundings through the eyes of local students. Understanding the distinctions between Chinese and Canadian cultures can also assist students in assimilating more smoothly (Gram et al., 2013). Active participation in social

activities, such as co-op programs, can improve language skills, communication skills, and the potential to integrate into the local community (Gram et al., 2013).

Second, professors and fellow students also play an essential role in helping Chinese students cope with challenges. Listening attentively to international students and providing additional support can increase cultural sensitivity while clarifying discipline-specific terms, ideas, and illustrations, and providing comprehensive evaluations can promote international students' understanding and engagement (Yang, 2018). More contact with Chinese students and local peers and establishing study groups are also beneficial (Heng, 2018). Furthermore, institutional resources and community support are critical. Higher education institutions continue to improve academic support for international students through academic writing courses and language partnership programs (Heng, 2018). Technology assistance, such as with translation devices, Internet searches, and social media, is critical (Heng, 2018).

Expanding and improving services for international students, coordinating intercultural events, fostering student exchanges, and strengthening students' sense of belonging are important objectives for higher education institutions. Multilingual support and anti-racism education can help reduce language discrimination and enhance tolerance and appreciation for diverse languages and cultures (De Costa, 2020).

Higher education institutions must have deeper knowledge of their students' coping methods and patterns of help-seeking and how these experiences vary over time to increase the quality of student assistance, create partner systems or mentors, and streamline program operations (Carayannis & Campbell, 2011; Yakushko et al., 2008). Cross-cultural or diversity training and instructional training are suggested to assist teachers, staff, and fellow students in better understanding the international student experience and the root causes of problems and to

provide appropriate advice (Bezrukova et al., 2012). Finally, higher education institutions must accept responsibility for recognizing the needs of international students and offering holistic assistance to facilitate the internationalization process and reap the long-term benefits of intercultural understanding (Heng, 2018).

### **Research Gaps**

The existing body of literature reveals certain areas that require further investigation and exploration, sometimes called research gaps. Despite the scholarly work on the experiences of Chinese national international students, there are some notable lacunae. To begin with, there needs to be more cross-cultural studies on the coping strategies Chinese international students employ when faced with problems in improving their proficiency in the English language while learning in English, using available resources, and building their identity (Mao, 2021). An examination of their personalized educational encounters in Canada is necessary.

It is essential to investigate the experiences of Chinese students in improving their English while studying in degree programs, as well as the potential challenges they encounter regarding linguistic racism and discrimination. This has the potential to enhance our understanding and to help us take steps to create better cross-cultural learning environments for Chinese students.

In the realm of globalizing education, it is crucial to comprehend the educational encounters of students hailing from China to enhance assistance. This may help to broaden educational prospects, facilitate societal integration, and foster the diversity and globalization of Canadian society (P. Wang, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The facilitation of the academic English language acquisition process for students of Chinese origin is of paramount importance. It is critical to be open to, and inclusive of, international students, such as Chinese students, and to promote cooperation between higher education institutions, faculty, society, and international students to describe a diverse environment and to facilitate the construction of their varied identities (Benzehaf, 2023). Chinese students continue to learn English while studying in English at Canadian universities, which helps them achieve effective integration and societal advancement in Canada. Canadian society must demonstrate a proactive commitment to assisting with the educational requirements of pupils from various racial, cultural and linguistic origins. This would not only enhance the accessibility of educational possibilities for Chinese students but also contribute to their aspirations for academic pursuits, living arrangements, and professional trajectories in Canada.

The capacity of Chinese students to effectively manage and transform challenges into advantageous situations is important. This examination facilitates a more profound comprehension of their English language acquisition as language learners and their encounters while studying at Canadian universities (Mao, 2021). This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by enhancing the comprehension of the processes via which international students acquire English language skills and navigate the challenges associated with assimilating into the Canadian university environment.

## **Chapter Three: Research Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Looking at the wide range of magazines describing foreign countries as a child made me dream of studying and travelling abroad. I felt a longing to study and live in English. Now, I am studying in Canada as a Chinese student, experiencing Canadian learning and life. The experience of entering Canada was pleasant and exciting. However, simultaneously, I have encountered many difficulties and challenges: miscommunication, poor pronunciation, unconventional expressions, cultural differences, learning difficulties, and confused identity perceptions. Not only did I have such experiences, but I also found that Chinese students around me also had such experiences and feelings, which is the main reason that prompted me to conduct a study on how Chinese international students experience learning in English at Canadian universities.

I utilized my native language (Chinese) and cultural competence in designing and conducting this study because I am also a Chinese student. I understand and identify with the participants as an insider who can communicate effectively with them, switching to Chinese, if necessary, which may have helped me to collect more authentic data (Zang, 2007). My insider status helped me better understand and interpret the study results. This case study is based on a small Canadian university that had approximately 2000 international students (including English Language Program and Exchange Students) in the 2021-2022 academic year. This chapter has four sections: research design, research process, ethical issues, and limitations of the study.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research methods were chosen for this study because qualitative research allows researchers to explore and reconstruct their experiences and perspectives in depth with the

participants (Zang, 2007, p. 24). Avraamidou (cited in Gouvi, 2023) notes that data from qualitative research is collected in the participants' natural environment and provides a highly detailed description of not only human behaviour, but also of the participants' attitudes, perceptions, and thoughts, which can be described in detail. Compared to quantitative research, qualitative research is the best tool for revealing specific details of a particular case study. To explore the research topic, I adopted a phenomenologically-influenced individual case study design (Stake, cited in Gustafsson, 2017).

Complex social phenomena are difficult to isolate from their context (Merriam, cited in Mao, 2021), but through case study research, researchers can gain a better understanding of complex social phenomena (Mao, 2021), as well as a broader examination of a single individual, a team of individuals or a condensed unit (Gustafsson, 2017). Furthermore, according to Merriam (1998), each case study has “specific, descriptive, and heuristic characteristics” (p. 29), just as the participants in this study came from different backgrounds and had different multilingual experiences (Siggelkow, 2007).

Phenomenology emphasizes the understanding of an individual's or group's experience in a given situation by looking at participants' descriptions of their thoughts, feelings, and stream of consciousness (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach aligns with my research question. Having phenomenology as an influence may help to reveal the nature or underlying structure of an event (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), as well as to understand the experience and translate it into consciousness, capturing and describing how people experience a phenomenon, including perceiving, expressing, feeling, sensing, judging, remembering, and understanding negotiations with others (Patton, 2002).

## **Research Process**

### ***Participants***

Ten Chinese international students formed the sample. They came from different cities in China, spanning the age range of 20 to 35 years old, and were enrolled in either an undergraduate or a master's program at the university. All were studying on student visas. This convenience sample included seven students from the Faculty of Education, two from Electrical and Computer Engineering, and one from Kinesiology. Seven participants identified as women and three as men.

The duration of these students' university studies in Canada ranged from one semester to three academic years, and the length of residence ranged from four months to over four years. With the exception of two participants who were also able to use Cantonese, the remaining eight students spoke English and Mandarin. In order to recruit from different faculties, I contacted acquaintances and if they expressed interest, I sent them an invitation letter and consent form to invite them to participate in the study. Information about participants is summarized in Table 1. In the table, "Participation in English language programs" refers to programs in Canada.

**Table 1***Participants' Demographic Characteristics*

| Number | Gender | Age   | Academic Program                              | Previous International Study Experience | Prior Education Background  | Duration of Study (live) in Canada                               | Hometown (China) | Participation in English Language Programs | English Level Admission Requirements                          | Interview Format | Interview Language | Language Spoken             |
|--------|--------|-------|---|---|---|--|------------------|--|---|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| P1     | Female | 30-35 | Master of Education                           | No                                      | College in China  | 3 Semesters (since 2023 January)                                 | Guangxi          | No   | IELTS 6.5   | distance         | Chinese            | Mandarin English            |
| P2     | Male   | 20-25 | Bachelor of Education                         | No                                      | International High School   | 3 Years – 5 Semester (Since 2021 December)                       | Yunnan           | Three Months                               | IELTS 6.5   | distance         | English            | Mandarin English            |
| P3     | Male   | 20-25 | Master of Electrical and computer engineering | No                                      | College in China  | 1 Semester (Since 2023 September)                                | Guangxi          | No   | IELTS 7   | distance         | Chinese            | Cantonese, Mandarin English |
| P4     | Male   | 20-25 | Bachelor of Education                         | No                                      | International High School   | 3 Semesters (since 2022 September)                               | Jiangsu          | No   | English Studies 12 (Chinese International High school course) | distance         | Chinese            | Mandarin English            |
| P5     | Female | 26-30 | Master of Education                           | Yes                                     | University of Western Ontario- TESOL Program in Canada                            | 3 Semesters (since 2019 September)                               | Liaoning         | No   | IELTS 7.5   | distance         | Chinese            | Mandarin English            |
| P6     | Female | 31-35 | Master of Education                           | No                                      | College in China  | 2 Semesters (Since 2023 May)                                     | Hubei            | No   | IELTS 7   | distance         | Chinese            | Mandarin English            |
| P7     | Female | 31-35 | Master of Education                           | Yes                                     | Half of year college in Czech Republic, One-year online program in America        | 3 Semesters (since 2023 January)                                 | Sichuan          | No   | TOEFL 114   | distance         | Chinese            | Mandarin English            |
| P8     | Female | 26-30 | Master of Education                           | No                                      | College in China  | 1 Semester (since 2023 September)                                | Tianjing         | No   | Duolingo 120  | distance         | Chinese            | Mandarin English            |
| P9     | Female | 31-35 | Master of Electrical and computer engineering | No                                      | College in China  | 3 Semesters (since 2022 September)                               | Guangxi          | Three Months                               | IELTS 6.0   | distance         | English+ Chinese   | Cantonese, Mandarin English |
| P10    | Female | 20-25 | Bachelor of Kinesiology                       | Yes                                     | International High School, summer camp in Australia and Canada for one month each | One year ESL and 1 semester degree course (since 2022 September) | Neimenggu        | One year                                   | Duolingo 95   | distance         | Chinese            | Mandarin English            |

### ***Data Collection***

I employed two qualitative data sources in this research: Language Portrait Silhouettes and semi-structured interviews. I also kept a research diary and notes.

**Language Portrait Silhouettes (LPS).** Combining the visual with the narrative through the first perspective on Language Portrait Silhouettes, participants had a blank template of the body outline (see Figure 1) to fill in as they wished, stimulating the participants to think subjectively (Busch, 2018). Participants were instructed to imagine their own bodies and think about what parts of the body different languages occupy and were encouraged to express themselves in their favorite colours and symbols, such as flag colors, favorite images, or words. I explained some of the research studies that had used this method in the past, such as Dressler's (2014) study that suggested that language drawn closer to the head had more impact, while language drawn closer to the hands and feet had less impact. Some participants spontaneously added countries they have visited, countries they have traveled to, or languages they have learned to their language portrait silhouettes. In this study, three participants filled in the LPS before the start of the interview and seven filled in the LPS during the interview. The LPS, as a multimodal analysis combining colours, shapes, symbols and verbal interpretations, helps to explore bilinguals' linguistic identities, multilingual competence, and experiences of learning in English (Dressler, 2014), and also builds a model for expanding and interpreting different linguistic experiences and repertoire through visualization and description (Gouvi, 2023).

**Semi-structured interviews.** Semi-structured interviews are commonly used for collecting qualitative data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). They can lead to a comprehensive discussion by predetermining the initial questions (Patton, 2002), while providing flexibility in allowing the researcher to better understand the participant from their perspective by following

their conversation (Patton, 2002). An interview guide (see Appendix B) was used to give “the interviewer the freedom to explore, probe and clarify particular topics” (Patton, 2002, p. 277), allowing for more flexibility in capturing and assigning meaning to the experiences of the respondents (Rabionet, 2011).

Each interview began with a greeting and explanation of the purpose of the study and the interview process, followed by a brief conversation getting acquainted with each other. Participants then proceeded with their interpretation of the LPS immediately after they had drawn them, so that in a short period of time they remembered the reasons why they had drawn them in this way and were able to adequately explain their thoughts about them (Dressler, 2014). Questions about demographic characteristics, questions about the experience of studying in English at a small Canadian university, questions about bilingual Chinese students and questions about technology were then asked. Throughout the interviews, I also asked open-ended exploratory questions in response to participants' comments.

Multilingual students often find it more comfortable and practical to communicate in their mother tongue because they can express their thoughts and feelings more accurately without worrying about language barriers or misunderstandings (Zang, 2007). During the interviews, I respected each respondent's preference and comfort level in communicating in either Chinese or English and expected they might prioritize the use of Chinese. Talking in one's mother tongue may increase one's ability to think critically and creatively to answer interview questions more effectively, and using one's mother tongue may make participants feel more like themselves. They may also have a wider vocabulary. Mother tongue is an important part of people's culture and identity, and people can preserve and pass on their cultural heritage by talking in their mother tongue (Zang, 2007). In the interviews, eight participants chose to

communicate in Chinese, one participant chose to try English but shifted to Chinese five minutes after the start of the interview to better express ideas. One participant chose to communicate in English the entire time, although there were words that were not able to be expressed in English and the participant rephrased them in Chinese.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom and were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. Each participant was interviewed once. Interviews ranged from 34 to 110 minutes, averaging 63 minutes. During the interviews, I maintained a research diary and notes to record the main themes of each conversation, participants' comments, and my thoughts.

### ***Data Analysis***

In my research, to manage and analyze data I used NVivo software, which plays an important role in organizing, storing, and retrieving data (Bui, 2023). I actively looked for recurring terms, themes, and phrases by carefully coding and analyzing the text (Combs & Onwuegbuzie, 2010) resonant with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Most of the data were in Chinese and I developed codes in Chinese. I categorized the data into five major themes. After initial coding, I asked all participants three follow-up questions via email to enhance content; nine people answered and I entered these data into NVivo for coding. After the first data analysis, I reread the transcripts and added several new codes, then organized codes that corresponded to different aspects of participants' experiences in order to answer the research question.

I translated all quotes that were initially in Chinese into English using Feishu and DeepL software whenever I used participants' words to illustrate findings. I then smoothed the text to help with flow and cohesion and my supervisor also helped with editing. We were careful to preserve meaning.

## **Ethical Issues**

With the starting point of persuasion, authenticity and credibility are the measures of qualitative research (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). Participants received an information letter and consent form (Appendix A) before being interviewed. REB protocols, based on the Tri-Council Policy Statement, were observed. Specifically, after I introduced the interview with the purpose of the study, the topic, and the ethical issues, and after indicating that anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained in the thesis and that there would be no potential benefits or risks, they signed to give their consent to participate, knowing they could opt out of the study at any time. My supervisor and I will keep the data for seven years, and a copy of the research results will be held in the database of the university. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Board (Appendix D) before recruitment or data collection commenced. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), adherence to well-established research ethical rules helps establish and strengthen the credibility of the research.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The participants in this study were ten Chinese students from a small Canadian university, so the findings are not universal and cannot be generalized to the learning experiences of all Chinese students studying at Canadian universities (Şenaydın & Dikilitaş, 2022). Most of the participants were students at the Faculty of Education; thus, the findings do not represent the experiences of Chinese students in all programs or faculties. Although the chosen methodology and methods could not fully capture the complexity of knowledge and action (Hart & Gough, cited in Miller, 2021), the present study provides insights that may benefit faculty, universities, and future Chinese students.

The particular small Canadian university provides an individualized approach to international student support and education that may not be present at all universities. The small size of the university may result in students facing specific challenges and opportunities that are critical to understanding their experiences learning in English. The findings cannot be directly generalized to the entirety of other Canadian post-secondary institutions, but the study of this particular group can still help to shed light on common patterns and issues in learning English at a small Canadian university. These limitations need to be carefully considered when discussing the transferability of the findings, and caution needs to be exercised when applying the conclusions to other contexts.

## **Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I present the findings of this study, framed by the research question, “What are the experiences of bilingual Chinese students studying in English at a small Canadian university?” I document and discuss the major themes from the study. The 10 participants will be referred to as P1 through P10.

The analysis of the data led to the development of five broad themes: (1) The Language Portrait Silhouette (LPS); (2) The overall experience of studying in English at a Canadian university; (3) Transformation: Expectations, changes in expectations, changes in motivations, biggest changes and success; (4) The resources and support received while studying at a Canadian university; (5) The use of technology. I describe and illustrate these themes below.

### **Theme 1: The Language Portrait Silhouette (LPS)**

#### ***Colours, Symbols, and Location***

In drawing Language Portrait Silhouettes, participants expressed their language proficiency, preferences, sense of belonging, and experiences with a particular language in various ways (Terminology Coordination Unit, 2020). Participants depicted themselves using nine colours: red, green, black, blue, yellow, purple, brown, orange, and pink, similar to the set of all colours of a pride flag. Red was the most frequently used colour, with most participants (n=8) using it to represent a language. The majority of participants also used the colour red to indicate positive content. Still, there were exceptions, such as P1, who explained: “I flagged it out in red; red is half of [the LPS], it’s all this language and barriers.”

Lundell’s (2010) study found that painters typically used a favourite colour to depict a preference for a particular language and conversely used a disliked colour to represent a poor

aspect. This was also the case for some participants in the current study. For example, P10 liked the colour pink and therefore used pink to depict areas of excellence (see Figure 3) and explained:

This one (LPS) uses two colors to represent, half like and half don't like, and there's grey for what I'm not good at, and then pink for what I'm good at, and then I drew a spatula on it, and I like cooking better. Since I write with my right hand, I'm better at doing this stuff on the right side, and I'm not good at it on the left side. I'm good at Chinese, not good at English, and I like to play badminton and tennis....Then I like to play computer games and watch anime.

Overall, different colours represented different roles in the LPS, reflecting participants' feelings and perceptions of their learning experiences in Canada. Furthermore, the grey and pink colours are uniformly spread and mixed together to improve adaption to local life, which is consistent with Berry's (1997) integration technique.

### Figure 3

*Participant 10's LPS*



In addition, many participants represented themselves using the primary colours or as mentioned previously, patterns of the country's flag where a particular language is spoken. Lundell (2010) suggested that painters express their attachment to a language through the flag. For example, P4 (see Figure 8) used five five-pointed stars to represent the Chinese flag to indicate the Chinese language.

In addition to drawing the national flag, two participants drew LGBTQ flags on their raised hands, which is more accepted in Canada, but a sensitive topic in China. Two of the participants showed great interest in this, and they were actively learning, understanding and participating in knowledge and activities related to the culture of LGBTQ, which according to Duff (2011) is a manifestation of second language socialization. P8 (see Figure 4) said:

The thing that I wanted to highlight the most was this colourful flag in its hand...it stands for diversity, it stands for inclusiveness and being brave enough to speak out...because I feel like with this flag, it's like it doesn't just stand for the LGBTQ, right? And then it also stands for a lot more, just being brave and speaking out and expressing yourself and everyone being settled and that kind of thing.

#### **Figure 4**

*Participant 8's LPS*



While I had expected the LPS conversations to focus largely on language, many, as demonstrated above, explored cultural differences. Two participants' inclusion of the LGBTQ flag led to an exploration of the reasons behind the LGBTQ flag and why it is perceived by international students as representing Canadian identity.

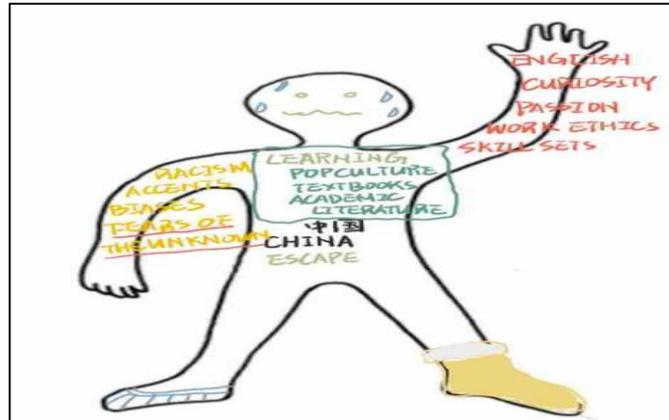
Participants had different understandings of different colors and the feelings of different languages behind them. The diverse meanings of colours need to be studied in depth at a cross-cultural level. I found little description of the meaning of colours in the LPS literature.

From an LPS perspective, the location the language is drawn in the body corresponds to the perception of the language. Dressler's (2014) study found that things drawn near the head or brain often represent "knowledge" (p. 46).

In the current study, P7 stated (see Figure 5): "My feeling is I feel like I still have to draw an expression if it's in the head, to be able to transcribe some of the emotions; it's just a very apprehensive one." At the same time, participants drew what they thought was influential on the head. P3 said: "I drew English on the head because I think the most important language for me right now is English."

### **Figure 5**

*Participant 7's LPS*



In contrast, hands, arms, and feet—body parts farther away from the head—usually represent “not knowing” (Dressler, 2014, p. 46). That was not exactly the case for participants in the current study, though some did make a clear distinction. P7 stated, “As far as it's just other, it's other parts of the body if it's something you can think about logically.”

**The Hands.** For the raised hand, participants presented different perceptions. Some drew what they thought was important; for example, P2 expressed recognizing the importance of money (see figure 6): “I would put money on my raised hand because I know that's the way society actually works.” Other participants drew things they liked on their raised hand. For example, P10 drew a spatula to show their love of cooking.

## Figure 6

*Participant 2's LPS*



Some participants thought they should draw positive things on the elevated hand; for example, P7 explained: “And then with the hand that's tilted up, I feel like I would want to go and write something positive.”

Other participants drew commonly used language on the upraised hand; for example, P5 wrote “English” and explained: “I'm studying at this university right now, and all the writing of papers and classes are in English.” Some participants thought the raised hand meant to say hello, as P9 described:

I mean to raise my hand and say hello to others; I mean I can say basic communication in English. I can do some basic communication with others in English, like saying hello. This is very basic communication. I can mingle with my English-speaking friends, so I put English here.

Participants also had their own opinions about the downward-facing hand. Some participants mapped part-time job experiences downward; for example, P5 said: “I also have a part-time job teaching English to kids, so this part-time job is half in English and half in Chinese.” Other participants thought the descending hand represented harmful content. P7 explained: “If you drop that hand, you want to go and write about some challenges or inadequacies.”

**The Shoulders.** Participants also had different opinions about the shoulders. Some participants thought that the shoulder symbolized supporting language, as P9 explained:

The shoulder means support. Mandarin is a good language because it supports me to read and write...so if the shoulder, we can say the shoulder supports me. Shoulders is my language of support because it supports my growth and education.

**The Torso.** Participants’ views varied regarding the ideas depicted in the center of the image. P5 thought the heart represented the closest connection: “The heart is my family and friends, who are all 99.9% Chinese.”

Some participants drew the university logo in their hearts; P2 stated: “My goal is to get a degree from this university; you know it's in my heart as much as it is in my mind.”

Two participants explained drawing Chinese in the stomach area because they liked Chinese food. For example, P7 described: “I would put China in this spot on my stomach. It’s just that my affection for my country has more to do with eating and food.”

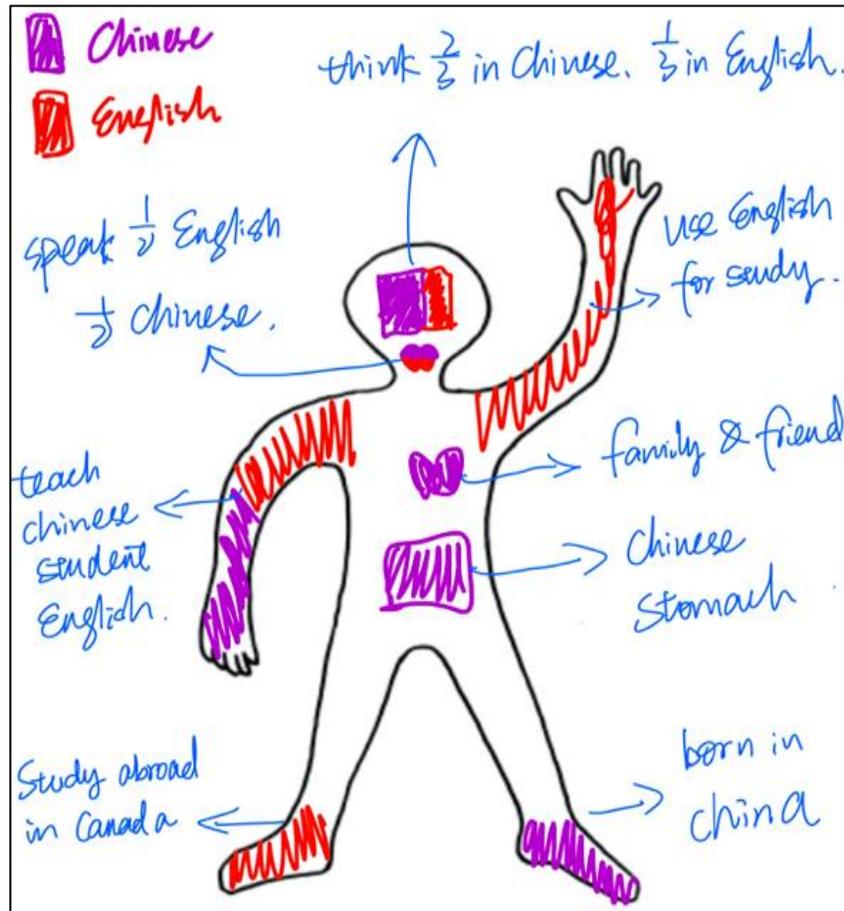
**The Feet.** Regarding the drawing of the feet, some participants thought that the feet were a symbol of roots. P7 commented: “On the feet, it’s really just that I want to feel that it’s like our roots, it’s our roots.”

Two participants represented a country by drawing different feet to represent coming from one country to another. For example, P5 explained (see Figure 7): “One foot is to represent

that I was born in China, and then (the other foot) studied in Canada, which means that my experience has been in two countries, China and Canada, both countries where English is spoken.” This sentiment is in line with Berry's (2017) integration strategy, symbolized by the shoes on the feet in the silhouette image of the language portrait, implying that P5 is both maintaining traditional Chinese culture and embracing western Canadian culture in order to better adapt to studying and living there.

**Figure 7**

*Participant 5's LPS*

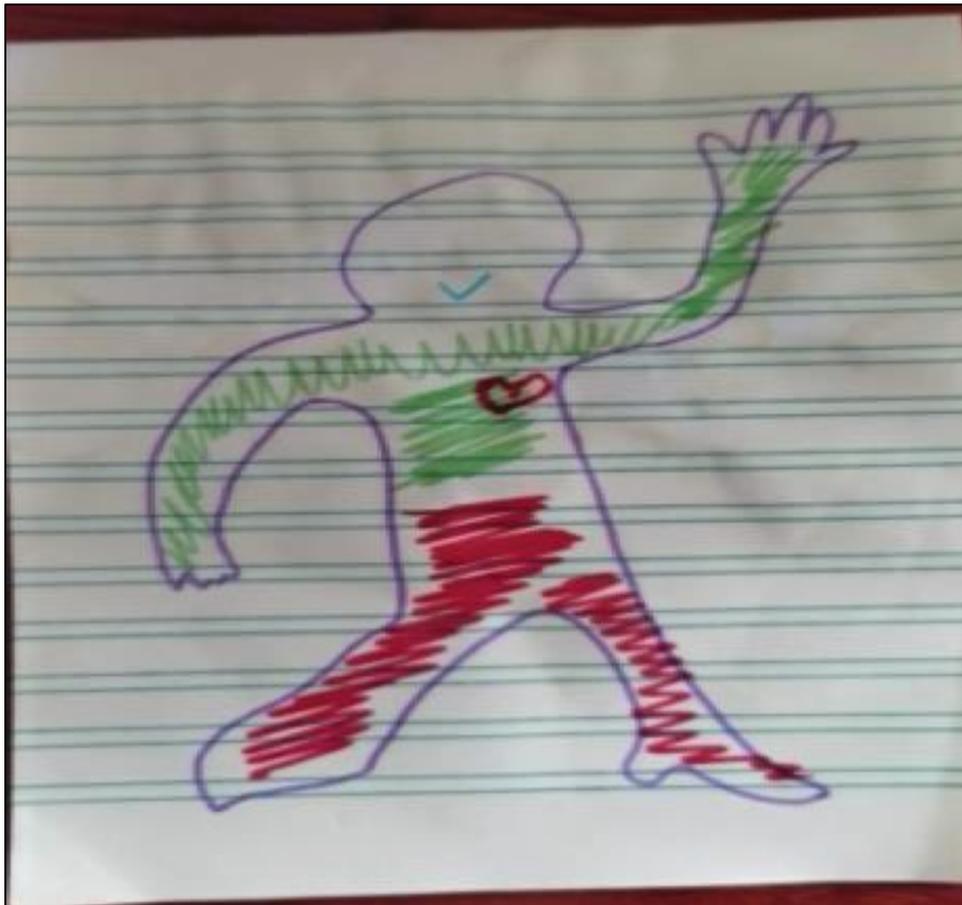


P7 commented: “The left foot represents the tradition of my country, and then the right foot symbolizes where I need to wear snow boots now in Canada.” The left foot has on a traditional Chinese slipper and the right foot a snow boot (Figure 5).

**The Mouth.** Four participants drew mouths; two drew smiley faces, one drew a downward curved mouth, and the other drew just the shape of the mouth. P1 used an upward checkmark to indicate a smiley face (see Figure 8): “I made a little blue checkmark, also near where this mouth is, kind of like a smiley face. Just overall feeling is still okay.” She explained that her overall experience in Canada is OK.

### Figure 8

*Participant 1's LPS*



On the contrary, P4, who had only lived in Canada for just over a year, used a downward checkmark to indicate unhappiness (see Figure 9): “Because it’s actually still kind of uncomfortable here, so it’s just a little bit of unhappiness, and then the mouth is just curved.” P4’s downward-facing mouth indicates that he is uncomfortable and distressed, as illustrated by Fox et al. (2013), throughout the complicated and lengthy process of second language socialization (Duff, 2011). P4 may be experiencing culture shock, as described by Zhu (2007). His struggle may be linked to P4’s reluctance to speak and socialize, which he described, which aligns with Berry’s (1997) marginalization strategy.

**Figure 9**

*Participant 4’s LPS*



**Added Objects and Symbols.** Regarding shapes, some participants drew images that they also considered necessary to study in English in Canada. For example, P6 drew a watch and explained:

I drew a watch because I think in Canada where cell phones aren't a necessity for me anymore, it's just that I'm often disconnected from people and computers, but I think the concept of time is essential for you over there.

This quote shows that P6 sought to integrate into the new local culture through watches and paying attention to time (Cheung-Blunden & Juang, 2008).

In terms of image placement and size, some participants depicted the length of an experience through the shape's size. For example, P4 explained, regarding the eyes:

The two dots on the head that are one big and one small represent that they're two eyes...because I haven't been here in Canada for very long, I'm just going to draw me on this side of the eyes a little bit smaller, and then on that side of the eyes, I'm drawing me a little bit bigger.

This description may reflect M.-J. Chen 's (2002) concept of paradoxical integration with P4's experience of being in China and Canada as opposites but harmonized on the LPS.

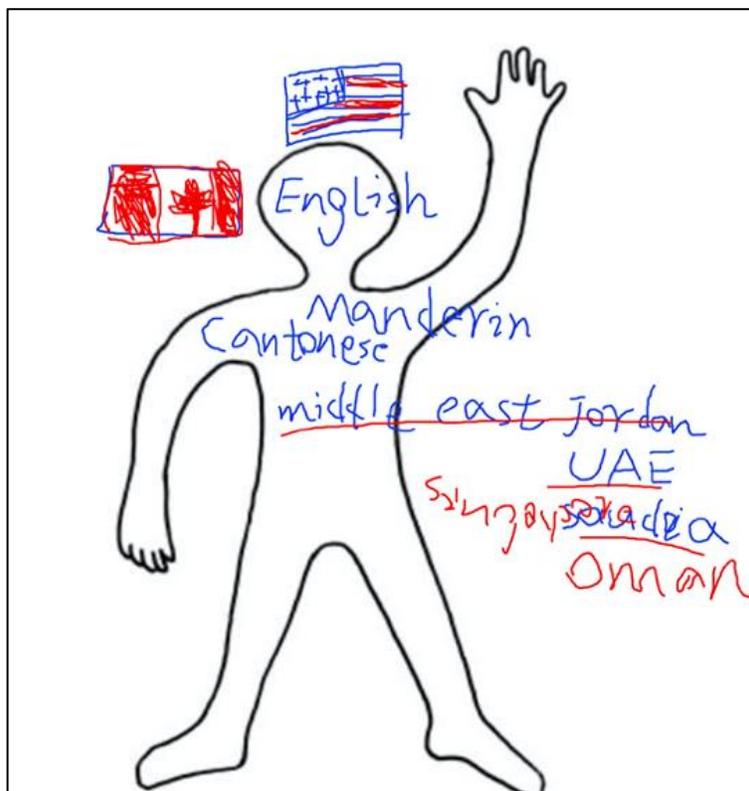
**Ideas.** In terms of drawing ideas, some participants depicted past experiences abroad. It is apparent that the LPS prompted participants to reflect on their experiences (Busch, 2018) and is an informational tool that can reveal a person's lived experience of language (Lin, 2023). For example, P3 described (see Figure 10):

When I was drawing, I was actually thinking about these experiences over the past few years, these experiences that brought me here to study, and also these experiences over the past few years, and then that slowly led me to where I am now....It means that these

countries were the beginning of my journey to use English to communicate with other people.

**Figure 10**

*Participant 3's LPS*



In addition, some participants' depictions were based on changes in appearance and clothing when faced with a new environment, indicating how individuals eventually learn about the local clothing culture and adjust to their new surroundings through changes in their external appearance (Duff, 2011). For example, P6 explained:

You see this (LPS) is very well equipped, with a hat, with thick snow boots. I think when you go over here [Canada], one's head and one's foot must be well protected...because it's really cold over here. If you wear the normal kind of boots, it's that cold air will come

up through that; really, I didn't notice that when I first started going over here, and I was really freezing and crying.

Some participants portrayed themselves based on their existing mindset. It was clear that P6 eventually overcame the usual negative ambivalence and transitions to a stage of seamless second language socialization (Duff, 2011). For example, he depicted the change from a tearful goodbye to a smiling welcome to his new life (see Figure 11), saying: “Actually, if you ask me to draw it initially, that is the first month when I first arrived in Canada, maybe he is a crying waving goodbye me, but now he is a smiling welcoming me.”

### Figure 11

*Participant 6's LPS*



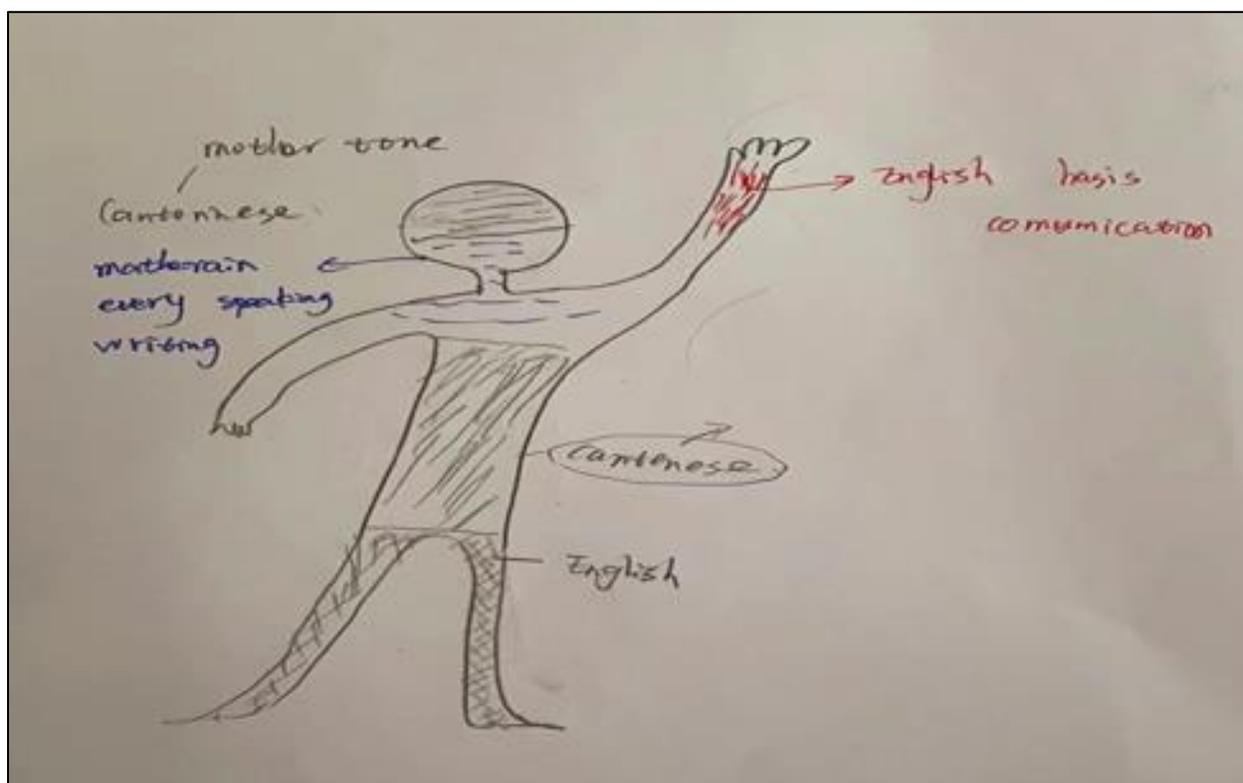
Some participants drew by comparing and contrasting cultural traits specific to China and Canada. It demonstrated how participants maintained Chinese culture while accepting and adopting new Western cultural standards (M.-J. Chen, 2002). For example, P8 explained: “Maybe at home, everyone just emphasizes the same; it all has to be the same, but here it's just special; everyone is different, so I think that's why I like it.”

As can be seen through the discussion in this section, each prioritized differently and drew different Language Portrait Silhouettes. P7 summarized, “Maybe where this information is placed on this person is where it is prioritized in your mind or how it is.” Because participants used the LPS to present a part of themselves, such as ranking priorities or selecting a language to communicate with specific interlocutors or in a specific communicative space, their linguistic practices are inextricably linked to their life paths and personal preferences (Lin, 2023).

Regarding the form of drawing the LPS, most of the participants divided it into two, but two, including P9 (see Figure 12), split it into three showing three languages spoken. These nuances help to illustrate the goal of LPS—to find the participant's whole language knowledge, as well as the identity and feelings underlying it (Lin, 2023). P4, whose LPS has two sides, said: “The yellow part on the left half represents my life when I came to Canada, and the part on the right is my life in China.” Participants demonstrated their understanding of their own unique English learning experiences by using different forms of segmentation. The drawing of the Language Portrait Silhouette appeared to provide them with an intuitive way to reflect and express themselves.

## **Figure 12**

*Participant 9's LPS*



**Added Text.** Some participants added text sections to their portraits to explain and illustrate. The LPS enabled participants to include a wide range of interpretations, from visual inspiration to simple representations (Gouvi, 2023), relating to the individual's language skills, communication styles, geographic and work backgrounds, personal interests and preferences, and cultural differences and challenges. These were related to their language learning experience on several levels. The added text reflects the rich experience of Chinese bilingual students studying in English at a small Canadian university. It helps promote a deeper understanding of linguistic and cultural interactions and provides a nuanced perspective. For example, P6 wrote the word “Sunny” on his chest, which he explained in the following way:

The cold weather does exist, but I just hope that everyone is the same as me, that if you get used to it, you'll still be able to live in that weather, no matter if it's a blizzard or

whatever, you'll still be able to live in the cold weather. The weather is a blizzard. As long as your heart is the sunshine, every day is this kind of sunshine body.

### *The Value of the LPS*

During the study, feedback from the participants suggested that drawing their Language Portrait Silhouettes, they gained a clearer understanding of their language abilities, thinking styles, and perceptions of their strengths. This process helped them assess their language expression and revealed their progress and challenges in the language learning process. This finding was consistent with Busch's (2018) opinion that LPS emphasizes visual and narrative first-person viewpoints, prompting participants to reflect and analyze subjectively. The LPS appeared to be a useful technique to grasp the participants' day-to-day temporal energy of language, as well as their sentiments about language (Lin, 2023). P1 said: “Actually, it [the LPS] is a little bit more graphic in the sense that it's quantified, just that you help me understand myself very well.”

Regarding the evaluation of English proficiency, participants were generally optimistic about their ability to express themselves in English after studying in Canada but were also aware of deficiencies in speaking. This finding helped to answer the research question on student experiences. For example, P1 responded: “Actually, it's just that if you study in Canada, it's not a problem to utilize this English language for the most part; it's just that the overall feeling is still okay.”

In the interview sections on the LPS, some common issues surfaced. When assessing their language expression, some participants hesitated with colour selection and placement considerations. In addition, some participants forgot the Chinese part when drawing, reflecting a

sense of inclusion in English learning. P1 replied: “When I stepped on a Canadian campus, I tried to think and speak in English, so sometimes I just forget Chinese when delivering my ideas.”

The LPS interview sections portrayed participants' differences in language learning and provided insightful perspectives for understanding Chinese bilingual students' experiences learning in English at a small Canadian university. These helped me to interpret the interview data that came from direct questions about participants' experiences.

## **Theme 2: The Overall Experience of Studying in English at a Canadian University**

The concerns of the ten participants in this study centred on their experiences of English. These can be categorized into six main areas: language barriers and academic challenges, culture shock, socialization difficulties, prejudice and discrimination, ignoring/marginalizing and misunderstanding, and feelings and learning experiences. These themes are described next.

### ***Language Barriers and Academic Challenges***

Unlike the two participants with prior study abroad experience, the remaining eight generally found the experience of studying in Canada using English to be challenging. The reasons for the language barriers involved the fact that the previous study was in Chinese rather than English, the more stringent requirements of higher education in Canada, and the fact that Chinese students preferred to communicate with their co-ethnicity rather than with other ethnicities. The latter may be based on feelings of inadequacy and self-perception of not having the necessary language proficiency to have meaningful relationships with people other than Chinese students.

Participants felt able to communicate in English at a basic level in their lives, but encountered difficulties in academic English, especially as new students, and most participants in the current study found learning English at the beginning stages challenging, unlike what Zang

(2007) reported. P9 said, “Using English in class in Canada was very difficult for me initially. Now, I still find it very difficult.” To overcome these barriers, participants realized the need to be more involved in activities and to increase opportunities to speak English. There is a difference between interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency (personal communication, I. Gonzalez, March 2024),

In terms of academic tasks, all participants, regardless of how long they had been studying in Canada, recognized significant differences in teaching and learning styles between the Chinese and Canadian education systems. This is similar to Zang’s (2007) participants. They agreed that Canadian universities are more academically demanding and require more hands-on and project work than Chinese universities. For example, P3 said: “Studying in Canadian universities is very challenging. You not only need to attend classes, but you also need to complete many experiments, projects, and tests and write reports in English. You need to invest much time.”

In terms of academic task challenges, two participants mentioned that they had difficulties in expressing their opinions and ideas in an educational setting, which may stem from a lack of English language proficiency (despite meeting the University’s minimum language requirement) and a lack of self-confidence in themselves, which in turn can lead to self-doubt and lowered self-esteem (J. Liu, 2016). P3 portrayed it this way:

Mainly my language level. My English level is not good, so it leads to sometimes many things are not explained very clearly, and then others do not quite understand what I mean. I want to explain what I want to say very much, but very much want to talk to others about things, but sometimes chatting there is no way to describe it clearly. Then, it

is difficult for others to accurately understand to get what you mean; this kind of thing is quite painful.

Guo and Guo (2017) reported that international students must overcome language barriers and improve their expression skills to be more confident in their academic expression.

In terms of resource retrieval and citation, one participant mentioned that one of the challenges faced in Canadian universities is the lack of awareness and ability to properly cite sources of ideas, considering the strict requirements for avoiding plagiarism in Canadian universities. In contrast, the educational environment in China is relatively less demanding in this regard. As P6 explains:

First of all, the awareness is a little bit shallow, and second of all, the ability is very weak, because I think that in China we may only be able to enter the Baidu Academic [a platform to search for articles], and at most we can enter some academic forums in the university, and that is that the academic libraries may have the resources to look up some papers, right? This limitation of resources leads to your poor searching ability.

This observation reveals the restricted situation of Chinese students' access to academic resources, relying mainly on limited online platforms and academic forums without access to foreign academic resources (e.g., Google Scholar). This narrow access to resources contrasts with the extensive and specialized databases and library resources offered by Canadian universities, posing a challenge to Chinese students who are new to Canadian universities.

This disparity in access to resources may lead to students' difficulties in fully explaining their own opinions when completing assignments, and in assuming as their own the opinions they have acquired after reading others' articles. P6 mentioned her inability to answer a professor's rhetorical question: "Where did you get this point? Where did you get this opinion?"

It also creates challenges in completing their assignments, increasing the risk of plagiarizing ideas. Participants may not have realized that the university offers workshops on academic integrity. We need to delve deeper into how Chinese students' lack of access to resources affects their academic performance at Canadian universities, and whether this discrepancy might trigger an increase in plagiarism. By understanding the resource access challenges faced by Chinese students in English learning environments, we can more fully explore the problems they face in adapting and propose solutions. I did not find these challenges related to differential access to resources and a concern about plagiarism in the literature.

In terms of subject learning, participants encountered problems such as difficulty in selecting courses and lack of clear guidance on syllabi and standards. In addition, different professors had different standards in terms of grammar and ideas about assignments, which also caused confusion for the participants. This was similar to Guo and Guo's (2017) findings.

Regarding language barriers, participants mainly described language skills, academic tasks, and subject-learning challenges. Language skills challenges involved problems with vocabulary, terminology, listening, reading, writing, and grammar. Among them, insufficient academic vocabulary, unfamiliarity with specialized terminology, and listening difficulties were the main problems. This finding resonates with previous findings (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Scott & Scott, 2015). In actual communication, participants found it difficult to express their ideas clearly due to their lack of English proficiency. This can have an impact on interactions with individuals who are fluent in the target language and cultural customs, a part of second language socialization, according to Duff's (2011) concept. P3 described it this way:

It's tough when it comes to learning. Sometimes when the teacher speaks in English, if he speaks a little bit more abstractly and uses some words that I haven't been exposed to

before, it's a little bit harder to—it's hard to understand. Because especially in our engineering program, we have to take that algebra, which is called applied algebra, and there are a lot of complicated concepts in it, like abstract algebra, which is too abstract. It's harder and harder if you say you haven't taken math in English before; it's too hard.

### ***Culture Shock***

Oberg (1960) defined culture shock as the anxiety caused by the loss of familiar social signs and symbols. As participants in the current study described their experiences studying in English at Canadian universities, several mentioned culture shock.

Despite the development of highly advanced technologies such as the Internet, Chinese students still face limited access to foreign websites and information and are therefore may be poorly informed about Canadian schools and culture. Participants pointed out their lack of understanding, for example, of the local LGBTQ culture and all-gender washrooms, which increased the difficulty of information exchange and increased cultural barriers.

There was a tendency for Chinese-born students to group together in the Canadian university environment, and a reluctance to socialize with local students, leading to socialization difficulties and difficulties in establishing long-lasting relationships. This is in contrast to Zang's (2007) study, which found that Chinese students who first arrived in Canada were more friendly with locals; participants in the current study perceived grouping together and xenophobia to be more pronounced. It seems as if they desired Berry's (1997) integration but experienced separation.

Most of the participants had not been in Canada for a long time and had a low level of understanding of local customs, life, and culture. This change resulted in their interaction with the locals becoming less frequent, especially if there were differences in lifestyle, food habits,

and other things. Added to this, the language barrier lead to communication difficulties, hindered learning, and increased difficulties in living in general.

Several described differences in educational systems and styles. The three undergraduate participants had previously attended international high schools in China. Despite their high school education being predominantly instructed in English, they felt that what they learned in high school could have helped them more. P2 mentioned, “The English program was very similar, but what I learned in high school didn't help me.”

Canada's encouraging approach to education gives more opportunities for students to express themselves and feel more equal and democratic (Zang, 2007). As P5 said: “Mainly they are encouraging education, which is quite different from home. I think it's kinda motivational; that means everything you say is right, and then it encourages you, that means speak more English, or to perform better.”

However, these participants also had difficulties with presentations and group discussions because they had never been exposed to such academic activities at a university in China, where independent self-study and completing learning tasks on their own are encouraged (Zang, 2007). This resonates with work on academic discourse socialization by Ho (2011). P6 explained the challenge:

Actually, it's just that if you're in China, we don't have much of these group activities. We're all in groups; it's either single or big groups. But over here, group activities are what I learned. Or you can go and work together with three or four other people from different countries and complete a group assignment and do pretty well.

The Canadian education system emphasizes students' ability to think independently, which differs from China's education style of pursuing test results and standard answers.

Canadian professors emphasize feelings, personal criticism, and reasoning skills (Zang, 2007).

Most participants appreciated and preferred the encouraging Canadian style of education, attributing academic difficulties to deficiencies in their previous Chinese educational experiences rather than to individual intellectual abilities. This was similar to Zang's (2007) findings.

P7's viewpoints were confirmed by exposure to education in Europe, the United States, China, and Canada, which was explained in the following way:

A lot of Chinese students don't love questions, and that's a big shortcoming because we're conditioned to think that you just have to answer questions, you have to wait for someone to ask you a question, instead of taking the initiative to get information or to take the initiative to make friends with someone.

My own experience as a Chinese national student adapting to the pedagogical approach of Canadian higher education resonates with Zang (2007). In contrast to traditional Chinese teaching that emphasizes student norms, discourages unsolicited questions, and takes a teacher-centered approach, Canadian universities focus on independent thinking, which can be a difficult adjustment. Burns (1991) noted that students moving from Asian to Western cultures may experience "learning shock"; that is, significant differences between Western university cultures and the highly rigorous and disciplined academic cultures of Asian countries. While Chinese teachers are often seen as disseminating knowledge, role models, authorities, and even parents, Western professors are more like facilitators, observers, curriculum designers, mentors, and reality critics (Gu, as cited in Zang, 2007).

Along with educational differences and small cultural differences, such as P8 mentioning a lack of understanding of shopping hours on Labour Day—emphasizing the impact of culture shock on daily life—P3 emphasized the difference in core values between East Asian and North American cultures:

I think it's like the cultural tip of the spear is pretty much the complete opposite direction, in terms of everyone looking at this kind of thing the opposite way, so a lot of times I think there's some interesting collisions on the way back to the brain; that is, if you go to talk to the locals.

In terms of language identity shock, two participants mentioned that one of the most significant difficulties was being influenced by native (Chinese) thinking to express English which required a mindset shift. Something similar was reported by Huang and Wang (2011).

P1 thought that studying in English at a Canadian university was an excellent opportunity to learn about the local culture, try to integrate with it, and reduce the culture shock. In the current study, unlike in Zang (2007), many participants felt that Chinese and Canadian cultures were in conflict with each other. However, they showed optimism and supported Ogbu and Simons' (1998) view that Chinese students were more willing to adapt to the mainstream society and viewed learning the dominant culture and language as a positive addition to their original culture. This is in line with Zang's (2007) view that Chinese students are very interested in understanding and learning about Canadian culture as they socialize with the Canadian community and students. It is also consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory that learning occurs in the social world, and through interaction with the Canadian community and culture, Chinese students learn to negotiate and expand their social skills to better integrate into Canadian society—also consistent with Berry's (1997) ideas about integration.

Despite their initial discomfort, participants in the current study showed overall positive feelings about their experiences in gradually adapting to Canadian post-secondary institutions and living environments. While the majority of participants highly valued Canadian universities' teaching styles that emphasized personal engagement and independent thinking skills, they also emphasized their need for more time for language training and academic instruction (Zang, 2007).

### ***Socialization Difficulties***

All participants reported varying difficulties in terms of socialization (meant here as social interaction with others), similar to Guo and Guo's (2017) findings. Specifically, the limited social circle for some was partly because local students dominated some programs (e.g., Kinesiology), and there needed to be more international students. Participants also expressed a reluctance to go out and socialize, possibly due to factors such as the weather, which contributed to their discomfort with Canadian socialization styles.

In addition, difficulty integrating into the local community was a common problem, with some participants noting that there were more local students in the professional programs and that it was difficult for international students to integrate. The phenomenon of social bubbles between different ethnic groups was also mentioned, with P3 suggesting there was little communication between various ethnic communities, which can lead to mistrust and conflict. The impact of the credit system and flexible curriculum was cited as a reason for unstable social relationships, with some participants stating that choosing different courses can lead to a gradual distancing of friendships established with classmates. P7 also noted that they were not accustomed to local socialization styles, including lifestyle and evening activities. Some participants chose to reduce their socialization activities for fear of embarrassment and loss of

reputation. In addition, lack of guidance and assistance was also an issue, because one participant who was taking online courses (P5) felt troubled by the lack of help from friends or classmates in the distance learning environment.

Overall, from studying in English at a Canadian university, participants faced various challenges regarding culture shock and socialization issues that required constant adaptation and adjustment. This placed new demands on improving both their academic and social skills. Academic challenges, language barriers, and cultural and social issues formed the core of this experience. Second language socialization can be challenging, but persevering may provide opportunities and benefits (Duff, 2011). These findings provide important insights into understanding this group's learning needs and challenges.

### ***Prejudice and Discrimination***

I found that although prejudice and discrimination are some of the challenges faced by international students at Canadian universities (Howe et al., 2023), participants in the current study generally reported that they were not discriminated against in the academic environment. For example, P8 felt that most of his classmates in the major were international students who understood each other's situation and he, therefore, did not feel discriminated against. Similarly, P6 shared the experience of not feeling discrimination at school and that classmates help each other. However, some participants felt that locals had different attitudes towards locals and foreigners in certain situations, which could manifest as discrimination.

There were also differences in participants' perceptions of discrimination. Some believed that discrimination exists in everyone to varying degrees (e.g., P7). Some students even had the idea that being discriminated against is expected, which P8 suggested was the view of some of his international-student classmates. Each participant, however, had a different attitude and

behaviours toward discrimination; some choose to ignore it, and some to take action to deal with it. For example, P1 describes the way to deal with discrimination as follows:

One time when I went back to China, I was in a hurry when I was transferring to Thailand, and at the Toronto airport, there was a young white staff member who didn't fully understand the entry policy of Thailand, and then said that I didn't have a Thai Visa and refused to let me take a boarding pass....the policy had just come out that Chinese passports could be used to get a visa on arrival in Thailand. Then he said you're wasting other passengers' time, and I told him you're the one who is wasting my time, so sometimes it depends on what the situation is [to decide how to deal with discrimination]. If he treats us in a way that's not quite right, I'm still going to stand up for my rights.

### ***Ignoring/Marginalizing and Misunderstanding***

In group discussions, some participants felt that their views were ignored and that they had communication difficulties, which researchers suggest could be due to language barriers or cultural differences (Guo & Guo, 2017; Ho, 2011). Misunderstandings also occur from time to time in life, mainly due to language issues. Participants reacted differently to this experience of marginalization and misunderstanding, with some choosing to ignore it, while others may have felt troubled. As P1 described:

Occasionally within the group discussion, and not to say conflict within the group discussion, you get the feeling that it's just when your opinion isn't being considered. There are times when the other students don't say 'no.' Your idea is that they tend to bring out their ideas and ignore yours.

### *Feelings and Learning Experiences*

Overall, the participants in the study showed diversity in their experiences of using English to learn at a small Canadian university. The majority of participants viewed the opportunity to use English for learning at a Canadian university positively, which included cultural experiences.

Some participants felt that by studying in English, they could improve their English language skills and better understand and integrate into Canadian society. This finding resonates with Duff (2011), who defines second language socialization as the use of language to make sense of multiple cultural surroundings, social circumstances, beliefs, emotions, and identity elements. P1, for example, mentioned that learning about Canadian culture became a valuable opportunity while learning English, such as seeing teachers and classmates in holiday costumes on Halloween and getting a feel for the local culture.

Other students saw it as a continuous exploration process, further expanding their horizons by socializing with classmates from different countries. Learning English in an English environment was also seen as an opportunity to improve language proficiency. P8, for example, mentioned communicating with a white landlord.

However, some participants also shared various difficulties in using English for learning in Canada. Language barriers, adaptation difficulties, changes in relationships, and changes in teaching styles were all mentioned, as P3 responded: “The experience was also challenging.”

Some students felt they had fewer friends in their new environment and needed help getting along with local students, especially in their specialized courses. Others found it very difficult to study using English in Canada, especially in the beginning stages, and said it may even affect their studies and moods. This is comparable to Mao's (2021) claim that second

language socialization is a complicated and varied process impacted by a range of settings. Lou et al. (2022) found participants had experienced emotional problems such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder when facing similar difficulties.

In addition to the challenges, some participants mentioned that learning English has impacted how they express ideas and make judgments about things in different environments. By learning English, they felt that they could express themselves more accurately and could better understand the language.

### **Theme 3: Transformation: Expectations, Changes in Expectations, Changes in Motivations, Biggest Changes and Successes**

As demonstrated in the previous sections, participants identified elements of Canadian culture or lifestyle in their Language Portrait Silhouettes, showing signs of transformation in how they viewed themselves in terms of their linguistic and cultural identities at the time of the study. Data analysis also demonstrated that their current linguistic and cultural identities were influenced by their original expectations as students in a Canadian higher institution, how their motivations changed over time, and the biggest changes and successes they have experienced.

Theme 3, Transformation, is divided into three subthemes: Expectations, Changes in Expectations, and Biggest Changes and Successes.

#### ***Expectations***

Participants' expectations focused on four primary areas that explain why they chose a Canadian post-secondary education, including successful graduation and finding a job, enhancing personal growth and development, seeking change and settling down, and multiple options for the future. These are similar to Zang's (2007) findings.

**Expectation 1: Successful graduation and finding a job.** Participants emphasized the role of education in social progress, so their primary concern was to attend classes, graduate successfully, and find a permanent job related to their major. This resonates with Zang (2007) and with Westwood and Barker's (1990) and Samuelowicz's (1987) conclusions that international students' experiences of studying in English in Canada may lead to higher job expectations and learning-related expectations of themselves compared to local students. Most participants (n=6) in the current study emphasized high grades and successful graduation as their first and most important expectations.

It seemed that most participants' expectations changed significantly from when they started their programs, though. Age became a major influencing factor, with older participants focusing more on career advancement and academic transitions, similar to T. Anderson's (2015, 2016) findings. Participants close to graduation showed concern about their job prospects, similar to Zang (2007).

A high level of English proficiency has been recognized as essential for international students to fully participate in Canadian society (Chiswick & Miller, 2003; Chow, 2001). However, language-related issues remain one of the major barriers to international student success in higher education (Nachatar Singh & Jack, 2021). For some participants, choosing a career-friendly major, acquiring relevant expertise, and obtaining a degree from a Canadian post-secondary institution were seen as the ticket to finding a job in a relevant field. However, there was also the realization that employment in Canada is related to English language proficiency, one's network, Canadian work experience, interviews, and more, and that the Chinese way of looking for work may not be applicable here.

**Expectation 2: Enhance personal growth and development.** One participant transferred from a college to a university in Canada because she thought a master's degree would be more helpful for future development. Other participants mentioned the expectation of improving their English language skills and wanting to master subjects more professionally to find a relevant job. For example, When asked what is expected of you, P8 said, “More expectations to improve my English, understand the classes, and interact more with the professors.”

**Expectation 3: Seeking change and settling down.** Unlike in Zang’s (2007) study, the participants in this study all expected to change their environment and settle down in Canada to obtain permanent resident status. This finding is consistent with why they chose to come to Canada to study. The favourable immigration policies influenced some of the participants who have decided to settle here. For example, P3 explained, “Because I wanted to come to immigrate myself, and then because the immigration threshold in the United States was too high, I chose to just come to Canada.”

**Expectation 4: Multiple options for the future.** The undergraduate students in this study reported feeling uncertain about their future options, consistent with Zang's (2007) findings. Studying in Canada provides them with multiple options and pathways. As P2 explained, “Because coming here will give me an alternative plan. I can get a back path in China if I can't stay in Canada. So having an alternative plan is better; it helps.”

### ***Changes in expectations***

Expectation changes can be summarized in two broad categories: significant changes and no changes. These are discussed below.

Notably, many participants' trajectories involved shifts in career priorities and academic pursuits. For example, P1 shifted from college to university because she expected better career opportunities, while P5 shifted from her initial academic focus to prioritize personal growth and career development. These shifts are consistent with Guo and Guo's (2017) findings.

Additionally, challenges such as course difficulty prompted P3 to redefine his goals from pursuing high grades to emphasizing successful graduation. The influence of age in expectations was evident, with older participants prioritizing integrating into the community and focusing on settling down and obtaining permanent resident status, similar to T. Anderson's (2015, 2016) findings.

Additionally, the transformative impact of the experience of failure is exemplified in the experience of P4, whose aspirations evolved from merely passing course exams to seeking higher grades after experiencing setbacks. These students' experiences were multifaceted, including career transitions, academic adjustments, age-related considerations, and transformative responses to setbacks, which together helped in understanding their challenges and growth trajectories.

Some participants' expectations remained consistent. P2 had been in an undergraduate program for two years and had no change in expectations, still focusing on learning English well, getting high grades, and getting a better job. P10's expectations remained consistent as well, and they stayed focused on doing well in class and ensuring passing grades.

The changes in expectations were related to the individual's experiences, age, and challenges, which are consistent with Zang's (2007) findings. Participants had a deeper understanding and changes in career development and personal growth after facing challenges and negative experiences. The age factor and academic experiences influenced their expectations

and goals. Participants gradually set more precise goals for their future careers and lives, and their personal growth developed.

Similar to Zang's (2007) findings, the current study found that the primary and initial expectations of all participants studying at Canadian universities were to do well in classes, graduate successfully, and find permanent jobs related to their majors. Other secondary expectations included personal empowerment, seeking change and settling down, and multiple options for the future. Most undergraduate participants chose this small Canadian university because of the high school co-op program, while graduate participants chose it because of more favourable immigration policies in the region where the university is located.

### ***Changes in Motivation***

Participants' learning motivation underwent significant changes as their time in Canada increased. Initial motivations for learning may have included personal, familial, or societal expectations, but over time, their motivations developed into higher-level academic and professional pursuits and cross-cultural understanding. This shift reflects a deeper awareness of their personal development and educational and career goals, similar to Zang's (2007) findings. For example, P2, an Education major, expressed her academic motivation to become a good teacher, emphasizing the desire to impart knowledge and guide teams of students. P7, a former language training teacher, felt motivated to come into contact with the locals after arriving in a small city, and was re-motivated to practice English. In addition, after speaking with a university employee, P8's motivation changed from initially focusing on studying for a master's degree and helping immigrants to focus more on improving her academic skills and finding relevant jobs.

### ***Biggest Changes and Successes***

While studying at a Canadian university, the participants' perspectives changed dramatically, and significant successes were achieved, similar to what Zang (2007) reported in his study. These changes and successes were mainly in personal enhancement, academics, and adaptation to the Canadian education system.

**Personal Enhancement.** Most participants emphasized their experiences of becoming more independent and confident, as Guo and Guo (2017) also found, regarding their most remarkable changes and successes. They reported making significant progress in verbal expression, independent thinking, and problem-solving. This independence and self-confidence provided opportunities to overcome difficulties and make breakthroughs. In addition, the experience of being away from their families and friends allowed them to become more independent and achieve successes.

**Academics.** Regarding academics, four participants identified achieving good grades (especially in math) and not failing their classes as the most significant success and change in their studies at the Canadian university. Their pride in their math skills and improved ability to search for academic papers demonstrated positive educational outcomes. In addition, through independent study and teamwork, they completed group activities and showed a positive attitude toward studying in Canada.

**Adaptation to the Canadian Education System.** In adapting to the Canadian education system, participants experienced a shift from vocational studies to academic studies. They found that Canadian professors paid more attention to students' active learning and enhanced academic exploration skills. Canadian professors were more willing to inspire students but required students to seek help actively, similar to Zang (2007). Participants' adaptation to Canadian

education was reflected in their change in academic motivation from an initial focus on immigration and diplomas to a gradual shift to recognizing the importance of professional qualifications.

These findings emphasize Chinese students' complexity and diversity in cross-cultural academic environments and provide areas to consider enhancing their learning experience in international universities.

#### **Theme 4: Resources and Support**

Questions about the university, professors, and prospective bilingual Chinese students found that all participants agreed that the Canadian university provided a friendly and encouraging educational environment. As an international student, I know that small universities provide a variety of resources and support, including academic advising, financial literacy, health, career, legal, and cultural services.

The patience and friendliness of professors and staff were also consistently recognized by all participants. They stated that professors, staff, and fellow students were very nice and patient in answering questions. P1 said, "I feel that people over here are quite nicer; most classmates and teachers will be more patient." In this theme, I document the role of universities and advice to universities, the role of professors and advice to professors, advice for prospective Chinese national students, and integration into the local community and students.

##### ***The Role of Universities and Advice to Universities***

Consistent with Zang's (2007) and Burton's (2016) studies, participants wanted the university to pay more attention to the unique needs of Chinese students to improve participants' well-being. Participants suggested offering courses to improve English, more Chinese cultural activities, having Chinese-speaking staff, and establishing tutoring groups. P8 stated: "I hope

they can open a language course to teach us English properly.” In fact, there are English language programs offered at the school's English Language Center, such as: Academic English Program (AEP), Intensive Academic English Program (IAEP), IELTS Prep Course, etc. The fact that these participants are not aware of them may mean that the school needs to do more to publicize them.

In addition, participants suggested that the university increase internship opportunities for Chinese students to improve their competitiveness for local employment. They emphasized the university's responsibility to help students achieve a smooth transition between studies and employment by providing work experience and support.

### ***The Role of the Professor and Advice to Professors***

Although Chinese international students actively sought help from their professors, consistent with Zang (2007), participants felt that professors needed to take more care of Chinese students. They expected professors to pay more attention to language barriers, cultural conflicts, and learning problems. Professors also require training in content and language integrated learning. That is, how to teach course material while promoting academic language learning (personal communication, I. Gonzalez, March 2024). For example, P4 said:

They still kind of have a more rigid kind of class; that is, they just don't have much communication, they just talk about the topics, they talk about the formulas, and then still they just talk about all kinds of topics.

Some participants expected professors to be more involved in the academic community of international students and to interact with them in the classroom, to better understand their needs and provide targeted support. Participants were happy to have a more relaxed and fair relationship with their professors in Canadian universities and a positive and encouraging

approach. However, outside of class time, they may feel relatively detached from their Canadian professors. In Chinese education, teachers must care for and develop each student as much as possible. According to J. Chen (2015), they take responsibility for students inside and outside the classroom and are totally committed to their work. According to Watkins and Zhang (2006), competent teachers address their students' personal issues. In contrast, Canadian university professors professional roles are largely confined to the classroom context. As a result, Chinese students prefer Canadian professors who focus on individual student development, and are enthusiastic, responsible, and helpful outside the classroom.

Participants' suggestions for professors' teaching mainly included slowing down the pace of lectures, providing more examples, detailed evaluations, and more explicit grading criteria. Some suggested that they include a review at the end of the class. This is in line with Ridley's (as cited in Hsieh, 2006) view that professors should design and implement courses that are tailored to the needs of international students to help them better integrate into the local community and university.

Some participants, especially those majoring in science, suggested that the professor should make abstract concepts more concrete by using icons or short videos. A number of the participants said that they did not know enough about the feedback and grading mechanism given by the professors, which made it difficult for the participants to identify their problems and improve their assignments or writing. Some participants suggested that professors should clearly point out and explain the mistakes in the feedback, provide more detailed comments, and provide some specific guidelines and models to help international students better understand the specific requirements of the assignments so that they can improve afterwards.

Some participants asked to be graded more leniently, asking that they be given at least a basic pass, rather than harsh details that would otherwise undermine the self-confidence of Chinese students, especially those who are new to studying in Canadian universities. Chinese students, as non-native English speakers, not only have to overcome the language barrier but also need to fulfill unfamiliar forms of academic tasks, such as group activities and essay writing, as also documented by Zang (2007). If international students are graded more leniently it is likely to make them more motivated to continue their studies. Ridley (cited in Hsieh, 2006) argued that professors should constantly question whether their expectations of international students are fair and reasonable, whether they can change the dominant ideology, and how to build bridges between the dominant academic culture and different cultural perceptions to assist students' integration into the local community and university.

Participants would also like professors to use technology to assist in teaching by instructing students on using relevant tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT.

### ***Advice for Prospective Chinese National Students***

For prospective students of Chinese origin, participants emphasized the importance of improving their English, being brave enough to communicate with foreigners, and changing their cultural mindset. They encouraged students to get more involved in the local community and student interactions and to learn about local customs and ideas in advance, if possible, by speaking with native English speakers. P7 advised, "You have to tune yourself into a giver's mindset for you to be able to learn the language." P6 also suggested that prospective students strengthen their ability to search and cite papers correctly and develop an open mind to better integrate into the local community.

### ***Integration into the Local Community and Students***

Regarding integration into the local community and students, participants indicated they tried their best to participate in various activities. Still, some felt alienated due to time constraints or off-campus residency. Volunteering was seen as a positive, but some participants mentioned that there was limited communication with off-campus students.

Overall, participants felt that their arrival in Canada brought different perspectives, knowledge, and experiences to the local community, something also reported by Knight (2004). They also positively contributed by allowing locals to learn about Chinese culture. In the future, they hope to continue to settle in Canada and contribute more to the local community.

By studying resources and supports, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and needs faced by Chinese nationals during their experience in Canada. Participants provided some targeted advice to improve their academic and social integration. They are well on their way through second language socialization (Duff, 2011).

### **Theme 5: Technology Applications and Learning Experiences**

As technology continues to advance, artificial intelligence and its derivative robots, such as ChatGPT, are transforming not only people's daily lives but are also having a profound impact on the field of education (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2023). In their English language learning, international students make extensive use of technology, such as online dictionaries, translation tools, and Internet searches, to overcome language barriers and improve academic performance (Heng, 2018), or to reduce reliance on collaborative learning (Zhao et al. 2005). The educational community, especially professors, have had to adapt quickly to this technological innovation (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2023).

Next, I discuss several aspects of participants' types of technology use, issues, impacts, experiences, strategies, and recommendations, as they relate to the development of their linguistic and cultural identity.

### ***Types of Technology Use***

The three main types of technology used by the participants in this study were artificial intelligence, grammar checking, and translation.

**Experience with Artificial Intelligence.** All participants had used the AI ChatGPT and had mixed experiences. P3 mentioned that “ChatGPT is powerful”. Some participants utilized ChatGPT for translation, as noted by P3: “ChatGPT is better because it can translate into any Chinese language and the translation is relatively accurate, especially in abstract algebra learning”. In addition, ChatGPT's reading speed was praised as fast, as P7 described ChatGPT version 4.0: “ChatGPT 4 can read PDFs: you provide it with the literature, and it can read it and summarize the general idea in a few seconds.”

Participants used ChatGPT to get ideas, as described by P8: “When I was preparing the assignment, I entered the question into ChatGPT, and it would give me several ideas, and I would pick the parts that I thought I could write about and that would be useful”. In addition, ChatGPT was also used as a check for assignment errors, as stated by P8: “After I finish writing it, I send it to ChatGPT and ask it if there are any questions and if there are any errors”.

However, ChatGPT's answers were not always accurate, as stated by P10: “Sometimes the examples given are particularly inaccurate, especially on math problems; I've used lookup answers and stuff, but it gives weird answers, so I haven't used it much”. P3 had a similar experience: “ChatGPT is powerful, but not powerful enough for graduate-level math problems; it never gave me the right answer”. Zhou et al. (2023) also expressed this concern about the

accuracy of ChatGPT and noted that it is common for ChatGPT to give a reference that cannot be found, and a link that cannot be found on the corresponding page.

Several participants in the current research study suggested that they would use the translation function of ChatGPT to learn English because ChatGPT can be translated, understood, and generated very quickly, so they use it frequently. It is apparent that, since errors can occur, students of Chinese origin should be careful to recognize and maintain critical thinking skills when using any technology (Adeshola & Adepoju, 2023).

Some participants also found the voice input to be slow, as explained by P6:

I tried to use ChatGPT once because I heard that it can help you practice as a speaking teacher and you can practice at home, but I tried it, and it wasn't perfect; it's prolonged with the voice input, so I haven't used it since then.

P7 expressed a different concern:

As far as I know, you can use ChatGPT to help you with the vast majority of things, and it's tough for the school to find out that you're using ChatGPT. The student can argue and say that I wrote it myself, so what's the basis for you to say that you didn't write it yourself? Especially for local students....So, I think liberal arts academics are hopeless....The job of a liberal arts scholar is to read the literature and then find a new point in the literature and then write the paper, and that's completely replaceable.

According to Adeshola and Adepoju (2023), cheating on assignments using AI-generated text is a new type of cheating, resonating with P7. ChatGPT also creates false information, and adjusting the sentence structure of the responses created by ChatGPT makes it difficult to detect this. Zhou et al. (2023) raise concerns about academic integrity and Susnjak (cited in Adeshola & Adepoju, 2023) suggests Chat GPT may reduce the value of the educational system, negatively

impacting it by undermining fairness and integrity. For example, teachers may be unable to correctly determine whether students are using these technological resources and might give out mismatched grades (Adeshola & Adepoju, 2023).

Some participants described concerns that their use of too much technology would lead to laziness and thus an overdependence on the technology, which could lead to a possible decline in academic competence. P3 explained: “if we always rely on it to write English text, we will lose our ability to organize the language and forget the spelling of words.” This finding suggests that future Chinese students should have self-control and use technology in a balanced way. However, when confronted with numerous difficulties resulting from a lack of fluency in academic language and culture, it is all too tempting to exploit technology to overcome them.

While ChatGPT has the advantage of facilitating academic thinking, providing inspiration, and checking assignments, there have been some negative experiences, including incorrect responses, slow voice input, difficulty in being detected by the school when used inappropriately, and concerns that overreliance on it may lead to a decline in academic ability. Perhaps because ChatGPT is relatively new, few studies report on Chinese international students’ perceptions of ChatGPT as a tool. ChatGPT data has a vintage limitation—that is, it is not based on the most recent data in real time—and there may be privacy concerns with Chat GPT (Zhou et al., 2023); neither of these issues was raised by participants in the current study.

**Experience with Translation Software.** Participants also mentioned using translation software in the study, including WPS, Youdao Translator, Google Translate, and Deepl. The use of translation software was seen to save time and increase learning efficiency. P1 stated:

In 3-5 minutes when I have to understand what he is talking about, I use WPS, which has a function of translating the document, and before the lesson to digest it quickly, I would use that and just look at it right away, over a glance.

Additionally, translation software was used to facilitate communication and more precise meaning, as described by P10: “When communicating, if you come across a word that you don't understand, you type it in Chinese, and then you know the meaning of the English word very quickly”. In terms of writing, translation software helps, as described by P10: “it can express your meaning clearly”.

However, there were some problems with the use of translation software, including the inability to translate certain words, such as abbreviations, Indigenous languages, and technical terms, as explained by P4: “Sometimes people over here will write some abbreviations, or some words in Indigenous languages, and it just might not translate”.

**Experience with Grammar Checking Software.** The participants highly recommended Grammarly as a tool for checking grammar, especially when writing assignments. Using Grammarly allowed for better correction of vocabulary, more concise and authentic writing, and better correction of grammatical errors. P6 described it: “Some of the little words I would not pay attention to, and I think a lot of the things that Grammarly just helped me correct”. P1 also expressed a positive experience with Grammarly in groupwork:

The overall experience is that the groupwork is a little bit more secure than before, and if I don't use the software, I actually write my own [essays] a little bit more redundantly, and then the software [Grammarly] can help us to cut out some of the expressions that don't quite fit in with the local customs, so it's a little bit more concise.

Grammarly was said to improve the quality of essays and save time; as P1 stated, “It's faster with the software; it takes less time”. By using Grammarly to check the assignments, participants thought that the scores might be higher, as P5 explained: “After all, I had a lot fewer mistakes in that assignment, the quality could be higher, and the scores might be higher accordingly”.

Regarding adequately using Grammarly to improve English, some participants mentioned the need to carefully read and study the correction suggestions provided by the software. P6 suggested:

It's nothing if you click on that correction immediately. But actually, Grammarly is very detailed, and it helps you to pick out your mistakes one sentence at a time. You don't just say it [Grammarly] corrects it and you're done; you deliberately take notes, put that phrase or expression, put it in a book, and review it yourself, right?

Overall, Grammarly as a tool for checking grammar was said to positively reduce lexical errors, improve the quality of texts, simplify expressions, correct grammatical errors and save time. This is similar to Ghufon and Rosyida's (2018) findings.

**Advice for Future Chinese Students about Technology.** Participants emphasized the need to understand the cultural context to obtain more accurate translations when using technology. P7 commented:

Because both Deepl and Grammarly are just directly translating or fixing your grammar, so what it does to your writing is the precision of what you want to express that meaning. Let's say you have some idioms that you won't be able to do with this stuff.

Additionally, participants suggested that students need to be attentive. P5 suggested:

It's just still students need to have that discernment that not every error that it [Grammarly] points out needs to be corrected; it's just still a matter of proofreading it again for yourself and carefully reading through that kind of thing.

Students need to carefully evaluate and proofread the content related to these technologies, not adopt all the answers given by the technology. They must also make sure that their use of the technology is in line with academic integrity.

**Advice for Professors.** Participants would like their professors to recommend appropriate tools or websites for students to help them better utilize technology. P10 suggested:

The teacher could give some suggestions and recommend just like dictionaries and stuff like that, just kind of electronic dictionaries on the internet. It could help students look up words and stuff like that, and the teacher could recommend just those sites if they know of them.

P6 also stated:

As a teacher, you, if you're going to say you're going to use it to a great extent, you're going to use a tool that you want to help your students with, you've got to master the tool first of all, and then you've got to have some of your tips on which piece you use it a lot and which is the fastest step.

Regarding further advice for professors, P7 emphasized:

The first thing that a professor has to do is to teach the students to use this tool is that the tool itself is an equalizer, it's a tool equalizer that can make everyone's starting line closer, so the professor has a responsibility and an obligation to teach the students to use these tools.

P1 also had advice:

I would suggest that the professor could have a smaller time slot at the end of each class, say the last 10-15 minutes, and then show it to the students. This is a common use of some basic functions, so it may be better for both sides because of our ability to improve and write something more in line with the standard.

P6 compared professors and resources:

I feel that resources are timelier than professors, but what about professors over resources?

The professor might give you a new point of inspiration...he'll take some examples of his students and give me, like he had a student before who didn't know anything about this, and he went and did blah blah blah, and he'll tell me about his student case, and then he'll give me a new point of inspiration from within his student case. That's the difference.

P3, in the current study, suggested that ChatGPT may replace teachers. According to Adeshola & Adepoju (2023), ChatGPT may not actively engage students as much as traditional teachers do because AI has no emotions, lacks human interaction, and can also have technical problems. It is evident that AI cannot just replace traditional teachers; instead, teachers and students should enhance their digital competence and teachers should moreover guide students to use AI (e.g., ChatGPT) as an effective tool to enhance learning outcomes.

**Implications for the Use of Technology in Higher Education.** Overall, participants felt that technology played a positive role in English language learning and their university studies, but also made several suggestions about its use, including knowledge of cultural contexts and developing skills of identification and reflection. Professors were also expected to provide some advice and support in their teaching to help students better use these technologies. The findings in this chapter are valuable for understanding the role of technology in university studies for English language learners and for providing insights for higher education.

## **Summary**

Chapter 4 delves into the diverse experiences of bilingual Chinese students studying English at a small Canadian university. Through the presentation of Linguistic Portrait Silhouettes (LPS), I have described elements of the students' complex process of adjusting their linguistic identities in a cross-cultural context and discussed their overall experience of studying English at a Canadian university, highlighting their linguistic, cultural, and academic challenges and their growth and progress in adapting to a new environment. In terms of transformation, I explored expectations, motivation, change, and success in Canadian higher education, presenting students' understanding of the higher education environment. In addition, I described the academic, social, and emotional support students received during their time at a Canadian university, which positively impacted their academic and life experiences. Finally, the use of technology emerged as a prominent theme, reflecting students' extensive use of technology in their language learning and social interactions, which provided them with additional learning opportunities and platforms for intercultural communication.

Participants' experiences remind me of Duff's (2011) definition of second language socialization as they are studying in English and striving to better grasp the local cultural milieu, social context, attitudes, emotions, and identity aspects, among other things. These findings provide insights into intercultural education and suggest targeted recommendations for universities to better meet this group's learning needs and facilitate their successful integration into the academic and social spheres. In the next chapter, the main findings of this study will be summarized, and some suggestions for future research and educational practice will be made.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

## **Summary**

This study provides a personalized perspective by examining the experiences of 10 Chinese international students studying English at a small Canadian university, drawing on a Language Portrait Silhouette activity that helped reveal students' experiences of learning in English. Most of the students (n=9) used Berry's (1997) strategy of integrative cultural adaptation, but one of them used marginalization strategies. The language barrier was the main disturbance, posing a threat to academic and social aspects of integration, and it was recommended that the university focus on student needs and provide English courses and cultural activities. In terms of technology, professors should provide real-time instruction and promote the use of technology in their disciplines, but different needs need to be considered depending on the discipline. Overall, academic, cultural, and technological insights were revealed through the experiences of Chinese international students, and future research should explore across disciplines to improve support services to meet the needs of international students.

## **Recommendations**

Attracting more international students to Canadian universities in the future will require greater attention to the particular needs of minority students. Chinese nationals with close to 100 000, are the second largest source of international students in Canadian higher education (CBIE, 2020). Canadian universities, professors, and faculty need to adapt the way they support and serve these international students. Since all participants in this study had issues with language barriers and were concerned about the impact of language on their academic learning and performance, I make the following recommendations to the university:

- Set up special workshops or regular English language courses for Chinese students, unlike the mandatory courses at the Language Learning Center that are

required for admission. These could be counted toward credits for undergraduate or graduate programs for international students or they could be taken for a small fee to help them improve their opportunities to use English in real-life and academic environments, to promote their language proficiency, to assist them in their transition to university disciplines in Canada, and to greatly enhance their experience studying in English.

- Organize more cultural activities centered on Chinese culture to encourage cross-cultural exchange. In addition to celebrating the Lunar New Year, one can consider organizing activities for traditional Chinese festivals such as the Mid-Autumn Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, and the Chung Yeung Festival, as well as traditional Chinese art performances such as dragon dances and Chinese dances. Handicraft-making workshops could also be run such as paper-cutting, Chinese knots, and so on, or lectures given on Chinese culture. Furthermore, Chinese study groups could be established to allow foreign students who are interested in Chinese culture or language to learn and communicate with one another. More foreign students from various nations can be drawn to engage in colourful Chinese cultural events, resulting in a diverse international student group rather than a single-country student group. Such a diverse setting will give foreign students a broader range of communication chances, encourage engagement and understanding among them, strengthen their English expression skills, and foster cross-cultural communication abilities.
- Increase the number of staff members in student centers, which, according to participants, should be increased since there has been a significant increase in the

number of international students, making it difficult to meet the needs of students from various countries.

This staff shortage is compounded by the language barrier, which makes it very rare or difficult for students to express their needs, while their lack of knowledge about Canadian university educational institutions makes it even more difficult for them. This finding resonates with Hsieh's (2006) findings. Having staff from different countries or languages working in the student center would be more helpful to Chinese and other international students in solving their problems.

With respect to technology, professors should provide real-time guidance. Professors should teach students to use writing tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT, providing detailed instructions on how to use the tools and writing prompts effectively and ethically. Professors can use and integrate these tools into their instruction to help students improve their English and advance the discipline. Different disciplines have different needs and standards for technology, so universities need to promote the use of technology in a way that is consistent with the use in the discipline. For example, technology that solves math equations cannot be recommended to Education majors.

These findings suggest that higher education needs to explore more deeply the role of technology in academic environments and requires educators to be mindful of developments in technology and to adopt appropriate guidance for students to ensure that they are using technology correctly and effectively, thereby assisting them in improving their academic standards. Universities must also create clear norms and standards around the use of technology

to generate content, such as how to properly use artificial intelligence to assist in learning, with clear penalties if technology is misused to curb academic cheating (Adeshola & Adepoju, 2023).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The Language Portrait Silhouette, as Dressler (2014) suggested, provided rich and valuable information in the interviews. The activity allows participants to review personal language use and specific experiences, providing more specific information for the research question (Busch, cited in Kusters & De Meulder, 2019). In the process of mapping the LPS, the participants' review of their experiences becomes more specific, presenting a diversity of expressions. This mapping activity differs from a typical interview by providing a more personalized perspective (Kusters & De Meulder, 2019). I recommend the use of the LPS by researchers who are looking at participants' experience in multilingual or multicultural environments.

Because of the limited sample size in this study, the results cannot be extrapolated to all Chinese students in Canadian universities. A bigger sample size from additional Canadian universities would be a welcome addition to this study. However, the study's findings and insights may still provide guidance for universities with international students of Chinese nationality in different contexts, and perhaps also for international students whose native language is not English, because they may share some of the same experiences as the study's participants.

This study utilized a phenomenologically-influenced case study methodology, which falls within the realm of qualitative research. Future research could use a different approach, such as combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, to test findings across a wider population.

Most of the participants in this study had studied in Canada in English for about one year, which means that they had stayed in Canada for a limited period of time. Most of their perspectives may therefore have focused on breaking through the language barrier and adapting to the local environment and lifestyle, with fewer thoughts on the process of integration. Future research could focus on how Chinese students adapt to the local culture in Canada and how the different cultural environments affect the students. A follow-up in several years with the same participants would gain a more comprehensive understanding of the academic experiences and career development of Chinese students.

As an international student of Chinese nationality, my perspective starts from the Chinese cultural background, and then analyzes, compares, and interprets the data with some personal bias. This study looked only at the experience of Chinese students. International students from different countries are in different situations, and more research would help to determine the needs of other minorities in Canadian higher education.

The majority ( $n=7$ ) of the participants in this study were Education majors with similar professional academic backgrounds. Future research could consider whether there are differences between students with different professional backgrounds, such as their expectations, motivations, and drawing of the Linguistic Portrait Silhouettes, and whether they are influenced by their majors.

This study only categorized motivation into those who did and did not experience change but did not explore the evolution of motivation. Future research could explore what factors influence changes in academic and career aspirations and how this affects students' choice of future academic and career direction.

Only a small portion of this study explored the resources and support that Chinese students receive while studying in English in Canada. Future research could focus on how to improve the support provided by the university and its staff to Chinese students, and even international students, while studying in Canada, so that they can better adapt to the local life and successfully complete their studies. The participants in this study, despite having passed the minimum requirements for English language proficiency for admission to Canadian universities, and regardless of their initial English language test level, felt that they had language deficiencies and expected more English language enhancement services. Future research could focus on ways in which universities can assist and support international students in improving their English language proficiency skills, to provide relevant and more specialized advice to prospective international students and better language support to current ones.

The goal of using Language Portrait Silhouettes was to gain a preliminary understanding of the participants' language identity, expectations, motivation, English language proficiency, and experience of learning in English, and how these had developed and changed over time while studying in English at a Canadian university. It did not seek to deeply assess English language proficiency. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' English language proficiency, future studies could consider using a more comprehensive language assessment tool, such as one that includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing in a holistic manner, to assess participants' language proficiency more accurately. This could allow researchers to determine whether, and how, language proficiency impacts Chinese students' experiences studying in Canada.

This study explores Chinese students' experiences of using technology but does not discuss in detail the specific effectiveness of technology in their language or content learning.

Future research could focus on how these technologies can improve English proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, respectively, and how they can be used to further enhance the effectiveness of students' English learning.

Because the use of AI is relatively new, and there are many drawbacks such as increased student dependence, privacy and security issues, and how to cite it correctly, future research could focus on how to overcome the drawbacks of AI and explore in depth the impact of technology in assisting students and professors, in order to understand the future trends of digital teaching and learning and the strategies for coping with them.

This study is based on the discipline of Education, and the approach has an Education perspective. Future research could use an interdisciplinary approach, combining multiple fields such as education, linguistics, psychology, and sociology to explore the impacts and roles of various aspects of the process of Chinese students studying in English at Canadian universities.

I have learned much of value about the experiences of Chinese international students and I believe there is much more that can be learned.

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## Appendix A. Description and Consent Form

[Jli12393@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:Jli12393@lakeheadu.ca)

[Paul.berger@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:Paul.berger@lakeheadu.ca)

**What is the Experience of Chinese National Students Studying in English at a Small Canadian University?**

### Description & Consent Form

Dear potential participant,

I invite you to participate in an interview to help me understand what it's like for you to study in English at a Canadian university.

Taking part in this study is voluntary. Before you decide whether or not you would like to take part in this study, please read this letter carefully to understand what is involved. After you have read the letter, please ask any questions you may have.

**Purpose:** My research looks at the experiences of Chinese students studying in English at a university in Canada. As a Chinese student studying in a Master of Education program at Lakehead University, I have had successes and have faced challenges, particularly related to studying in English. I am exploring the experiences of other Chinese students to add to our collective understanding and to be able to make recommendations about how universities can improve programs and supports.

I, Jiaqi Li, am the student-researcher. My supervisor is Dr. Paul Berger.

**Interview and the Language Portrait Silhouette:** If you would like to participate, we would begin the interview with the Language Portrait Silhouette, a short activity where you would fill in the outline of a person to map the way you engage with English and Chinese while studying in Canada. I would ask you questions about your identity as a speaker of Chinese and English and about your experience studying in English in Canada.

The interview is expected to last approximately 60 minutes. Participation is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to be interviewed. If you choose to be interviewed, you may refuse to answer any questions and you may stop the interview and withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, without penalty. If you agree, I will audio-record the interview and will keep the Language Portrait Silhouette to use as data.

**Risks & Benefits:** It is possible that speaking about your experiences studying in Canada could cause emotions to surface. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, we can stop the interview.

Participants will receive a \$20 honorarium as a thank you for participating in the research.

We believe that by exploring the experiences of Chinese students, we can suggest improvements that instructors and universities can make to benefit future students.

**Confidentiality & Data Storage:** Pseudonyms will be used to protect the confidentiality of all participants. Your name will not be used in the thesis or any publications.

Raw data will not be shared outside the research team and will be safely stored for seven years in a password protected computer in Dr. Paul Berger's office at Lakehead University.

**Research Results:** The research is for a Master of Education thesis at Lakehead University, which will be available through the Lakehead University Library. What we learn may also be shared through academic and non-academic journal articles, conferences, and reports.

**Researcher Information:** The research is being conducted by:

Jiaqi Li                      Master's Student, Faculty of Education  
Lakehead University, 955 Oliver Road, Thunder Bay, Ontario, P7B 5E1  
email: [jlj12393@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:jlj12393@lakeheadu.ca) tel: 807-358-1968

Under the supervision of

Paul Berger                Associate Professor, Faculty of Education  
Lakehead University, 955 Oliver Road, Thunder Bay, Ontario, P7B 5E1  
email: [paul.berger@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:paul.berger@lakeheadu.ca) tel: 807-343-8010 ext. 8708

**Research Ethics Board Review and Approval:** This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions related to the ethics of the research and would like to speak to someone outside of the research team, please contact Sue Wright at the Research Ethics Board at 807-343-8010 ext. 8283 or [research@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:research@lakeheadu.ca).

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have been fully informed of the objectives of the research.

**My Consent:**

I agree to the following:

- ✓ I have read and understand the information contained in the Information Letter
- ✓ I agree to participate
- ✓ I understand the risks and benefits to the study
- ✓ That I am a volunteer and can withdraw from the study at any time and may choose not to answer any question

- ✓ That the data will be securely stored in Dr. Paul Berger's office for a minimum period of 7 years following completion of the research
- ✓ I understand that the research findings will be made available to me upon request
- ✓ I will remain anonymous
- ✓ All of my questions have been answered

By consenting to participate, I have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

If you would like to receive a link to the thesis when it is available, please record your email address here:

\_\_\_\_\_

I consent to audio-recording of the interview.

or

I prefer notes to be taken.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix B. Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

Thank you for being a part of this interview and for agreeing to record our conversation (if applicable). I've started the audio recorder.

To kick things off, I'd like you to express your experiences visually. You have a blank silhouette in front of you—think of it as a canvas. Use colors, symbols, images, and words that mean something to you. There's no right or wrong way to do this; it's a way for you to reflect on your journey as a Chinese student studying in English at a Canadian university.

This visual activity is designed to help you explore and share your thoughts about the dynamic between Chinese and English in your academic journey. So, take your time, and let your creativity guide you as we dive into our conversation.



**Figure 1**

*Template of the body outline of the Language Portrait Silhouette by Busch (2018)*

### **Questions on the Language Portrait Silhouette (LPS)**

1. Please tell me what completing the Language Portrait Silhouette was like and why you completed it the way you did.
2. How do you feel about your proficiency in English as represented in the Language Portrait Silhouette? How would you rate your English level before you began studying in Canada? How would you rate your English level now? Do you think your English level has improved, regressed, or stayed the same since you started studying in Canada?
3. Can you share any insights or discoveries about yourself that emerged during or after creating your Language Portrait Silhouette?
4. When making your Language Portrait Silhouette, were there any particular obstacles you had to overcome? If so, please explain. Is it similar that any challenges or barriers you have faced in studying in English as a bilingual Chinese student? If so, please describe.
  - a. How did you learn to help you deal with these challenges or obstacles?
  - b. Were there any / any other academic challenges?
  - c. Were there any / any other personal or social challenges?

### **Demographic Questions**

1. Which academic program are you studying now?
2. When did you first come to Canada to study?
3. Have you ever studied outside China before? (If so, where, when and for how long?)
4. Did you study in the English Language Program before starting your degree program?
5. Do you identify as male, female, or non-binary or would you prefer not to say?
6. How old are you?
7. Where are you from in China?

### **Questions on the experience of studying in English**

1. How did you decide to study at a small Canadian University? What factors affected your decision?
2. What were your expectations when you first arrived in Canada to study in your degree program in English? (If the participant started with the English Language Program, change to: What were your expectations when you first arrived in Canada to study in the English Language Program?)
2. What is it like studying in English in Canada?
3. Please describe the most significant changes in your life during your study period in Canada.
  - a. Prompts: has your academic motivation changed?
  - b. Is your environment different?
  - c. Have your expectations about what studying would be like changed?
4. Do your professors do anything that helps you to improve your English while studying in your degree program?
5. Do your professors do anything to make the subjects more accessible to students studying in their second language?
6. What resources or support have you obtained, like family, friends, school, etc.?  
 a. How have these helped you to study in English?

### **Questions on being bilingual Chinese national students**

1. How do you feel being a bilingual Chinese national student at a Canadian university?
2. How do you perceive your identity as a bilingual Chinese national student studying in English at a Canadian university?
3. Have you encountered any challenges or moments of cultural or linguistic identity conflict while studying in Canada?

4. How do you engage with the local community and students?
  - a. What impact has this had on your experience?
5. What are your biggest successes while studying in University in Canada?
6. Are there any instances of misunderstandings or conflicts that you've encountered during your studies?
7. Have you ever experienced discrimination or bias in the classroom or the university community?
  - a. If yes, please describe more about Linguistic, Racial and Ethnic Discrimination and how you dealt with it.
8. Do you have suggestions for future bilingual Chinese national students in Canadian higher education institutions?
9. Do you have suggestions for your professors to help their bilingual students learn while studying in their second language?
10. Do you have any suggestions for Lakehead that could help them support Chinese national students' language and subject-matter learning?

### **Questions on Technology**

1. Could you share your experiences with Chat GPT, Grammarly, or other software programs to aid your English language education at university?
2. What effects have these tools had on your English writing and communication abilities?
3. Have there been any difficulties or restrictions utilizing these resources for your studying?
4. Has utilizing these tools enhanced your experience studying languages in general? If yes, in what manners?
5. How would you rank the help and direction instructors have given you in making the most of this technology for your studies?
6. How can professors use tools and software such as Grammarly, Chat GPT, and other resources to enhance instruction and help students with their English during their studies?

7. Are any student support or services available to help students use these tools for their studies?

### **Concluding**

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences studying in Canada that would help me to understand what it is like for you?

~ Thank Participant and say I will send the honorarium.

~ Stop Recording

## Appendix C. Research Ethics Board Approval Letter



Research Ethics Board  
t: (807) 343-8283  
research@lakeheadu.ca

December 21, 2023

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. R. Paul Berger  
**Co-Investigator:**  
Education/Education  
Lakehead University  
955 Oliver Road  
Thunder Bay, ON P7B 5E1

Dear Dr. R. Paul Berger and Jiaqi Li:

**Re: Romeo File No: 1470139**  
**Granting Agency: n/a**  
**Agency Reference #: n/a**

On behalf of the Research Ethics Board, I am pleased to grant ethical approval to your research project titled, "What is the experience of bilingual Chinese national students studying in English at a small Canadian university?".

Ethics approval is valid until December 21, 2024. Please submit a Request for Renewal to the Office of Research Services via the Romeo Research Portal by November 21, 2024, if your research involving human participants will continue for longer than one year. A Final Report must be submitted promptly upon completion of the project. Access the Romeo Research Portal by logging into myInfo at:

<https://erppw.lakeheadu.ca/>

During the course of the study, any modifications to the protocol or forms must not be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. You must promptly notify the REB of any adverse events that may occur.

Best wishes for a successful research project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C. Pousa".

Dr. Claudio Pousa  
Chair, Research Ethics Board

/dg