HOW ASSESSMENT PRACTICES INFLUENCE THE ACADEMIC ACCULTURATION
PROCESS OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS

BY
ANNA ZYUZIN

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education
in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Education

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
October 2012
Copyright © Anna Zyuzin, 2012
Abstract

Previous research studies have demonstrated that international graduate students experience various challenges adapting to academic situations within a new university community. This thesis reports on an interview study with six international graduate students who use English as a second language studying Master’s degree at one Canadian university. This study addresses the academic assessment and evaluation experience of international graduate students in the following four aspects: (1) their enjoyable and challenging assessment practices; (2) understanding of assessment expectations; (3) reflections on previous educational experience; and (4) psychological and physical factors in relation to assessment and evaluation. The findings indicate that these students’ experiences of assessment and evaluation procedures are varied and the academic acculturation process towards assessment depends on different yet interrelated factors: English language competence, cultural and educational awareness, and assessment literacy. All six research participants adapted to the host academic assessment practices and procedures fairly well despite the fact that they were not familiar with the expectations and requirements regarding assessment and evaluation at the beginning of their studies. These students learned about the host academic culture regarding assessment and evaluation through their own examination failure, instructors’ feedback, and peers’ observation. The findings also indicate that international graduate students need more coordinated support from university supportive services and easier access to information about assessment and evaluation expectations and requirements. Implications of the findings for effective learning and positive academic experience for L2 international graduate students, faculty and supportive staff, and for future research are discussed. It is suggested to organize workshops and seminars devoted to
assessment literacy for international and domestic graduate students, instructors and supporting staff in order to enhance learning experience and outcomes.
Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the support of many people; it is impossible to acknowledge all of you, and so, I do my best.

I wish to begin by thanking my supervisor Dr. Liying Cheng. This thesis is the product of a professional relationship characterized by academic support and personal guidance. Liying has taught me the necessity of getting things organized; the value of rigorous scholarship; the importance of synthesis in scholarship; and a few handy Microsoft Office tips, all the while trusting in my capability as a budding researcher. I only hope to be the academic mentor to my students that you have been to me. I also wish to thank my committee member Dr. Maria Myers, whose eye for detail and rigorous scholarship has proved invaluable to this thesis. Liying and Maria – as a supervisory committee, your professional insights and warm encouragement allowed me to complete this thesis. I will remember our conversations fondly.

On a more personal level, I am blessed with a loving family, amazing friends and thoughtful academic instructors.

To Dr. Penina Lam, Dr. Denise Stockley, Dr. Tom Russell, Dr. Linda Colgan, Dr. Derek Berg, Dr. Richard Reeve, Dr. Christopher Beeman your commitment to your students has always and will continue to inspire me.

To Brenda Reed, Marlene Sayers and Celina Caswell who always did their best to provide a supportive context for all the students.

To Queenie Chi Wah Wong, Wen Ma, Christine Doe, Jia Ma, my friends and classmates, you never hesitated to give me a hand when I had difficulties.

To my little daughters, Diana and Elizabeth, you always remind me why I have been working so hard. You are my sunshine.
Finally, to my husband, Dmitry, when I was tired, you brewed the coffee. In times of doubt, you offered witty jokes and assurance. When I was frustrated, you were an ear to listen and a shoulder to lean on. I could not have written this thesis without your unconditional love, unwavering support and endless encouragement.

To Kingston and Canada, the place that I have called home for the past five years.
# Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgments .............................................................................................................. iv

## Chapter 1: Introduction ........................................................................................................ 1
- Background ......................................................................................................................... 1
- Context ................................................................................................................................. 2
- Purpose ................................................................................................................................. 2
- Rationale ............................................................................................................................... 3
- Definitions of Key Terms .................................................................................................... 4

## Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................................... 6
- Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 6
- Process of Academic Acculturation .................................................................................... 6
- Assessment of Learning and Assessment for Learning ...................................................... 13
- Research Questions ............................................................................................................. 16

## Chapter 3: Methodology ...................................................................................................... 17
- Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 17
- Instruments .......................................................................................................................... 18
  - Semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews ..................................................... 18
- Participants .......................................................................................................................... 19
- Data Collection ................................................................................................................... 20
- Data Analysis ....................................................................................................................... 21

## Chapter 4: Findings ............................................................................................................. 23
- Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 23
- Enjoyable and Challenging Assessment Practices ........................................................... 24
  - Performing oral presentations .......................................................................................... 24
  - Receiving feedback .......................................................................................................... 27
  - Doing reflections ............................................................................................................... 28
  - Writing assignments ......................................................................................................... 29
- Understanding Assessment Expectations .......................................................................... 34
  - Understanding expectations regarding multiple choice examinations ....................... 35
  - Understanding expectations regarding oral presentations .......................................... 37
  - Understanding expectations regarding written assignments .................................. 38
Reflection on Previous Educational and Cultural Experiences ................................................. 41
  Developing critical thinking................................................................................................. 42
  Academic culture awareness.............................................................................................. 43
Psychological and Physical Factors ..................................................................................... 45
Individual Assessment Issues of Research Participants ....................................................... 47
  Samantha .......................................................................................................................... 47
  Rachel ............................................................................................................................... 49
  Sandra ............................................................................................................................... 50
  Amelia .............................................................................................................................. 51
  Pamela ............................................................................................................................. 52
  Valery .............................................................................................................................. 53
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 54
Chapter 5: Discussion .......................................................................................................... 56
  Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 56
  Research Question 1 ........................................................................................................ 56
  Research Question 2 ........................................................................................................ 58
  Research Question 3 ........................................................................................................ 63
Limitations ............................................................................................................................ 65
Implications for Further Research ...................................................................................... 66
Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations .............................................................. 67
  Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 69
References ............................................................................................................................ 71
Appendix A: Interview Questions ......................................................................................... 81
Appendix B: GREB Research Proposal Clearance ................................................................. 82
Appendix C: Invitation Poster for Research Interview ......................................................... 83
Appendix D: Letter of Information ....................................................................................... 84
Appendix E: Consent Form .................................................................................................. 86
Appendix F: Sample of Interview Transcripts .................................................................... 87
Appendix G: Emerging Themes ........................................................................................... 88
Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

As a graduate student at the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University, my research interest has focused primarily on teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language because initially I was a teacher of English and German prior to arriving in Canada. As an immigrant myself, I am very much interested in the integration and acculturation that all newcomers go through. My long conversations with my friends and classmates about learning and the educational system in Canada made me think deeply of the unique nature and scope of assessment and evaluation here. My professional background as a second language teacher helped me to understand the nature of linguistic challenges of second language learners in terms of assessment requirements at Canadian universities. There are many potential reasons that can possibly explain the obstacles that second language learners experience in fulfilling assessment requirements at the university level in Canada. Academic acculturation is one of the key reasons because second language learners go through the process of acculturation as newcomers to the country and to the new university setting. Moreover, they go through the process of academic acculturation because there are significant differences in the educational systems where they come from. Based on previous research studies, the process of academic acculturation and the assessment experience are interrelated (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004; Duff, 2001; Havnes, 2004). The graduate courses I have taken at Queen’s Faculty of Education, my professional background, personal experience and my conversations with other international students shaped my research topic and research questions. I believe the results of this Master’s thesis are helpful and useful for international
students, university support staff and instructors in terms of enhancing the teaching and
learning process.

Context

The number of international students coming to Canada to undertake graduate courses
has been constantly growing during the past decade. The Canadian Bureau for International
Education Research (2008) reports that overall 178,000 international students study in
Canadian higher education institutions: 89,000 undergraduates and 83,660 graduate students.
Canada is one of the world’s top providers of education to international students, so the total
post-secondary student enrollment contains a sizeable proportion of international students at
the undergraduate and graduate levels: 12.3% and 4.6% from the total student population
respectively (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2009; Citizenship and
Immigration Canada, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2007). There is much to be gained from this
international contact for both Canada and the international students: the students acquire an
international education, experiences and contacts, while Canada benefits in terms of financial
gains, enhanced international reputation, and increased commercial, trade and diplomatic
linkages (Sam & Berry, 2006). Therefore, it is important and mutually beneficial to research
the experiences and challenges international students encounter in adapting to Canadian
academia.

Purpose

Research has shown that learning and performance are best fostered when students
engage in assessment practices that focus on specific goals or criterion for performance and
target an appropriate level of challenge relative to students’ current performance. Assessment
should be of sufficient quantity and frequency to meet performance criteria (Ambrosa, S.,
Bridges, M., Lovett, M., DiPietro, M., & Norman, M. 2010; Havnes, 2004). Moreover, the
success of the learning process for second language students depends directly on successful academic acculturation (Duff, 2001; Morita, 2000).

During the last few decades, there have been many studies devoted to academic acculturation of international students associated with enhancing their learning and English language proficiency at Canadian universities (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Berman & Cheng 2001; Buddington, 2002; Cheng & Fox, 2008; Huang, 2010), but there is limited evidence as to how assessment practices influence the process of academic acculturation of these students. The aim of this study is to explore how assessment practices used by professors influence the academic acculturation of international graduate students at one Canadian University.

**Rationale**

In higher education, one of the most important teaching and learning issues is the choice of assessment methods and procedures, and its impact on students’ learning (Tian, 2007). Havnes (2004) pointed out that “Improving student learning implies improving the assessment system. Teachers often assume that it is their teaching that directs student learning. In practice, assessment directs student learning because it is the assessment system that defines what is worth learning” (p.1). Many studies examine the assessment accommodations for second language students to enhance their school experience. However, there is almost little evidence of how assessment and evaluation procedures influence the academic acculturation of the second language learners at the university level (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis 2004; Morita, 2000). If the assessment as an essential part of the learning process directs students’ learning (Havnes, 2004), it is logical to predict that assessment and academic acculturation of international students are interrelated.
Definitions of Key Terms

**Academic Acculturation.** In the current study, I have adopted the definition of academic acculturation as “the dynamic adaptation processes of linguistically and culturally diverse students engaging with the academic study culture” (Cheng & Fox, 2008, p.308). Cheng and Fox argue that “such acculturation processes are evident in how L2 learners account for what is happening and what it means, what they perceive, what they choose to appropriate, and how they interpret their expectations of and experiences in university classrooms” (Cheng & Fox, 2008 p. 309). Moreover, acculturation is not so much a state as a process (Ivanic, 2006), neither static nor fixed, but rather, as Morita (2000) suggests, “a potentially complex and conflictual process of negotiation” (p.304).

**L1.** In this study, L1 students refer to English as first language learners.

**L2.** L2 students refer to English as second language learners. For the sake of clarity, I will use ‘international’ students throughout the thesis to refer to both international students who come to Canada on a student visa, and those new immigrants to Canada. They are L2 students within the context of English content instruction.

**Assessment Practices.** In the context of this research study, I will use the term Assessment Practices broadly meaning all kinds of assessment procedures required at the graduate level, for example, essays, oral presentations, article reviews, critical reviews, examinations, group projects, research proposals, blogging, and oral and written reflections on assigned readings.

**Culture shock.** Cultural shock is the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, or to a move between social environments. There is no true way to entirely prevent culture shock, as
individuals in any society are personally affected by cultural contrasts differently (Macionis & Gerber, 2010).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Research has shown that learning and performance are best fostered when students engage in assessment practices that focus on specific goals or criterion for performance, target an appropriate level of challenge relative to students’ current performance, and is of sufficient quantity and frequency to meet the performance criteria (Ambrosa, S., Bridges, M., Lovett, M., DiPietro, M., & Norman, M. 2010; Havnes, 2004). Moreover, the success of the learning process for L2 students depends directly on successful academic acculturation (Duff, 2001; Morita, 2000). The chapter explores such relationship between academic acculturation of international students and assessment practices used in higher education.

Process of Academic Acculturation

To examine how L2 learners are acculturated successfully into academic discourse, scholars in applied linguistics have taken a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. This area of research has at least two major orientations as suggested by Morita (2004). One is product-oriented approach that focuses on identifying what learners need to know to participate competently in a given academic community. A common type of product-oriented research uses a need-analysis survey to find out what kind of academic tasks are assigned in various disciplines and what academic and language skills are required to successfully complete those tasks (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004; Ferris & Tagg, 1996a, 1996b). Another product-oriented approach, which has been popular in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), is genre-based research (Swales, 1990). These lines of research tend to treat disciplinary acculturation, although often implicitly, as one-way assimilation into relatively stable academic community with fixed rules and conventions (Morita, 2004).
The other approach is process oriented, which asks and investigates how students are acculturated during their academic studies. Researchers using this approach explore the situated or socially and temporally constructed process by which newcomers such as international students become acculturated into academic discourses at various levels of schooling (Duff, 2001; Morita, 2000; Spack, 1997) and at the university level (Cheng & Fox, 2008). Applying primarily qualitative research, “researchers have shown that academic acculturation is not simply a matter of acquiring pregiven knowledge and set of skills but involves a complex process of negotiating identities, cultures, or power relations” (Morita, 2004).

Research has shown that differences in academic expectations have resulted in misunderstanding and some confusion for both instructors (and professors) and international students studying in the English-speaking universities (Cheng & Fox, 2008; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Leki, 1995; Morita, 2000; Robinson 1992). In particular, classroom interaction analysis has traditionally relied on observable classroom behavior focusing on language skills neglecting participants’ views and intentions (Kumaravadivelu, 1999). Therefore, such analysis yields limited knowledge about L2 learners’ perspectives. This study obtains more evidence about the L2 students’ perceptions particularly regarding to assessment and evaluation practices and their impact on the academic acculturation.

Scholars use adjustment, acculturation, socialization and assimilation interchangeably to denote behavior, value, and attitude changes associated with feelings of mental health and social integration (Kagan & Cohen, 1990). In recent years, a growing body of research literature has increasingly examined the academic acculturation processes of second language graduate students in higher education environment (Cheng & Fox, 2008; Kagan & Cohen, 1990; Leki, 1995; Morita, 2000; Spack, 1997). Cheng & Fox (2008) investigated L2
university students’ perceptions of academic acculturation and the role of English for Academic Purposes instruction. Their findings suggested that the students who characterized their academic engagement as successful had typically developed more strategic learning and social skills as part of their acculturation process. Kagan & Cohen (1990) examined international students regarding their cultural adjustment. The main findings suggested that cultural adjustment is simultaneously affected by their employment level, language spoken at home, having both L1 and L2 friends, internal decision making and work value. Leki (1995) researched the academic literacy experiences of L2 students in light of the strategies they brought to their first academic experience in one American university, and the strategies they developed in response to the writing demands they encountered in their regular courses across the curriculum. In the tradition of qualitative research, this report is a narrative of L2 students’ experiences, giving a picture not only of students learning to write but also human beings negotiating the exhilarating and sometimes puzzling demands of academic life. Morita (2000) explored the discourse socialization of L2 graduate students through their engagement in oral academic presentations. Findings suggested that both L1 and L2 gradually “became apprenticed into oral academic discourses through ongoing negotiations with instructors and peers as they prepared for, observed, performed and review oral academic presentations” (p.279). Spack (1997) examined the reading and writing strategies of L2 student over a three year period. Her data analysis suggested that L2 learner’s educational background shaped her approach to academic discourse practices and the way she theorized about those practices. L2 learner’s reflections and analysis of her own experience changed over time, raising questions about cross-cultural interpretations of student learning.
There are a great deal of familiar studies written on the relationship between language acquisition and acculturation processes since Schumann’s (1976) work that defined an acculturation model for second language acquisition. Schumann argued that a learner’s potential to learn a second language is directly related to the degree to which he or she acculturates to the target language (TL) group. In defining his acculturation model, Schumann did not specifically consider academic cultures, which was researched by Cheng and Fox (2008) showing the L2 students perceptions of the factors contributing to their academic acculturation, such as learning strategies, academic resources, EAP and English program support. However, as Purves (1986) points out, “instruction in any discipline is acculturation or the bringing of the student into the interpretative community of the discipline” (Purves, 1986, p.39). Indeed, the term acculturation has often been used in describing the relation between L2 students’ cultural adaptation and academic achievement (e.g. Berry, 1997; Buddington, 2002).

In the current study, I have thus adopted the definition of academic acculturation as “the dynamic adaptation processes of linguistically and culturally diverse students engaging with the academic study culture” (Cheng & Fox, 2008, p.308). Cheng and Fox argue that “such acculturation processes are evident in how L2 learners account for what is happening and what it means, what they perceive, what they choose to appropriate, and how they interpret their expectations of and experiences in university classrooms (p. 309). Moreover, acculturation is “not so much a state as a process” (Ivanic, 2006), neither static nor fixed, but rather, as Morita (2000) suggests, “a potentially complex and conflictual process of negotiation” (p.304). Assessment and evaluation procedures and practices could be a part of that complex and conflictual process leading to successful academic acculturation.
A number of L2 studies have employed the theoretical perspective of language socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) and investigated the fundamental link between L2 learning and its sociocultural context (Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2010; Duff, 1995; Morita, 2000). In higher education, many researchers have explored the academic acculturation of L2 university students, mostly through writing (Huang, 2010; Leki, 1995; Spack, 1997) and only few through speaking (Morita, 2000). Some studies examined the consistency between the academic skills required for engagement with the demands of course work at the graduate level, and some on the skills that international and immigrant students particularly find difficult (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis 2004; Huang 2010). Two studies at the University of Alberta revealed that speaking and writing were found to be the main challenges for international students (Berman & Cheng, 2001; Chacon, 1998). In this Canadian survey, Berman and Cheng (2001) administered a need assessment survey to both L2 undergraduate and graduate students and L1 students for the purpose of comparison. They received valid questionnaires from 53 L2 undergraduate students and 60 L2 graduate students. Results indicated that the most difficult language skills for L2 students as a whole were academic oral communication (giving presentations, participating in class discussions) and writing (examinations, essays, and reports), (Berman & Cheng, 2001).

It is important to point out here, that listening and reading were cited by the L2 students as the least difficult skills (Jordan, 2005), but the results from the Huang study indicated otherwise (Huang, 2010). He writes, “Both instructor and student respondents across divisions and levels pointed out issues with reading, specifically critical reading” (Huang, 2010, p.532). Results from the respondents of Huang’s research (2010) indicated that skills in the reading domain were more important than skills in the speaking and listening domains, and those they
assessed, found their own reading skills as being more in need of improvement across different disciplines. Huang argues:

Speaking (e.g., making class presentations, participating in class discussions, making comparison and contrast, or synthesizing information) and especially writing (e.g., using reference materials and other sources appropriately to support and refine arguments, producing writing that effectively summarized and paraphrases the works and words of others) often require the ability to perform many of the skill items in the reading domain. (p. 532).

Some studies have explored the faculty and student perceptions of academic language difficulties and factors that have the greatest effect on student learning. Al-Shariden and Goe’s (1998) study claimed that in order to facilitate the adjustment process and promote self-esteem, students need to balance their co-cultural friendships with those of local students. Research on faculty beliefs, attitudes, and practices also present valuable information regarding L2 student behavior in their regular courses (Braine, 1995). In addition, survey methods have been used to examine student perceptions of the relative importance of language, academic, and social skills (Leki, 2001; Xu, 1991). Leki (2001) investigated the social/academic relationship of L2 learners with their L1 peers in the learning context of the group work project. The finding suggested that those relationships may undermine the ability of L2 learners to make meaningful contributions to the group projects across different subjects. Leki (2001) suggested that “power differentials, exaggerated by linguistic limitations in English, variously prevented the learners from managing social/academic interactions to their advantage” (p.63). Furthermore, even group projects that appear to work well may conceal “particular burdens for L2 students of which faculty who assign group projects may remain unaware” (p.63). Xu (1991) examined the impact of English proficiency as indicated by student self-ratings and by the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores and selected non-linguistic variables on the level of academic difficulties perceived by international graduate students. The results suggested that English proficiency is the single
most important factor influencing international graduate students’ academic coping ability. Moreover, international students’ coping skills can be better understood and evaluated as the combination of their ability to use English and their ability to handle the academic tasks. Interestingly, Xu’s (1991) research results indicated that TOEFL score did not reflect students’ ability to perform their academic tasks across different disciplines. These research findings require more empirical evidence about academic acculturation and its impact on successful learning.

The present study examined the academic acculturation of a group of L2 graduate students in humanities, social studies and science at a Canadian university. This research is based broadly on a recent tendency in the applied linguistics literature that views language learning as a fundamentally social, cultural, and temporal activity. It draws variously from three research approaches within this tendency, namely, language socialization (Duff, 1995), activity theory and neo-Vygotskyan research (Lantolf, 2000), and critical discourse research (Pennycook, 2001). Duff (1995) defined language socialization as “the lifelong process by means of which individuals are accepted into specific domains of knowledge, believes, identities and social representations, which they access and construct through language practices and social institutions” (p.107). Activity theory is a unified account of Vygotsky’s original proposal on the nature and development of human behavior. Specifically, it addresses the implications of his claim that human behavior results from the integration of socially and culturally constructed forms of mediation into human activity. Lantolf (2000) suggested that “as people participate in different culturally specified activities they enter into different social relations and come into contact with, and learn how to employ and ultimately appropriate, different meditational means” (p.13). Critical discourse research focuses on the changed educational ideology. It says the impulse for current individual difference research is more
often the need to choose the best instructional approach for the learner. At the same time, the critical discourse research accept that language learning is always situated and that these factors will shape differently for different learning tasks and in different settings (Pennycook, 2001). Theoretical perspectives assume that learning and acculturation entail a process of gaining competence and membership in a discourse community. Although different assumptions exist about the notions of discourse and discourse community, I have followed the perspectives that consider a discourse community such as pursuing academic studies at the university level as open, conflictual, and dynamic rather than autonomous, coherent, or static (Morita, 2004; Prior, 1998). I have focused on the acculturation processes of international and immigrant students in relation to assessment practices they experienced while pursuing their graduate degree at this Canadian university.

**Assessment of Learning and Assessment for Learning**

Assessment and evaluation is the very core of the learner-centered paradigm. Assessment is both the single-most important element of learning that drives the educational process and also the most effective means of implementing institutional change (Cullen & Harris, 2009). Biggs (1999) posits that meaning is constructed through learning activities and the quality of learning is influenced by the way it is assessed, that is, to what degree it provides students with opportunities to learn how to progress. Scriven (1967), in the context of course development, made the initial distinction between summative assessment (SA) and formative assessment (FA) to illustrate the same fundamental difference. He notes that the process of assessment is a single process, which makes a judgment of learning according to criteria and standards; this is SA, and is always the first part of any assessment process. FA is an additional step, which follows SA and necessitates feedback indicating the possible gap in addressing the criteria or the required standard (Sadler, 1989; Taras, 2009). The findings of
the research study of Taras (2008) showed conflating of summative and formative assessment at the classroom. FA was represented as part, units or aspects of learning or feedback and this FA contributes to SA. Logically, developmental work will lead to summative work and not vice versa. However, “formative and summative assessment feed into each other and are cyclical” (Taras, 2008, p.183). In the context of Taras (2008), the FA from the previous SA can contribute into the following summative assessment. According to Black and Wiliam (1998), marking and providing feedback without a grade have been shown to help students’ learning. This procedure allows learners to focus on their work without the pressure and censure of the grade. Also, relating the FA to the SA work will permit an iterative cycle of feedback (Taras, 2008).

Because teaching and learning are rooted and are dependent upon a common language between teacher and student (Hilliard 1997), L2 students, who learn in English, have specific difficulties compared with L1 students in how they learn, how they think about the learning content and how they express themselves through assessment. Language-dependent assessment may lead to a lower evaluation of their subject capability because poor language skills are taken as an indicator of lack of subject knowledge (Webb, 2002). Research comparing the final results of L1 and L2 students in English speaking countries presents a mixed picture. Some suggest there is no difference in final outcomes (Ackers, 1997), others find that international students outperform their local classmates (Dobson, Sharma & Calderon, 1998), and some assert that L2 students have assessment disadvantages compared to L1 students (Morrison, Merrick, Higgs, & Le Metais, 2005) even in science-based and quantitative degrees (Logan & Hazel, 1999).

Within this context, it is important to discuss the issue of grading student achievement in higher education, although grading is not a primary focus of this research study. According
to Yorke (2009), there are several qualities of a low graded assignment in higher education. Such an assignment tends to be descriptive only; does not answer the question directly; misses key points; contains important inaccuracies; and covers material sparsely, possibly in note form; assertions are not supported by evidence. Performances rarely fit neatly into the criteria which define levels of achievement. Moreover, L2 students can be evaluated low because of linguistic or cultural mismatch of assessment expectations (Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2010; Duff, 2010; Durkin, 2008; Huang, 2010). Research has found that many instructors do not provide explicit and appropriate scaffolding, modeling or feedback to support students’ performance (Zappa-Holman, 2007a). Duff (2010) writes that it is “simply expected that most students are already familiar with the genres required for academic writing or presentations and the criteria for evaluating them, even though these criteria may vary from one context to the next” (p. 181).

The interaction between language and assessment is more nuanced than the intuitively attractive hypothesis that L1 students will outperform their L2 peers. Interactions have been noted between the subject of learning and assessment methods, English language and test format, whether it is open-ended or multiple choices (Jenkins & Holley, 1990) as well as even more subtle dynamics between gender, language and assessment question type (Logan & Hazel, 1999). International students seem to be particularly disadvantaged, compared to their L1 peers, when assessment is based on timed, closed-book examinations rather than assignments (De Vita, 2000) but less so on the purely multiple-choice format (Clarke, Heaney, & Gatfield 2005).

While there is evidence through research studies that international and immigrant students undertaking research degrees in English speaking universities find English to be an ongoing problem (Cheng & Fox, 2008), the focus in research on L2 students doing
coursework study has tended to be predominantly at the high school and undergraduate level with the graduate student population being relatively neglected (Morrison et. al., 2005). This study extended the language-assessment performance investigation to learn more about how assessment practices influence the process of academic acculturation of L2 graduate students.

**Research Questions**

This study addresses the following three research questions:

1. What aspects of academic assessment and evaluation processes do international students identify as most challenging and most enjoyable?

2. What prior cultural and educational influences facilitate or hinder the understanding of, and attitude toward, assessment and evaluation practices in this Canadian university as perceived by international and immigrant graduate students?

3. How can the learning experience of international students in relation to assessment and evaluation be described in terms of an acculturation process and learning outcomes?
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This study examines how assessment practices influence the academic acculturation of international graduate students. “If humans are studied in a symbolically reduced, statistically aggregated fashion, there is a danger that conclusions – although arithmetically precise – may fail to fit reality” (Berg, 2009, p.8). Qualitative procedures provide a means of accessing unquantifiable facts about actual people. Therefore, this study employs a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of international graduate students’ lived experiences and perspectives in relation to assessment and evaluation of their studies in one Canadian university through semi-structured interviews. In keeping with the tradition in qualitative research, I have aimed for “concrete and complex illustration” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 364) and thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the study data. Rubin & Rubin (2005) said:

“Learning about the world through qualitative interviews has extended our intellectual and emotional reach, and by turns, roused and satisfied our intellectual curiosity. Qualitative interviews have operated for us like night-vision goggles, permitting us to see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is often looked but seldom seen…”(p. vii).

Qualitative interviewing is based on conversation, when the researcher attentively listens to the interviewees. Interviews played a central role in educational research because understanding the social context of learning is one of the purposes for interviewing in education. Researchers using qualitative techniques examine how people learn about and make sense of themselves and others (Berg, 2009).


**Instruments**

**Semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews.**

To allow data to be triangulated, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with participants and follow-up interviews were employed (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), interviews typically “inquire about feelings, motivations, attitudes, accomplishments, and experiences of individuals” (p. 288). Such a data-collection method is “used extensively in educational research to collect information that is not directly observable” (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p.288).

The interview questions of the current study explored issues related to assessment practices and their impact on participants’ academic acculturation (see Appendix A). The interview questions asked the participants about the assessment practices that helped them to achieve learning goals. The questions investigated the enjoyable and challenging experiences regarding assessment and evaluation practices. The semi-structured format with each individual participant guarantees open-ended conversation where I had little control over the participant’s responses (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). These questions were directed at the participants’ experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about course assignments and their influence on participants’ academic acculturation. According to Bentz and Shapiro (1998), Husserl called it *bracketing* when the inquiry is performed from the perspective of the researcher. Bracketing (Groenewald, 2004) in this study entails asking the participants to set aside their experiences about the assessment practices and to share their reflection on the value associated with assessment practices and potential impact on their academic acculturation. Data obtained tells stories about how the participants “think and feel in the most direct ways” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p.96).
Participants

At the root of the qualitative educational research is, “to understand the phenomena in their own terms – to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p.96) and allowing the essence to emerge (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). I chose purposive sampling, considered by Groenewald (2004) as the most appropriate kind of non-probability sampling, to identify the primary participants for this study. I selected the sample based on my judgment and the purpose of the research, looking for those who “have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched” (Kruger, 1988, p. 150).

All six research participants are:

1. Second language speakers of English (L2 students),
2. Master’s students studying at this university,
3. Have experienced post-secondary education in another country.

As soon as this study received the ethical clearance from the General Research Ethics Board (see Appendix B), in November 2011, I announced my study at the university International Center through a poster (see Appendix C). International graduate students who were interested in this study and fell into the above three criteria sent me e-mails to express their willingness to participate in this research study. I e-mailed them the Letter of Information (Appendix D) and the Consent Form (Appendix E) to invite them to participate in this study. Once the consent form for the use of audiotape in accordance with the ethical procedures defined for research involving human participants was signed, I arranged a time and location that was suitable for the participants for the interview.

In order to trace additional science participants, I also used snowball sampling. Snowballing is a method of expending the sample by asking one participant to recommend...
others for interviewing, also called networking sampling (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). I asked one research participant from science to recommend me any potential participants, who have experienced the process of academic acculturation and fell in the above research criteria.

In total, six graduate students at the Master’s program across sciences, social studies and humanities disciplines participated in this study. Two of six research participants are from health sciences; one participant is from humanities, three are from social sciences. All of them expressed their willingness to participate in this study because of their personal interest and concern. I invited only six participants, while more graduate students expressed their wish to be participants, only six of them met the above selection requirements. I did not invite graduate students who were bilingual, lived in Canada for many years or were doing the Doctoral degree. I looked for participants, who recently arrived in the country or have been living in Canada just for few years and did not have any experience in studying in Canada in the post secondary setting. I involved only Master’s students to keep the level of assessment requirements for one graduate degree as the assessment requirements for Doctoral students may be higher and different. It turned out that all my research participants are female, although I did not aim to include the gender as a criterion for participant selection in this study. All my participants are middle thirties or older and have families and children. Only one participant is in her early twenties and single. I looked for participants who have different educational and cultural background to receive data from the most diverse participants to see the general tendencies in their experiences toward the academic acculturation regardless their major. All participants received English pseudonyms to protect their identity.

**Data Collection**

The six interviews and four follow-up interviews were audio taped and transcribed in the period from November 2011 till February 2012 (See Appendix F). All interview
procedures were accomplished on the university campus in libraries and study rooms. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. All transcriptions were returned to the participants for review and verification prior to analysis.

After initial analysis of the interviews, additional questions arose. For example, “What supportive resources did you use at the beginning of the program?” “What kind of assessment expectations and requirements were you not aware of at the beginning of your program?”

Therefore, I conducted the follow-up interviews with only four participants, because the other two had graduated at that moment and left the city. Each follow-up interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and explored further and verified the data collected earlier. The follow-up interviews contributed to analysis of emerging themes or questions to understand the phenomenon in depth. One follow-up interview was conducted in the first language and translated by me into English as the participant and I shared the mother tongue. This strategy was employed because the participant did not know the educational terminology in English well enough to discuss the assessment processes. The translated transcripts were verified with the participant before the data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Following the tradition in qualitative research, data analysis is primarily inductive. Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes and categories of analysis come from data, rather than being decided before data collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). I analyzed data using a number of strategies: for example, repeatedly read the transcriptions to become familiar with the data (Berg, 2009), kept an open mind and allowed themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing answers to questions (Glesne, 2011), used constant comparison, reflection and self-questioning to validate findings. I analyzed all the interviews using open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

21
Color coding and categorizing were used for data analysis. The transcripts were segmented into units of meaning called topics. I used different colors to code the topics and also placed conceptual labels on selected segments of the transcripts to represent the preliminary themes. These topics were grouped into larger clusters to form categories, resulting in several major themes and major sub-themes of factors influencing the academic acculturation through assessment and evaluation practices. This process enabled me to discover patterns of meanings first within individual interview data, then across the data set. During this process, suggested themes were discussed, rethought and relabeled until a final set came to be accepted (See Appendix G). Once the data were coded according to salient themes and categories, the frequencies and commonalities were developed, analyzed and discussed.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The chapter reports the research findings of the current study. I present the results according to the emerging themes that are common for all participants or for the majority of them. The table of frequency of emerging themes is represented in the Appendix G to illustrate how the themes arrived.

Four major themes were drawn from the six semi-structured interviews and four follow-up interviews. These themes reflected four major aspects of the study: (1) enjoyable and challenging assessment practices, (2) understanding assessment expectations, (3) the reflections on the previous cultural and/or educational experiences, and (4) psychological and physical factors associated with second language anxiety, cultural shock and relocation. Together, they address the research questions of this study. I will report every theme and subtheme using direct quotations from my participants to illustrate these themes. I have given my participants pseudonyms. They are Rachel, Samantha, Sandra, Amelia, Valery and Pamela. I will indicate direct quotations from a particular participant with a reference to pages and line numbers of every direct quotation in the transcriptions from the participants.

Following the reporting of the major themes, I will introduce each research participant by pointing out their cultural, educational and language background and by showing their unique situation or attitude in relation to assessment and evaluation. I believe individual description of every research participant can significantly add to better understanding of the process of academic acculturation in relation to assessment and evaluation.

The first emerging theme is Enjoyable and Challenging Assessment Practices. This theme has four subthemes: (a) performing oral presentations, (b) receiving feedback, (c) doing reflections and (d) writing assignments - all required assessment practices at the graduate level. The second theme is Understanding Assessment Expectations, which has three
subthemes: (a) understanding expectations regarding multiple choice examinations, (b) understanding expectations regarding oral presentations and (c) understanding expectations regarding written assignments. The third theme is *The Reflections on the Previous Educational and/or Cultural Experience*. This has two subthemes: (a) developing critical thinking and (b) academic culture awareness. Academic culture awareness further consists of student-supervisor relationship and course outlines as two subthemes. The fourth theme is *Psychological and Physical Factors* that are associated with second language anxiety, cultural shock and relocation.

**Enjoyable and Challenging Assessment Practices**

Enjoyable and challenging assessment practices is one of the four most frequently cited themes that emerged from data coding (see Appendix F). This theme was shaped from the data discussing the commonly used assessment practices at the graduate level at one Canadian University. This theme contributed to better understanding of the first research question and embraced the following assessment practices: (a) oral presentations, (b) feedback, (c) reflections and (d) written assignments.

**Performing oral presentations.**

Oral presentations at class seminars and at professional and academic conferences are very important and common activities for graduate students in Canada. Public speaking is an essential ability for success in graduate learning. All my participants felt uncertain, anxious and challenged by oral presentations and public speaking, but interestingly, they all enjoyed them:

> Oral presentation was the most positive experience for me, because doing it I choose a topic and I am not expected to present the full knowledge regarding that topic. All my slides I show to my audience are in accordance with my plan. I generate the outline and I follow my steps. Oral presentations are easier
and more enjoyable to me…Oral presentations taught me to address specific topics to my audience in a very logic[al] way (Rachel, p. 2, L45-50).

Amelia, on the other hand, was very anxious about speaking in front of her colleagues, she worried about her accent. She mentioned that because of her nervous condition she could not pronounce words properly; her face muscles were paralyzed, and her accent became very noticeable, and she felt very embarrassed about this:

I was very anxious speaking at the oral presentations, especially, if it is long. It seems people are [too] tired to listen to you. I hurried to finish and the accent was getting heavier and heavier. You just want to escape as soon as possible, there is no fun! Probably, I am too hard on myself because my marks were always good, my classmates asked interesting questions and I felt [good] after, but the moment itself was horrible. Probably, only now [a year and a half in the two year program] I feel more confident and less nervous (Amelia, p.2, L13-17).

Amelia and Valery both mentioned that technologies and PowerPoint software made oral presentations enjoyable. They had never used this software before in their home countries. Moreover, preparing for presentations was a valuable learning experience not only due to the need to process new information, but also to use and learn new technologies.

In fact, all my research participants felt that PowerPoint presentations helped them to overcome obstacles they had in speaking English because they had visual slides to read aloud or to ask classmates to read the slides aloud. The technology helped them to perform better and to feel more confident in terms of language use. Sandra explained why she felt excited and less disadvantaged as a L2 student fulfilling her oral assignments. She said that her rich life and professional experience let her approach the group work and presentation task more creatively in comparison with her younger peers. When group work was assigned, she usually provided an idea, searched for information on-line, prepared resources and constructed the presentation structure; her peers wrote the ideas and spoke during the presentation.
Pamela also called her oral presentations the most enjoyable assessment experience. She underlined the crucial role of the instructor and his positive attitude for successful learning and self-esteem.

I had a class with the professor, [when] we had a presentation (3-4 people in the group), they were very experienced, my peers… When I started to work with group it was very hard, so much pressure on me. When we presented, my peers did better than me, because I was so nervous speaking in front of the group. But in the end, the instructor personally came to me and told that it was a good job, expressed his appreciation of my ideas, told [me] about my creativity. And I really liked it. I was surprised, he gave us good grades. He looked at me as good as other students. I got happier, confident, I think, after that. It was important to be confident for me (Pamela, p.1, L26-27, 29-35).

Speaking in public presentations means giving an immediate response to the questions asked. Therefore, the student should not only understand and know the material she or he is presenting, but be able to speak in a second/foreign language about the discussed issues. At the beginning of the first semester, it is extremely difficult, tiring and emotional to speak in front of the class. The international students of this study developed subject knowledge and the second language skills at the same time that can be challenging and frustrating.

…I had language problems. Speaking was very challenging, I even thought I could not do this, but the second term was better. I believed I could speak better… Only here [in Canada], I realized I had difficulties with speaking, other people spoke better. But I think, with the time, I can deal better with this issue (Pamela, p.3, L25-26; p. 2, L8-10).

Although all research participants of this study passed the TOEFL examination and received the required score for the speaking section, they had significant problems with speaking and doing oral presentations as a part of their course assignments at the beginning of the Master’s program that led to frustration, language anxiety, pressure and fatigue. They were not certain about their accents, vocabulary use, public speaking skills, technologies and peer perception, but they all enjoyed the oral presentations. The research participants constructed their understanding as how to fulfill the oral assignment requirements through
communicating with peers and instructors, and also through observation. As soon as they understood the requirements and expectations regarding oral presentations, they improved their assessment performance. They became more confident, professional and competent in preparing for and performing the oral presentations, practicing this kind of assignment intensively and collaboratively.

**Receiving feedback.**

Constructive feedback provided by the course instructors was the favorite assessment experience mentioned by all participants of this study. It was the most appreciated assessment process because it was descriptive and usually individual. This form of assessment allowed the international graduate students to see their strengths and weaknesses. Constructive feedback helped the research participants to understand how to learn and what they needed to improve. It was a new educational and cultural experience for the international graduate students of this study.

I find it interesting they care here about the feedback to students… I think here professors pay more attention to the students’ work; they are more exact in giving the number, mark [grade]. Here, professors pay more attention to the details. They give good comments, feedback. In my country, I get just the mark [mark], no feedback (Pamela, p. 2, L23, p. 2-3, L34-L2).

According to the research participants’ responses, constructive feedback increased L2 students’ self-esteem and encouraged participation in the learning activities. Sandra and Valery noted that feedback at the clinical placements was crucial for successful learning and professional development. The interaction with supervisors and instructors at the clinical placements and their feedback about the learning processes were the most helpful assessment and learning tool that built cultural awareness. Feedback was highly valued not only in terms of subject learning but also learning in Canadian surroundings particularly.
The research participants learned from the feedback they received from their instructors. This assessment practice helped them to understand details of the academic requirements and to improve their future assignments. The L2 graduate students appreciated feedback because it was individually focused, led to better understanding of the course assessment requirements and helped to understand how to learn in Canada.

**Doing reflections.**

Reflections as part of assessment procedures, for example, blogging and mapping to assigned academic readings, were also highly appreciated as an effective, interesting and new assessment practice for learning. According to the research participants, reflections required less preparation time in terms of reading and writing, they were reasonably sized and it was easy to recall the learned information afterwards.

I had to find out the rules of the issue, reflect, be more creative about the subject and then come to the conclusion. And it was more productive for me. I learned more. And it [there] was the difference. Of course, in the beginning, it was very difficult, but now I am more experienced than my peers in my country (Pamela, p.1, L18-22).

Amelia said that she improved her language skills, when she prepared for assignments requiring her reflection:

Doing reflections, I learned a lot: I improved my language skills and it helped me to think about the information I have read and heard. Actually, it is a great strategy to make students read, think, write and memorize information at the same time (Amelia, p.2, L28-30).

Only Valery did not think that reflections helped her to study. She said that doing reflections did not contribute to her learning. This can be partly explained by the variety of reflection assignments, employed technologies or her major itself.

Amelia, who had three reflection assignments – two blogs and one course mapping, expressed her high motivation to do these assignments because they gave her a lot of flexibility in terms of reading and reflecting on reading. Reflecting in her blog on-line,
Amelia could connect her previous professional knowledge and new information towards her area of expertise. The new synthesized information was easy to recall. She enjoyed blogging, although it was time consuming and required discipline, but, as she said, “benefited her”.

However, she was concerned about technologies that she had never used before.

My instructor created a virtual place to meet my colleagues and share my thoughts with them in the chat. We had to do it every week. He told [us] that it was not necessary to write comments to every message just reflect and read. Everybody was responsible to prepare topics three times through the semester. I did my minimum. I went to the virtual map every week, but did not write a lot. I did not know a lot about [discussed] issues in Canada. Only in the end of the course, I realized that the professor could see on his computer, how much we entered the discussions, participated in it. Probably, he told about it in the beginning but I forgot or did not understand. My grade was good for that course, but could be even higher if I could use the technology better and actually was not afraid to use it frequently (Amelia, p.1, L21-30).

The fact that the research participants could express their opinion reflecting on the issues discussed and communicate with instructors via technologies helped them to adjust to the new assessment requirements rather quickly. The research participants perceived reflections such as blogging, short discussions and short readings as more informal assessment practices. They felt more relaxed doing reflections because of the manageable preparation time. These L2 students understood this assessment practice as assessment “for learning” rather than assessment “of learning”. Reflections built the communication with instructors and peers influencing the academic acculturation and socialization of the L2 learners positively.

**Writing assignments.**

Academic writing is a key requirement for graduate study in Canada. Although all my participants obtained the required TOEFL score in the academic writing section to be admitted to this university, all of them had difficulties writing academic papers and fulfilling written assignment requirements (essays, literature reviews for research proposals, critical
reviews of assigned readings and position papers). All respondents were concerned about their capacity to write for academic purposes: for example, Samantha said:

I don’t like writing but I like to learn. I think whenever you go [do] your writing, content is very important. The reader will interpret what you retain correctly. Writing is my challenge (Samantha, p.2, L23-25).

The structure of any formal essay is usually consists of introduction, statement and conclusion. The requirements for these three main parts of every written piece in the English language can differ from the requirements of the written assignment in the native language of an international graduate student. There are many particular qualities of good academic writing that should be learned by graduate students before they start to write their assigned papers: for example, structure, professional vocabulary, formatting, citations and critical reasoning.

Writing requirements of the given university are strictly connected to the formatting and citation requirements; for example, to the Publication Manual of American Psychological Association (2010), further APA is a key writing requirement at the Faculty of Education and at the Faculty of Philosophy. Formatting requirements are another new knowledge and skill that all graduate students have to follow and learn. For L2 graduate students, these can be additionally challenging because they reflect on their previous experience in their home countries and on the different formatting and citation style assigned in various parts of the globe.

It is expected that every graduate student knows APA. We are first year student. It is not serious, you know, in my country at the undergr[uate] level. At the grad school, it should be purely according APA. I learnt about APA, ok, this is how it should be, when I came here. The instructor expected I already know about APA, but, sorry, I don’t know, I am learning, I was penalized for that immediately. It was a real nightmare for me (Samantha, p.2, L4-8).

Samantha pointed out that doing her first written assignment she did not know the citation and formatting requirements, but the grade of that assignment was 50% of her final
course mark. Since she had failed to submit a good paper, she could not hope to get a good mark for that course, and that made her anxious and upset. She also wondered that the first assigned paper was at the beginning of October and was so influential in terms of the final grade.

Amelia considered another very important component of academic writing – language accuracy. She mentioned two aspects of it – spelling and stylistics. She also stressed that doing writing assignments can improve other language skills.

My program has a lot of writing assignments. They were very useful for me. I learned a lot through reading, but writing improved all my skills I have noticed that I don’t use a dictionary to look for the general vocabulary anymore. When I check my spelling, I almost don’t do [make] mistakes in it. Before, I corrected a lot before sending even a small letter [e-mail] (Amelia, p.1, L4-6).

At the Faculty of Education, correct spelling and grammar were the components of the final grade for every assigned paper, but not every instructor indicated this language requirement in course outlines. Amelia was from the Faculty of Education and appreciated the indication of spelling and proper grammar usage requirements because she paid more attention to these issues if they were mentioned in course outlines. She strived to sound English as much as possible because improving her English was her learning goal.

The amount of graduate writing is overwhelming, especially if writing an academic paper is a new learning and assessment experience. I believe all graduate students, regardless of their L1 or L2 status, have challenges writing a paper at the graduate level for the first time, but L2 students also learn many other things simultaneously: professional vocabulary, written assignment structure, formatting, new software and technologies.

The most negative one [assessment experience] was the literature review. For writing a literature review, you need to provide a variety of resources, you have to refer to many articles, you have to reorganize them in your way, I mean depending on your research problem. First of all, I have to know how to search articles and information online, to find available ones and decide which is relevant in my research. Then reorganize them, this researcher, this scholar
says about my topic positively, this one disagrees, and the third one was neutral towards this issue. I had problems in searching relevant articles, like I have said some of them were not available. It was also difficult to reorganize them; it was hard to say if they were relevant to my topic or not (Rachel, p.1, L19-26).

Multiple choice examinations are another form of written assessment. Sandra’s program had a lot of such examinations with multiple choice and open-ended questions. She lacked the ability to recall information during the examination. She explained this by her relatively small professional vocabulary, inappropriate exam preparation and weak writing skills at the beginning of the program, which led her to failing the first multiple choice examination. Besides, she also mentioned the importance of correct spelling. Comparing to Amelia, who could always use spell check for her written assignments as she wrote her assignments at home, Sandra did not have that opportunity because of the nature of her exams in a classroom timed environment without a computer or a dictionary. She just hoped that the instructor would understand her writing despite her poor spelling. She also did not know the university grading policy regarding spelling issues at the examinations.

The most challenging was [the] written exam. Was it challenging because I had English as a second language? Yes, when I had short answers questions, sometimes I couldn’t spell the word. I knew what it is, I knew how to pronounce it, but I don’t remember the spelling. I always have a piece of scrub paper to write down several variation of word or name spelling to choose one that looks right. The problem with this was [that] I didn’t have time to do it every time and wrote what I have right now. Often I knew it is a wrong spelling, but to keep up with time I left it as it was and hoped that a professor would understand what I meant (Sandra, p.2, L1-7).

Valery and Sandra also mentioned that they could not make any notes during the lectures and seminar sessions. This is another issue that can be crucial for the successful assessment experience. Valery said:

I had problems taking notes. You know how Canadians type? So fast! I could not type as fast as they did, I lost the clue. And I missed information. It was embarrassing not to be able to take notes, frustrating (Valery, follow-up interview, p.1, L3-4).
Sandra and Valery had already experienced exam failure during their first midterm. They pointed out that the multiple choice exam in medicine was an unknown form of assessment. They did not know the strategies to handle and pass it; they did not understand the structure of the exam.

A multiple choice was a completely and new kind of assessment. I had only oral examination at Russian University before immigration. Multiple choices required completely different mindset. I figured it out by hard way: by failing my first midterm. I failed, got lower than 65%, on every subject. I was shocked because first I studied hard, second I was always performing well on my exams during my previous years (Sandra, p.1, L12-15).

After her failure, Sandra discovered new strategies and tried to understand the expectations for the multiple choice exam and afterwards always passed her multiple choice exams. However, Valery said that she thought that this type of exam did not reflect the actual knowledge and she did not understand why it is so often used for assessment purposes.

I found my Certificate exam [to obtain a license to be an occupational therapist] to be the most negative testing experience. The way questions were developed did not reflect the knowledge I need to have to be able to work. Most of the questions were case studies [did not show her understanding of the subject as a structure] (Valery, p.1, L11-13).

Unacquainted with multiple choice examinations, L2 graduate students faced significant challenges preparing for and passing them. They had several issues associated with English language skills and overall understanding of the multiple choice exam structure. They need more training and explanation before the exams.

Academic writing in the form of essays, literature reviews and multiple choice examinations were pointed out as the most challenging assessment experience because successful performance of these assessment practices required substantial knowledge about writing in academic English, formatting and proper citations, information search, critical reasoning, and formulating authentic conclusions. Continuously practicing writing
assignments, the L2 graduate students developed all the above mentioned skills and awareness about assessment expectations. The process of preparation and receiving feedback afterwards significantly helped the L2 graduate students to acculturate to academic assessment and to function in their new roles and surroundings as well as their L1 peers did. However, this process required time, negotiations and supportive relationships with instructors and peers because the international graduate students were learning the subject, the English language and ‘how to learn’ in Canada simultaneously.

Understanding Assessment Expectations

According to responses of the research participants, they did not understand expectations and requirements regarding assessment and evaluation at the beginning of their study in Canada. Sandra mentioned:

In short, everything was new. Written exams – new, group projects – new, clinical placements evaluation – never had it before. I don’t think my previous Russian University experience prepared me for any kind of evaluation at [the university in Canada]… Zero of preparation and zero understanding [of expectations and requirements] (Sandra, p.2, L20-26).

Unawareness about the assessment expectations resulted in low grades, misunderstanding and frustration for the research participants. Valery understood assessment expectations through the painful assessment experiences of receiving low grades. It was embarrassing and hard to accept as she was among the high-achieving students in her country.

I studied harder than my classmates; I know it because I am a second language student. I learned everything like crazy, but my marks were always very low, sometimes they were the worst in the group, just because my approach to preparation was different. It is not only language difficulties; it is also how we understand the expectations. And in reality, we don’t know those expectations (Valery, follow-up interview, p.1, L5-9).

The participants experienced not only language difficulties doing their assignments and passing exams, they demonstrated unawareness about the educational expectations because their knowledge about the assessment procedures was limited.
The research participants stressed that as soon as they understood assessment expectations; they employed effective strategies and did not have any further problems with assessment practices. This theme contributes to shaping the answer to the third research question, particularly, how the learning experience of international students in relation to assessment and evaluation can be described in terms of academic acculturation process and learning outcomes.

**Understanding expectations regarding multiple choice examinations.**

Only two research participants out of six, whose major was science, mentioned the multiple choice examination as a form of assessment used at the Canadian university: Sandra and Valery. The other four participants have Master programs in humanities and social sciences and did not have any experience preparing for multiple choice examinations. The research participants actively negotiated and discovered the new educational assessment culture to be able to fulfill assessment requirements. Sandra employed new learning strategies to prepare for the multiple choice examinations:

After I’ve got my failure marks – I spoke with each of my professors to understand why I failed. One person explained me about multiple choice question examination. During this examination long term memory is tested, not short term memory. I think Russian examinations required different kind of memory to perform well. That explanation made a huge difference for me. I started to study everyday what was taught on the same day. I stopped [to] study before the examination and was doing only reviews what I studied before. I didn’t study any new subject/information day or two before the exam, as I knew I won’t be able [to] reproduce any of that information during assessment. And I studied only my notes and nothing more, this is a part that I don’t like about Canadian education: study only notes no textbooks. Learning only notes makes me sceptical about [depth] of my knowledge. But was I able to study/read more? No. It is only 24 hours in a day. As soon [as]d I changed how I study every day, I didn’t have any difficulties with later assessments (Sandra, p.3, L25-38).
Sandra also mentioned that she discovered a new way of conceptualization from details to understanding of whole concept, while she had always studied in her country from concept to details, in other words, vice versa.

The L2 graduate students had to learn new strategies to meet expectations of multiple choices examinations, but this knowledge was shaped through many obstacles and frustrations. For example, Valery did not possess knowledge of how to approach a multiple choice examination:

I can always find distracters in the multiple choice question, but it is so difficult to figure out the correct answer between other two choices (Valery, follow-up interview, p.1, L 18-19).

When I spoke with Valery during the follow-up interview, she explained to me why she could not find a right answer between two options. She did not know synonyms in her professional field, and she chose an option that had the word she knew and did not notice wrong grammar in the option she thought would be a right choice. Sandra mentioned that she asked instructors how to prepare for multiple choice examinations, but Valery never tried to figure it out. She remained resistant to understanding this type of assessment, always received only minimum required grades to pass and insisted that multiple choice exams did not show her actual knowledge. Sandra also struggled to understand the structure and validity of the multiple choice exam and realized that her limited professional vocabulary was the main reason of her failure.

Two research participants from sciences had significant difficulties in understanding and passing multiple choice examinations. This kind of assessment drove the research participants to learn more professional vocabulary, to pay more attention to grammar, to look for distracters, and to find effective learning strategies, but it was one of the most challenging and anxious assessment experiences. They stayed resistant in their negative attitude to the
multiple choice exams because they did not believe in the reliability and validity of this assessment practice.

**Understanding expectations regarding oral presentations.**

All research participants pointed out that oral presentation in this Canadian university differ from oral presentations they had done earlier in their home countries. Amelia finished her study in her country more than a decade ago in Russia. At that time, technologies were not used as much as they are used nowadays. She emphasized the educational role and opportunities that technologies contributed to her learning process and adjustment. Definitely, technologies created more pressure on the international graduate students of this study, but they learned how to use them and felt more confident preparing for their oral presentations because they had visual material helping them to be more confident while they presented in front of people as mentioned under the theme of enjoyable assessment practices.

Rachel mentioned the maximum efforts she invested in her preparation. She paid more attention to information she looked for and shared with her peers than she had done in her country. She spent more time designing attractive slides, analyzing and synthesizing readings and she planned her performance beforehand very carefully.

Pamela said that she had never prepared so seriously for oral presentations in her country. It was a great learning experience that helped her to improve her language skills, critical thinking and reflectivity she had never employed before.

In my country, to present something I had to go and find information, just gather it, describe [it]. The process is more descriptive, but here, it is more exploratory, exploring. For example, I had to find out the rules of the issue, reflect, be more creative about the subject and then to come to the conclusion. And it was more productive for me. I learned more. And it was the difference (Pamela, p.1, L16-20).

Amelia noted that she never scheduled her oral assignments among the first presentations. She preferred to present after observing her peers’ presentations to check the
requirements, to look at the L1 students’ creativity, selected literature and structure. Observations let her understand the assessment expectations and requirements better without asking “stupid” questions. During the second semester, she performed the oral presentations easily although anxiety associated with public speaking still bothered her.

Sandra employed avoidance strategies that let her show her strong skills and hide her weak ones. She took on herself the preparation part of a presentation – did a literature review, looked for materials, and generated ideas, but asked her peers to write a project down to avoid language mistakes. When the group presented in front of the class, she also avoided speaking as she believed that after the second slide people stopped to listen to her because they were bored with her accent.

According to the research interviews, L2 graduate students tended to observe their L1 peers to learn about expectations for oral presentation assignments. They asked questions about how to do oral presentations because they didn’t have experience with this kind of assignment, or their experience in their home countries differed significantly from the expected performance in Canada. Understanding assessment expectations allowed L2 graduate students of this study to achieve their learning goals: to study professional subjects, to improve their English language competences, to achieve better grades in courses, to construct knowledge about assessment requirements, and to acculturate academically via the experienced assessment practices.

**Understanding expectations regarding written assignments.**

Written assignments, for example literature reviews for research proposals, position papers, article reviews were indicated as the most challenging assessment practices in terms of meeting expectations and fulfilling requirements. The strategies employed by the graduate
students of this study for writing assignments differ depending on the nature of the assigned paper and also on the discipline.

Sandra sought peers’ help in the final editing of written assignments when the assessment was a group project so she could save her time and avoid language mistakes. Amelia used her translator’s experience intensively to make her writing meet the required formatting and grammar standards. She reread her papers many times correcting language mistakes and referring to dictionaries. Time management was essential for her successful learning experience. While her L1 peers started to work at assignments a few days before the deadline, she planned and prepared for the written assignments two weeks beforehand. This strategy allowed her to do her work in chunks, to reflect on it in detail and to have time to improve her writing in terms of quality. Rachel mentioned that she was overwhelmed with the amount of reading she had to do before starting her writing.

Searching for literature is another learning skill that should be mastered by international graduate students in order to pass written assignments well. Moreover, it was time consuming because L2 students needed more time to read and to understand information in their second language. Although the graduate students of this study found it tiring and challenging, they enjoyed reading because it helped them to achieve learning goals. They learned different data bases, looked for help in libraries and asked peers. Extensive reading significantly helped these L2 graduate students to adjust to graduate school as reading is a main source of knowledge building at the graduate level in Canada.

The university’s Writing Centre was mentioned by the research participants many times during the interviews as an excellent support resource for reviewing written assignments. They just regretted that many of them did not know about this resource at the beginning of their programs.
I learned about the Writing Center only in July, in the end of my first year at the program, and when I needed their help to review my research proposal, I could not get any appointment because they closed for the August. I did not use my 10 free hours. And I restricted to these 10 hours, but if I need more? (Amelia, follow-up interview, p.1, L33-35).

I interviewed Samantha at the end of December 2011, when she already had an issue with her instructor regarding formatting and citations. If she had learned about the Writing Centre at the beginning of her program, she could probably have avoided this painful experience. Valery pointed out that she did not know about booking appointments in advance so she lost her opportunity to get support from the Writing Centre. When she approached the Writing Center asking for help, all time spots were already booked, she did not know that she has to book an appointment and could not get help without a booked appointment. This indicates her unfamiliarity with Canadian appointment culture that does not exist in many countries.

The research participants built their knowledge about the assessment expectations through negotiations with instructors and peers, obstacles and failures, but they demonstrated competence and ability to develop new strategies required for successful fulfillment of written assignments. At the beginning of their programs they usually did not know about available resources at the campus supporting them in assessment preparation. The international graduate students in this study stressed that they probably performed their assignments less successfully than they would have done had they been aware of supporting resources existing on the campus. As soon as L2 graduate students understood assessment and evaluation requirements they sought new approaches to meet them in order to cope better with their graduate programs.
Reflection on Previous Educational and Cultural Experiences

Reflection on previous life experiences in new life and study settings is a normal process of academic acculturation. Every person experiencing something new goes through the process of adjustment. In the academic setting, international students go through the processes of academic acculturation expanding their academic and life horizons. The research participants’ assessment experiences in their home countries influenced their understanding of assessment and evaluation practices in Canada. Sandra said:

I don’t think my previous Russian university experience prepared me for any kind of evaluation [at the Canadian university]… It is about how I didn’t know that midterm is an examination. I thought it is a half of the term marked in a student calendar. I never had midterm before. I didn’t ask other students about the meanings of it. I thought I knew: mid means half, term is a term. 6 weeks block is a midterm. When I figured out I have to study for exam it was too late. I didn’t make student notes, for example, because I expected to have 2-3 free days before [the] exam to review all materials as I had in Russia. As I mentioned before I got below 65% at my first midterm (Sandra, p.2, L27-34).

Sandra gave an excellent example of cultural unawareness and reflection on her previous experience when she demonstrated lack of knowledge of the host educational system. She did not have midterms in her country and she did not have preparation days before exams in Canada to review and study learning materials. She built her knowledge about the Canadian university through a very painful exam failure. She did not realize that she did not know about the time deadlines, otherwise she would ask, but she did not because the idea of a midterm did not exist in her previous experience.

Further, I focused on two subthemes that were mentioned by almost all research participants as a consequence of their reflection on their previous educational and cultural experiences: (a) the ability to think critically in the Western way, and (b) cultural awareness in relation to instructor-student relationship and course outlines.
Developing critical thinking.

Critical thinking is a significant learning skill that is expected at the graduate level in Canada. However, international graduate students may not possess critical thinking as a skill as they were never exposed to it or they never learned it before because of the educational circumstances they had in their countries.

All participants in this study belonged to Eastern cultures where the word “critical” is associated with something negative. Moreover, it is not possible to criticize somebody from a higher social or educational status in Eastern cultures. Therefore, my research participants felt lost and disadvantaged at the beginning of their programs when they were supposed to employ critical thinking in their assignments, but did not have that ability. Besides, their detachment from Canadian public and professional life made them silent in class discussions about certain societal issues. The only thing they could do throughout their first courses was to refer to actual situations of a discussed issue in their countries, but not all instructors are satisfied just with reflections, they require more synthesis and analysis.

But here, there is another standard of studying, you have to synthesize whatever you learn and you articulate it with your own understanding and try to integrate knowledge you have and form you idea. This is what I find different from my country, that kind of assessment. It is so challenging to grasp this information and integrate it to your own idea and integrate it and make it understandable to other people in terms of your own perspective (Samantha, p.3, L4-9).

Critical thinking was a torture at the beginning. In my culture, it is possible to criticize somebody if you are in the same social position or higher, but here in Canada I had to criticize PhD and professors’ research papers being a first year master student. This was actually the major comment in the feedback I received with encouragement to criticize more doing my literature review or article review. I felt helpless sometimes (Amelia, p.2, L33-37).

What I got from these courses at Queen’s is not actual knowledge, it is way of thinking. How you think of this kind of research, thinking methods, how do I think about the article, not the actual knowledge (Rachel, p.3, L25-27).
Critical thinking was definitely a challenge for the international graduate students of this study towards academic acculturation. It took time and feedback from instructors to understand the host academic culture and to be able to make assignments corresponding to the institutional standards required at the graduate level. L2 students built knowledge, understanding of learning materials and knowledge implementations practicing critical thinking and reasoning as a part of assessment requirements. Practicing critical thinking involved the international graduate students into the host academic life and helped them to adjust to the new school rules.

**Academic culture awareness.**

It took some period of time for the participants in this study to understand new behavioral rules and adjust to the new relationships common in North America, but unusual for the Eastern part of the world. For example, calling professors by the first name, professors’ approachability, professors’ participation in social events, and partnership in relationship.

It took me one year to get used to call my supervisor with the first name and not Dr. X. I just could not do it because I felt as I did not respect her or did not show my respect! But she expected this informal relationship that do have respect and distance frame but you feel it other way. And she gave me a hug, when we met, asked about my life. I felt very good after meetings with her. I felt she is interested in me (Amelia, follow-up interview, p.2, L1-4).

Interestingly, the participants of this study appreciated feedback as a form of communication with professors and perceived it as a significant advantage of the Canadian educational system.

Pamela wondered if reducing social distance with instructors by calling them by first names would not break discipline and the learning process. She pointed out that discipline was respected and kept not by social distance between people in power: instructors, professors
and advisors and students, but by students’ personal responsibility. Rachel said that this freedom and responsibility increased the pressure on her.

The professors’ approachability was another new cultural experience that the L2 graduate students of this study discovered in Canada. They learned that instructors offer support and information.

I can add here that “if you don’t understand something – go and talk to the professor” was also new and surprising. I’ve never talked to any of my professors in Russia if I don’t understand [the] materials. I went to library or asked my classmates to find the answer. Professors in Russia were not approachable as they are approachable in Canada (Sandra, p.2, L40-41, p.3, L1-3).

Some instructors want to speak about our progress, give feedback, I really appreciate it. It is good that they involve us [in] to the assessment process, direct us to the right direction, it is very important… Academic advisor can be a good recourse of help (Samantha, p.4, L17-19, p.3 L 28).

Awareness of the academic culture between instructors and students in the host country was crucial for the research participants regarding assessment understanding and performance. This knowledge helped to acculturate academically and increased positive learning experiences of the L2 graduate students.

Unawareness about course outlines can be another cultural obstacle disturbing international students in successfully fulfilling their assignments. The research participants did not know that a course outline is a document to follow during the course that includes assessment expectations. Not all instructors explained the details of courses by referring to course outlines; they did not emphasize their significance and guiding role. The research participants did not have any previous educational experience following a course outline to fulfill academic course requirements. Therefore, they needed to be informed about the essential role of a course outline beforehand.
It would be good to know that course syllables is not a formal paper that nobody reads, but actual guidelines what to know and what has to be learned and assessed later (Sandra, p.4, L23-25).

I find it very good to get syllabus in the beginning of the term and to be honest it took me a while to understand, what the course outline is. I didn’t know what it is. I could not believe that each session had a purpose and program (plan). Maybe, it took me half of the term to realize oh, I follow this paper, called outline. In my country, I didn’t have experience to get course outline, in my country it is very oral. It is not a paper (Pamela, p.4, L1-6).

At the beginning of the first semester, Pamela and Sandra did not know that course outlines were their guides through their courses because they were culturally unprepared for this practice. There is no course outline practice in their countries. They realized that course outlines were official documents they had to follow after they had already submitted a couple of assignments. Amelia learned from Sandra that she needed to refer to course outlines in order to be prepared for every single class. She studied every course outline very carefully and planned everything beforehand to be ready for the deadlines. She found course outlines very helpful in understanding assessment expectations and never failed any assignment.

Academic culture awareness about particular qualities of instructor-student relationships in Canada such as approachability and partnership, and importance of course outlines can significantly improve learning experiences of international graduate students towards assessment and evaluation as well. Becoming aware of the cultural/educational issues discussed above, the L2 students could employ new strategies to achieve their learning goals, particularly in performing assignments better. This new knowledge helped the research participants to acculturate academically to Canadian university life and impacted their assessment experience positively.

**Psychological and Physical Factors**

Psychological and physical factors in learning are the last emerging theme contributing to the overall understanding of the process of acculturation to the new university.
Two related aspects were mentioned by all research participants (a) second language anxiety and (b) fatigue associated with cultural shock and relocation.

Second language anxiety was already mentioned regarding examinations and oral presentations. In addition to the preceding data, an emotional factor is very influential for successful assessment performance. Learning itself can be a very anxious life experience, but learning in a second language increases learning anxiety to a great extent by means of second language anxiety.

I remember me reading questions number 5 while a [student] next to me raised her hand and asked about clarification about question number 25. My heart start pounding from panic that I am so behind in term of time at that moment (Sandra, p.3, L10-13).

Second language anxiety experienced by these L2 students as a part of the academic acculturation process could significantly influence assessment performance and self-esteem. According to the interview responses of the research participants, positive feedback from instructors helped to reduce anxiety caused by assessment in the second language.

Cultural shock is a common phenomenon that occurs when people travel overseas. Fatigue is one of the body’s responses to cultural shock. Rachel, Pamela and Samantha arrived in Canada just before classes started and felt fatigue preparing for their classes and assignments. Pamela said she felt very tired at the beginning of her program. She was very busy with family issues associated with relocation that disturbed her ability to focus on her studies. She said that her physical and emotional condition was caused by cultural shock and the time change between Europe and North America. It took her several months to adjust to the new biological rhythm.

Amelia and Sandra expressed that they felt tired, although they had been living in Canada for several years. Amelia compared herself to an “overloaded” computer at the beginning of the program. She could not work in English more than 3-4 hours a day.
Second language anxiety and fatigue associated with cultural shock significantly influenced the physical and emotional well-being of the research participants at the beginning of their study in Canada. This was a time of transition for the international students. Therefore, it can impact assessment performance negatively. All my research participants expressed appreciation for feedback, information sessions, faculty support, graduate workshops and social activities with peers during their first period of adaptation.

**Individual Assessment Issues of Research Participants**

Below, I present the research participants of this study individually. The individual experience can significantly contribute to an understanding of the academic acculturation of the L2 graduate students through their experience of assessment and evaluation procedures in a Canadian university. My initial intention was to include research participants of different cultural, educational and first language backgrounds as I wanted to see commonalities in the process of academic acculturation via assessment and evaluation for diverse population. I presented those commonalities in the first part of this chapter. However, in the nature of the qualitative research, there is a fundamental belief that all people are unique and their experiences within the empirical world are also unique. Therefore, I realized during my data coding that the individual description of each participant can add to the explicitness, transparency and overall credibility of my study. I present each participant with her individual assessment issue.

**Samantha**

I really don’t know what I don’t know: assessment is a destination [goal] (Samantha, p.2, L11-12).

Samantha is a graduate student in a Master’s program in social sciences; she is from Malaysia. She has a Bachelor’s degree in Education and a Master’s degree in Human Resource Development from her home country. She was employed by a big governmental
company in Malaysia for many years, where she had a supervisor’s position and high social status. She decided to come to Canada to study at the graduate level to improve her knowledge, to obtain a prestigious Canadian degree and to improve her English skills. Her family accompanied her. She has three little children and her husband has a job. During her first semester she had a conflict situation with one of her instructors because she did not know about formatting and citations requirements. Her instructor was very concerned about the plagiarism issue and had a very strict attitude to keeping citations according to formatting requirements.

Samantha failed that written assignment and could fail her course because it was worth 50% of the final grade. It was her first assignment in the new program. At that time, she did not know the requirements and expectations regarding citations, formatting and critical thinking. She was afraid to speak with peers and her instructor about the issue; she did not know about the supporting resources available to her:

Students like us [international], we don’t know what to ask. I really don’t know what I don’t know. (Laughs) This is a kind of danger. Seniors [second year students] say to ask questions, but I don’t know what to ask. There is a lot of information, but I don’t know, where it is, you know (Samantha, p.2, L11-14).

Only in the second semester she did fulfill requirements of assigned papers smoothly because she learned about the assessment expectations she needed to meet at the graduate level in Canada. She also learned that instructors are approachable and could be the best information resource:

Assessment is a destination [goal]. I can get there myself or ask for instructor’s help. Instructors give me idea how to get there and I learn doing this, it helps to save my time. All assessment practices helped me to understand expectations, what is important to know to achieve the standard of the institution (Samantha, p. 4, L22-25).

Establishing new relationships with instructors and communicating with peers, she constructed her knowledge about key assessment requirements and expectations. Samantha
determined assessment as a “destination” for L2 graduate students in order to achieve their learning goals. In light of the research questions of my study, Samantha acculturated academically doing her assignments. She made mistakes, learned about them and improved. Samantha said that assessment was a core point in her graduate school learning experience in terms of surviving the program.

Rachel

I feel I control my own learning and all my assignments teach me this (Rachel, p.3, L6-7).

Rachel is a graduate student from China. She is doing her second Master’s in social sciences in Canada. This is her first experience travelling abroad and living in an English language speaking country. Her Chinese Bachelor and Master’s degrees were English immersion programs with the students’ choice to take every course in English or in Chinese.

Interestingly, Rachel mentioned several times during our interview that she had power over her own learning:

I emphasize one point. I control my learning my academic life. All of these assignments teach me this. I feel power, I have power, it gives me a lot of pressure. I have to be responsible for myself, this is the difference. I was taught to do this and that in my previous experience but here no one says what to do. I have to do what I really want to do. I appreciate it. This is a real education. This is what the education means (Rachel, p.6, L1-5).

Being a teacher, she emphasized mostly cultural differences in teaching and learning approaches in Canada and China, particularly unlimited freedom in choosing what to read and how to shape assignments in terms of ideas, critiques and further research. Freedom in choosing made her responsible for assessment products, demanded critical reasoning skills and a lot of preparation time. Rachel emphasized students’ responsibility for their study and the emotional pressure as a consequence of that responsibility. She also explained cultural differences in learning styles in Canada and China and her cultural and educational
unawareness of assessment expectations at the beginning of the program. Rachel realized that she was the only person responsible for her study, research and degree. In China, she was more dependent on her supervisor in making decisions related to her learning. She had new assessment experiences which put psychological and emotional pressure upon her, but also allowed her to achieve her learning goals, to build her understanding of assessment in Canada and thereby academically acculturate.

**Sandra**

As soon as you understand how to fulfill assessment requirements, you understand the approach how to study here: assessment is a gate to integrate into academic life (Sandra, follow-up interview, p.2, L3-4).

Sandra is a Master’s student in health sciences from Russia. She was a medical doctor in Russia for many years and also has a PhD in Physiotherapy. In order to be a physiotherapist in Canada, she needed a Master’s degree in Physiotherapy of a Canadian university.

Sandra failed the first midterm with multiple choice examinations and was terrified to be dismissed. At the beginning of the program, she did not know about the University’s policy that she could have extra time at examinations as a L2 student.

I am very grateful to the university that it has a program/policy that allows to ESL students get extra time during examination. I didn’t take extra time for my first midterm. I didn’t know and if I knew I probably would not take it as I am very proud person. I always wanted to prove I am as smart as others in my group despite my second language. It was wrong. It was beyond my ability to pass through assessment (Sandra, p.3, L18-22).

Sandra mentioned that a lack of professional terminology in English and her inability to speak with the patients in their everyday life language, a lack of simple words disturbed her very much, influenced her grades negatively and bothered her during the placements. Unfamiliarity with multiple choice examinations as an assessment practice was the main challenge in a process of assessment understanding. The lack of skills how to pass this kind of assessment hampered in achieving her learning goals. In the process of discovering of new
learning approaches and strategies, she learned about assessment expectations and built her knowledge about them. As she said, her assimilation, but I would say, her integration into the academic life was through assessment. She explained it through deep reflections on her assessment experiences. When she realized that she can fail her program and her dream to be a physiotherapist in Canada, assessment became a matter of life and death, a matter of surviving. She just wanted to pass the examinations and assignments to receive the passing score and graduate. Sandra communicated with L1 peers, asked them for clarification of the assessment tasks and procedures and actively figured out the expectations and requirements with instructors. She pointed out that the English language proficiency is very important for success at the University, but the knowledge how to prepare and pass assessment and evaluation procedures are crucial as well.

Amelia

All assignments were those key points that directed my learning and led me to my learning goals (Amelia, p.1, L15-16).

Amelia is a Master’s student in social sciences, she is from Russia. She has a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in language arts from her home country. Her wish to get a Master’s degree at the Canadian university was motivated by the intention to improve English, to update knowledge in her professional field and to join the Canadian job market with a Canadian degree. When we spoke about assessment and evaluation practices in the Canadian university she gave me deep and constructive reflections stressing anxiety and fatigue as a consequence of studying in a second language:

I wonder, was my study so emotional, exciting and anxious because I do it in a second language or because I returned to school in thirteen years after my graduation in my country, or because I am an immigrant and have to build my life from the very zero, or because I don’t know the expectations towards assessment? I believe all that influenced my accomplishments. On the one hand, I am very motivated to finish the program because my kids’ future
depends on my study. On the other hand, the physical and emotional stress is very high…it is very draining (Amelia, follow-up interview, p.1, L3-10).

Learning anxiety and second language anxiety were ongoing challenging factors for Amelia, but at the same time helped her to organize her learning, to communicate with peers and instructors, to establish new contacts and to build her knowledge about the school culture. Her anxiety about fulfilling the oral assignments was always higher than about her written assignments. However, she coped well with all course assignments, learned professional information, organized her knowledge, significantly improved her English language skills, and as she said she achieved her learning goals. She expressed that assessment and evaluation experiences were key points for her adjustment to the university life.

Pamela

It took me half of the term to realize I follow this paper, called “outline” (Pamela, p.3, L2-3).

Pamela is a graduate student originally from Iran. Her first two degrees were in Philosophy. She also had a Master’s Degree in Muslim Culture that she received in United Kingdom. One and half years ago, she moved to Canada with her family to do her third Master’s in humanities. She mentioned that she never had any emotional or frustrating moments concerning her academic life here in Canada. She appreciated her faculty support in every day issues. She underlined that Canadian culture and attitude to people from other countries were very friendly and comforting comparing to her previous experience in United Kingdom, where she felt lost and lonely. Her biggest concern was about the English language:

My [TOEFL] score was good. But I believed I could speak better. Only here, I realized I had difficulties with speaking, other people spoke better. But I think, with the time, I can deal better with this issue… It is always a main issue – language (Pamela, p.2, L9-11).
Pamela pointed out that speaking was very challenging for her, although she had a required TOEFL score in the speaking section to be admitted to the program. Moreover, she spent one year in United Kingdom before she came to Canada and was already exposed to the English language in the country, where English is a national language. She did not speak about any difficulties associated with written assignments, just mentioned she needed more preparation time for them mostly because of the English language. She said that she has been improving English constantly and it allows her to feel more confident about fulfilling assessment requirements.

**Valery**

I had always low grades comparing with my classmates just because I didn’t understand the expectations regarding required assignments. It took me a long period of time to get it (Valery, follow-up interview).

Valery is a very energetic young lady in her middle twenties. At the time I interviewed her she was finishing her Master’s in Occupational Therapy and had already found a job. Valery has a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree with Honors in Psychology from Ukraine. She was very proud about her high achievements in her home country owing to the fact she received a scholarship that covered all her educational and living expenses in Canada. Valery insisted that she studied like “crazy”, but always had low marks comparing with her Canadian classmates. It was very embarrassing because she used to be among the first students at her university in Ukraine. She expressed the negative attitude to multiple choice examinations. Every time she had multiple choice examinations during the program, she was close to failing. Interestingly, her husband who was also from Ukraine, was admitted to the same program one year later and always had very high grades, usually over the average of the group mark. Valery believed that was possible because she had explained to him the assessment expectations beforehand, and had been actually his mentor during the program.
She stressed several times the importance of mentors’ and peers’ support and repeated this idea during our follow-up meeting. Unknown assessment expectations and unfamiliar host educational recourses left Valery in the dark regarding how to fulfill assessment requirements at the beginning of the program. Communicating with peers and instructors and studying hard, Valery fulfilled assessment requirements, but she remained resistant to understanding some assessment practices’ purposes. She insisted that her low grades did not reflect her actual knowledge, particularly, in multiple choice examinations, although she constructed and organized her knowledge about assessment and evaluation procedures that helped her to cope with the graduate school requirements.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented and analyzed data according to the main four categories pointed out by the research participants as the most essential regarding their assessment and evaluation experiences at one Canadian university.

All research participants identified assessment and evaluation as the key learning process for successful academic acculturation and learning experience. All six participants coped with their Master’s programs and their assessment requirements, but this process was extremely stressful, and sometimes painful. The research results suggest that the L2 graduate students have to develop new knowledge in three academic domains simultaneously in order to survive at the program: English language skills, graduate course’s content and assessment literacy. Some of the research participants realized the mismatch in assessment expectations and their understanding of assessment requirements through exam and assignment failure. The other participants learned via receiving oral and written feedback from their instructors, but no one knew about assessment expectations and requirements at the beginning of the program. The main finding of this study is the crucial role of assessment literacy for these L2
graduate students that they needed at the beginning of their study in Canada for the smooth academic acculturation process and successful learning experience.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This study examined the academic acculturation of the international graduate students through their engagement in course assessment practices. The interviews helped to gain in-depth understanding of how the L2 graduate students adapted to the assessment and evaluation procedures at the university, which cannot be entirely revealed in survey studies. Although the sample was relatively small (6 participants), there was a good mix of graduate students from different cultural and language backgrounds. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed these students to speak freely and openly about their experiences and perceptions of assessment and evaluation on campus. Current research finds that assessment and evaluation is one of the key learning processes that influences the academic acculturation of L2 graduate students and challenges the linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of student adjustment.

Below, I endeavor to answer the three research questions of my study. I will also discuss limitations of my study and provide recommendations and implications for supporting staff, instructors and international graduate students based on the study’s findings.

Research Question 1

What aspects of academic assessment and evaluation processes do international students identify as most challenging and most enjoyable?

This study identified written assignments and academic writing as the most challenging aspects of assessment and evaluation for my participants. The finding was consistent with previous research (Berman & Cheng, 2001; Huang 2010; Horowitz, 1986; Leki, 1995; Xu, 1991). According to Berman & Cheng (2001), international graduate students perceived written assignments such as essays and multiple choice examinations as the most...
challenging aspects of assessment. Huang (2010) also reported that academic writing is the most important language domain for the successful learning process. According to Horowitz (1986) and Leki (1995), L2 students are required to organize their written assignments following three main steps of academic writing: 1) selecting relevant data from sources, 2) reorganizing the data in response to the given question or issue and 3) using the academic English language. However, L2 students struggle through all three stages of preparation. All participants of this study faced challenges in locating relevant sources at the beginning of their program. They did not understand assessment expectations, particularly, regarding citations, formatting and critical thinking common for North American academia, because they did not have previous experience, and learned about all issues mentioned above mostly via mistakes and errors. Writing in academic English was an ongoing problem for all research participants because this skill requires not only higher order cognitive skills, but also certain level of the English language competence in professional and academic vocabulary and academic writing patterns. It is important to stress that only one participant of this study, Sandra, attended a non-credit English for Academic Purposes graduate course offered voluntarily to all graduate students of the university. The other five L2 students used only the Writing Centre as a support resource, but not to the full extent because they were unaware of its existence at the beginning of their program. They were also unaware of the appointment culture; when they were required to book appointments two weeks before their assignment deadlines.

According to the research findings, oral presentation was the most enjoyable academic assessment experience. All participants found the preparation for and performance of actual presentations valuable in terms of their learning. This result seems to be contradictory to the findings of previous research studies (Berman & Cheng,
They found that oral presentations were very challenging for L2 students, but I would like to stress here that enjoyable and challenging are not necessary antonyms in the context of this study. Morita (2000) supports this study finding and suggests that presentations constitute a valuable opportunity for L2 students’ academic learning. However, the L2 students identified the following difficulties with oral presentations: (1) linguistic, such as pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary; (2) sociocultural, such as lack of critical thinking skills; and (3) psychological, such as lack of confidence and anxiety. Oral presentations often place pressure on a student to stimulate or satisfy the audience intellectually. To compensate for these difficulties, the L2 graduate students in my research employed a variety of strategies such as: conducting rehearsals and providing handouts, extra written notes, and visually attractive PowerPoint slides. As a result, they perceived oral presentations as an opportunity to learn, to demonstrate knowledge and skills, and to gain confidence. They realized that this kind of assessment led them to their learning goals, introduced them into the learning community and allowed them to overcome their language obstacles.

**Research Question 2**

> What prior cultural and educational influences facilitate or hinder the understanding of, and attitude toward, assessment and evaluation practices in this Canadian university as perceived by international and immigrant graduate students?

Students and instructors in the host country tend to share certain unstated values, assumptions and expectations regarding assessment and classroom practices. Assessment literacy can be the conscious or unconscious knowledge underlying assumptions and values about education (Cadman, 2000; Durkin, 2008; Smith, 2011; Stobart, 2005). The challenge for international students is that often the assumed knowledge or context is implicit. In a
sense, L2 graduate students need to become assessment literate to be successful in their academic study. An assessment literate student has a basic, shared context within which to discuss salient issues with others. The argument for becoming assessment literate is not that of conformity, but rather empowerment. Unawareness about particular features of studying in Canada can lead to negative consequences such as failure and course dropout. Sandra’s misunderstanding of the “midterm” (timeline rather than examination) is a glaring example, which shows the lack of assessment literacy. Her misinterpretation of the term led her to an exam failure. The participants of this study stressed the following cultural and educational features that hinder their understanding of assessment practices they experienced: 1) the lack of critical thinking skills, 2) misunderstanding of the relationship between supervisors/instructors and students, and 3) unawareness of course outline role.

Among Canadian universities, one of the practices of academic argumentation is rooted in the Socratic-Aristotelian exploration of “truth” through the disciplined process of critical thinking. Objective truth is sought through logical evaluation of the weak and strong points of a theory, statement or proposal and comparing and contrasting it with alternative views or explanations (Durkin, 2008). Other researchers argue that this is an ethnocentric view and that different cultures employ and value different styles of reasoning (Cadman, 2000; Horowitz, 1986). However, a western paradigm is historically employed in academic settings in North America (Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2010; De Vita, 2000; Durkin, 2008). For many L2 students, conforming to the North American standards while reflecting on their previous academic experience in home countries and on traditional ways of studying requires “a delicate balancing acts” (Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2010, p.69). Since individuals see the world through their respective cultural lenses, it follows that they would understand the requirements regarding written assignments through their personal worldview and experience.
(Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2010). Consequently, international graduate students, who possess other cultural and/or educational experiences, would produce an assignment reflecting their experiences and personal interpretation of the assignment, while the instructor would be expecting a product of the Socratic-Aristotelian argumentation, which is the requirement of this university. Only Pamela, whose major was in Philosophy, did not struggle with this issue because she was aware of the Socratic-Aristotelian argumentation. However, all other participants maintained that critical thinking was challenging partly through their limited previous experience.

The research results suggest that the international graduate students needed time, practice and instructors/supervisors’ support to develop critical thinking skills and to cope with assessment requirements. This finding is supported by some previous research studies (Cadman, 2000; Cheng & Fox, 2008; Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004; De Vita, 2000; Smith 2011; Tian 2007). For example, De Vita (2000) points out that a well-structured and logically organized written assignment has cultural boundaries. It means that different cultures have distinctive preferences for constructing logical arguments and critical approaches. Students entering academic institutions have different amounts and kinds of prior experience with academic discourse, even when their language is the same as that of the educational institution. Mature English-speaking students entering higher education after some years of absence may experience change, difficulty, or crises of confidence (Ivanic, 1998). They need to discover the rules of an unfamiliar world (Duff, 2010). However, L2 students can have different cultural backgrounds that potentially may hinder their academic acculturation and learning success. Carjuzaa & Ruff (2010) report on the mismatch in assessment expectations, when the instructor and the aboriginal graduate student operated from different worldviews regarding logical argumentation and critical thinking when writing appears to be determined.
by cultural values and socialization. Carjuzaa & Ruff (2010) called expected argumentation style in graduate assignments a “Socratic, direct, linear Western communication style” (p.70) that tends to get directly to the point. However, the research participant of the study submitted her graduate assignment written in an indirect, circular manner which is more common among American Indians. De Vita (2000) also pointed out that not all languages follow the linear structure of English, a structure which in essay writing, is characterized by an introduction, a statement of the thesis and a conclusion. Some languages follow a circular structure, some adopt a cultural-specific rhetorical style, while others allow and even encourage repetition. This means that “what may appear to be an unstructured, disorganized, off the point or repetitive piece of work, may in fact be written in accordance with the discourse style and logical patterns of the home language” (De Vita, 2000, p. 172). These experiences are not limited to L2 students. Special learners can also experience challenges regarding employed assessment and evaluation procedures and need to adjust to new academic discourses (Abrams, 2008; Murray, Wren, & Keys, 2008). However, for students coming from minority languages and backgrounds, the challenges contain a very complex nature. L2 international students need to adjust to linguistic, academic and cultural distinctive features of their new institutional life simultaneously and quickly, which can be extremely stressful (Cadman, 2000; Fletcher, & Stren, 1989; Myles, & Cheng, 2003; Smith, 2011).

The North-American academia values equality; instructors and students prefer to be informal with one another (Robinson, 1992). Such instructor-student relationships can be puzzling for many international students (Barnes, 1984; Myles, & Cheng, 2003; Robinson, 1992). Instructors’ behavior, for example, smiling, being open and friendly, indicates to international students that the instructor-student relationship is open and free. However, international graduate students may be unaware of instructors’ approachability and they can
ask for material explanation, assessment clarification and mentoring support. For example, Sandra said that she had never approached her professors in Russia if she had had any questions. The research participants of this study were unaware of approachability and informality in relationships among instructors/supervisors and did not ask questions, did not approach instructors even in the critical situations such as the one experienced by Samantha. She avoided contacting the instructor regarding critical assessment issues until the very moment she realized she could fail the course. If she had approached the professor and explained that she did not know how to fulfill the citations and formatting requirements, she would have avoided this problem.

Traditional academic course planning and implementing also reflects equality in Canadian education (De Vita, 2000; Stobart, 2005). Barnes (1984) describes the notion of “contract” between instructors and students. This “contract” is the course outline, which details course assignments, required readings and grading policies. According to the research results, the international graduate students did not possess the knowledge regarding the course outlines and their role for successful learning. This lack of awareness was a reflection on their previous educational experiences in home countries, where course outlines were not used. However, the research participants expressed that course outlines were very helpful and useful for understanding course content, organization and assessment requirements. They appreciated course outlines in guiding their learning especially stressing the importance for assessment purposes.

This research finding supports the results of studies by Cadman (2000), Cheng & Fox (2008) and Durkin (2008). Through interviews with the L2 graduate students in this study, it became apparent that most students eventually learned about the host academic culture towards assessment and evaluation requirements and expectations, particularly regarding
critical thinking, student/instructor relationship and the role of course outlines, but it was a complex interaction of linguistic and socio-cultural experiences.

**Research Question 3**

*How can the learning experience of international students in relation to assessment and evaluation be described in terms of the acculturation process and learning outcomes?*

The international graduate students of this study grew accustomed to the academic culture of graduate school and into academic oral and written discourses by preparing for, observing, negotiating and performing written assignments and oral presentations repeatedly throughout the academic year. The instructors’ guidelines and constructive feedback contributed to this acculturation process significantly. At the beginning of the program, the L2 graduate students did not possess knowledge about assessment expectations and requirements; they did not use available support resources fully.

As Horowitz (1986) points out, what learners believe about what they need to learn strongly influences their receptiveness to learning. In this context, I would add “how to learn” is an extremely influential aspect of acculturation for L2 students. It is difficult for learners to self-diagnose what and how to learn accurately because they are only aware of what is already in their consciousness. In other words, my research participants did identify challenges that are in the zone of conscious competence, like critical thinking according Socratic-Aristotelian argumentation and sociocultural competences expected in Canadian universities. However, it occurred via intensive assessment practicing and in the process of assessment preparation that all research participants were able to alter their approaches to assessment and evaluation procedures and pursue new ones when their first attempts did not produce the desired results. Some of the students were more conscious of their strategies than others as in the case with Sandra, when she realized after her exam failure that her learning style is not appropriate for
the assessment procedures used in Canada, others, for example, Samantha, took slightly longer to shift to alternative approaches to fulfill assessment requirements when necessary, but they were all flexible and fairly richly endowed with ideas about what to do.

Research studies of L2 students and academic acculturation towards assessment and evaluation across disciplines (Cheng & Fox, 2008; Huang, 2010; Smith, 2011; Xu, 1991) seem to show that assessment demands vary considerably from one discipline to the next and even from one course to the next within disciplines (Leki, 1995). It is important to diagnose L2 students’ academic and cultural incompetence and address support in better understanding of assessment requirements for successful learning experiences.

All students are challenged by the demands of higher education, but international students are particularly placed under more pressure by the confrontation with a new academic culture and the need to become linguistically competent and knowledge competent quickly (Cummins, 2009; Persaud, 1993). Coping with a new environment demands the learning of new behaviors and this process can be very demanding. Anxiety is a common reaction, which can become chronic until adjustment is reached (Berry, 1994). A high level of anxiety caused by the academic assessment tasks was emphasized by all six participants of this study. Anxiety was caused by the demanding nature of the program they studied, the need for a higher level of English language and the dissonance between the host and original country academic culture. It is important to stress that learning anxiety and language anxiety is a mixture of language and academic cultural differences. As Berry (1994) notes, there exists a thin line between adaptation that enhances life chances and an extreme experience that “virtually destroys one’s ability to carry on” (p.137). Overcoming the painful experience of cultural shock is usually a function of time and involves a process of adaptation (Berry, 1994).
A further obstacle to all participants of this study was the bridge between their level of English language ability and the academic assessment demands placed on them at the beginning of their program. There is a discussion in the literature about the role of culture and language in the academic acculturation process, with some scholars emphasizing the importance of the English language ability (Fletcher & Stren, 1989; Xu, 1991) and other researchers stressing more the cross-cultural competence (Robinson, 1992; Stobart, 2005). It is difficult to reach a clear conclusion, which is more exhausting – language difficulties or cultural differences as these two aspects are often intertwined. In academic life, and in relation to this study, I would suggest that academic success is impossible without strong language skills; however, linguistic competence alone will not guarantee successful academic acculturation. L2 students should be linguistically and culturally competent to cope with the intensive assessment at the graduate level (Cheng & Fox, 2008; De Vita, 2000; Duff, 2001). They have to understand the host university expectations in language and culture domains regarding assessment and evaluation procedures, in other words, to be literate about assessment requirements and know how to achieve them.

**Limitations**

Before concluding, I would like to acknowledge the limitations of the present study. First, I did not draw a random sample but relied instead on volunteers as participants, therefore, the results may represent the perceptions, challenges or successes of these students, or how they adapted to the processes (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Further, I did not study specific groups of students in one discipline but examined instead a broad range of L2 graduate students: in health sciences, social sciences and humanities. Therefore, the opinions of the international graduate students in the present study are limited to this diverse assessment experience. I also recognize that the findings of this study are based on students’

65
accounts of their academic acculturation processes and their perceptions of assessment and evaluation procedures within one Canadian university study context. Therefore, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution. As Cheng & Fox (2008) mentioned:

We cannot account for all we know because much of what we know is tacit. When we do account for what we know or how we know it, we shape our accounts in relation to the particular setting, people, purpose or event in which our accounts are situated (p. 327).

Researcher bias may also be a limitation of this study, as I facilitated all interviews and analyzed the data myself. Moreover, I am a L2 international graduate student myself, which can invite my own bias in interpreting the data, but I believe this fact contributed to the study positively. It allowed my participants to speak openly and be explicit about the issues under discussion as they trusted me. To optimize the credibility and the validity of the findings, participants’ reviewed the transcripts for accuracy of data (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Due to the nature of the present study being qualitative and small in scale, it is not possible to make generalizations to a wider population. However, certain common patterns revealed from the participants’ accounts, enriched our understanding of assessment impact on the academic acculturation, and provided a useful point for further exploration of this issue.

**Implications for Further Research**

Future research is needed to find out more about how assessment practices influence academic acculturation of L2 students. Research in this area has mostly examined L2 students across different disciplines, and generalizations have been made about their linguistic and cultural needs in order to succeed (Berman & Cheng, 2001; Cheng & Fox, 2008; Duff 2010; Durkin 2008; Fletcher & Stren, 1989; Huang, 2010; Smith, 2011; Woodrow 2006; Xu, 1991). However, it would be useful to investigate the academic acculturation processes towards assessment of groups of students within a particular discipline, as the academic requirements
regarding assessment vary, may address different issues and need specific approaches. For example, medicine-related L2 students need to be literate about assessment approaches and trained for multiple choice examinations, but education students need critical thinking skills for academic writing. It would be also important to study both male and female perceptions of assessment impact on the academic acculturation, since this study had only female participants. Significant contribution to understanding the issue may require the use of quantitative methods, for example, questionnaires to illustrate patterns across a large sample regarding academic acculturation through assessment.

The phenomenological approach and case studies of L2 students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds can further illuminate the process of academic acculturation and its relationship with assessment in depth. Such a research study can possibly empower students and instructors with knowledge about the challenges that can hinder positive experience and achieving learning goals. It seems also important to examine views and perceptions regarding experience of assessment and evaluation of L2 graduate students who did not survive their graduate programs to identify failure causes and to prevent dropping out in the future. It would be valuable to listen to the perceptions of instructors and supervisors as only with the triangulation of the data from students and instructors we can see the whole picture of the issue.

**Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations**

The findings of the study suggest that the L2 graduate students’ academic acculturation was strongly influenced by their assessment experience. By preparing for and performing different kinds of assignments, the L2 graduate students improved their linguistic and sociocultural skills and gradually adapted to the academic study culture. The L2 graduate students strongly related their ability to handle academic tasks with achieving their learning
goals and academic success. Therefore, this study’s results provide practical implications and recommendations for instructors, academic advisors and student advisors. It can be helpful for international graduate students in terms of understanding potential academic challenges.

One way of preparing students for assessment and evaluation procedures in Canadian universities is to include explicit instruction on assessment expectations and requirements in English for Academic Purposes courses and to organize workshops through the International Centre and the Society of Graduate and Professional Students. According to the research findings, specific topics, for example, “Assessment Literacy” can inform new international students about sociocultural and academic specifications characterizing the academic life in Canada. The involvement of both senior L1 and L2 graduate students as mentors into discussions, role plays and problem solving using case studies could significantly contribute to an understanding of assessment expectations and assessment performance.

Moreover, instructors should be informed about the challenges of L2 graduate students towards an understanding of assessment expectations and requirements via professional development sessions and workshops as Berry (1991) suggests that acculturation is a two-way process when the host community is inclusive and open while novices learn about new rules. Academic acculturation can be a key discussion topic for a professional development seminar to learn about acculturation stages and academic and non-academic issues international students face during their first period of adaptation in Canada. At the beginning of course seminars, instructors should emphasize the importance of course outlines, particularly, how to approach every assignment. It is also recommended to explain assessment expectations and requirements in detail addressing graduate students’ common issues, particularly, critical thinking approaches to written and oral assignments, appropriate academic language use, formatting and citations. Instructors should also inform L1 and L2
students about available support resources, for example, individual sessions at the Writing Centre, non-credit courses for English for Academic Purposes, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the International Centre and the Society for Graduate and Professional Students. An explicit course outline with detailed descriptions of expectations and requirements regarding assignments and examinations is crucial for positive assessment experiences of L2 students.

L2 graduate students invest a great deal of effort, financial resources and time to be admitted to Canadian universities; they are highly motivated to succeed in the new linguistic and cultural surroundings. They need to discover all possible support resources, ask their peers and instructors for clarifications and explanations towards assessment expectations and requirements before assessment deadlines. They should also be encouraged to explore the institutional web site to obtain information about support resources available on the campus. The graduate workshops, non-credit courses and seminars are suggested rescheduling from evening to the regular school and day care hours as many L2 graduate students are parents and do not have an access to afterhours child care facilities. This strategy will significantly improve the learning experience of L2 graduate students and make the process of academic acculturation smoother.

**Conclusion**

The highly qualified and motivated L2 graduate students in this study identified assessment and evaluation as the key process for successful academic acculturation. All six participants prospered throughout their Master’s program and their assessment requirements, but this process was extremely challenging, and sometimes painful. The research results suggest that L2 graduate students have to develop new knowledge in three academic domains simultaneously in order to be successful in the program, i.e., the English language skills, graduate courses’ content, and assessment literacy. Some research participants realized the
mismatch in assessment expectations and their understanding of assessment requirements through exam and assignment failure. Others learned through oral and written feedback from their instructors, but not one knew about assessment expectations and requirements at the beginning of the program. It was like a journey in the dark constructing the knowledge about assessment and evaluation procedures. Berry (1991) suggests that integration can only be freely chosen and successfully achieved by foreign groups when the host society has an open and inclusive orientation toward cultural diversity. Moreover, academic acculturation is not a one-way transmission from the host academic community to novices, but rather it is a complex interaction between academic, personal, social and cultural experiences that allow for academic acculturation (Cheng & Fox, 2008). The research participants reported that they actively interacted with a variety of academic and non-academic resources to develop their own learning, assessment understanding and assessment strategies. However, it is important to recognize that by facilitating international students to learn about assessment procedures and assessment requirements, the university offers a better learning experience and consequently better learning outcomes for L2 graduate students. Certainly, this research suggests to the university more effective service if it will develop relationships with L2 graduate students based on a mutual understanding of the academic acculturation process through assessment, as it uniquely embraces linguistic and non-linguistic factors of adjustment.
References


Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What kinds of assessment practices have helped you to achieve your learning goals?

2. What is your most positive experience regards assessment practices at Queen’s University? What is the most frustrating one? Please, provide examples and let me know, why this happened? Please, don’t mention the name of you instructor to protect his/her identity.

3. If you are looking at one of your course syllabuses, what kind of assessment and evaluation practices do you find the most challenging/enjoyable to you? Why?

4. If you would remember and compare your experience in Canada and in your country at the university setting, what seems to you new in the process of assessment and evaluation? Why? Can you give an example?

5. What kinds of assessment practices are used or not used in your country?

6. If you would compare your first semester and the second one, which one was easier or more difficult in terms of assessment? Can you explain why? Can you give any examples? What have you achieved or have not?

7. What kind of help would you appreciate if you could reverse time and start your study again regards assessment practices?

8. What would you advise to a new international student in terms of expectations regards assessment practices to avoid difficulties, which you have had?
Appendix B
GREB Research Proposal Clearance

November 22, 2011

Ms. Anna Zuzun, Master’s Student
Faculty of Education
Duncan McArthur Hall
Queen’s University
511 Union Street
Kingston, ON K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-587-11; Romeo # 6006416
Title: “GEDUC-587-11 How Summative and Formative Assessment Practices Influence the Process of Academic Acculturation of International Graduate Students at One Canadian University”

Dear Ms. Zuzun:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled “GEDUC-587-11 How Summative and Formative Assessment Practices Influence the Process of Academic Acculturation of International Graduate Students at One Canadian University” for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at https://services.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Adverse Event Report). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To make an amendment, access the application at https://services.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Amendment to Approved Study Form. These changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

cc: Dr. Liying Cheng, Faculty Supervisor
    Dr. Lesly Wade-Woolley, Chair, Unit REB
    Erin Wickham, c/o Graduate Studies and Bureau of Research
Appendix C
INVITATION POSTER FOR RESEARCH INTERVIEW

How summative and formative assessment practices influence the process of
academic acculturation of international graduate students at one Canadian university

Dear International Graduate Students,

I am a Master’s student at the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University. I am writing to request your participation in my study, which is part of my Master of Education Program at Queen’s University. The purpose of my research is to understand how summative and formative assessment practices influence the process of academic acculturation of international graduate students.

In this study, I will conduct two face to face interviews with you. The first interview will take about 60 minutes and the second follow up interview will be around 30 minutes. I will also ask you to bring two course outlines for research analysis, which you find challenging and enjoyable (course code and instructor’s personal and contact information should be erased beforehand). If you are:

1. second language speakers of English (L2 students);
2. 2nd year Master’s students studying at this university;
3. Have been in Canada for less than three years;
4. Have experienced post-secondary education in their own country,

You are invited to participate in my study!

I believe that your thought, perspectives and reflections from your learning experiences in Canada will contribute to the meaningful data to my study. There is no compensation for participation in this study.

If you are interested in being interviewed, please, contact me, Anna Zyuzin via e-mail a.zyuzin@queensu.ca. Any questions about study participation may be directed to Anna Zyuzin or to my supervisor Dr. Liying Cheng at 613-533-6000 ext. 77431 or via e-mail liying.cheng@queensu.ca.
Appendix D

Letter of Information

Dear Graduate Students,

This study - *How summative and formative assessment practices influence the process of academic acculturation of international graduate students at one Canadian university* has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen’s policies.

Thank you for your interest in my study. This research is being conducted by me, Anna Zyuzin under the supervision of Dr. Liying Cheng, at the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario.

The aim of this study is to explore how summative and formative assessment practices influence the academic acculturation of international graduate students at one Canadian University. This study can be helpful in terms of evidence for both Canadian higher educational institutions as well as international graduate students, by securing the success of their study through support. The study will require: a 60-minute face-to-face audio taped interview; two course outlines (syllabuses) of your taken courses, which you liked or disliked in term of assessment and evaluation practices; and a 30-minute follow-up audio taped interview. The total time of participation in this study is 90 minutes. The interview and the follow-up will take place at the main campus of Queen’s University (in the library or in the study room). The interview, the first part of the study, aims to identify, what kinds of assessment practices have helped graduate students to achieve their learning goals; what is their most positive experience regarding assessment practices at Queen’s University; what the most negative one is. The interview will be audio taped, transcribed and the transcript will be sent to you for verification. The course outline collection, the second part of the research, serves the purpose of further understanding of assessment and evaluation practices, which graduate students identify as the most challenging/enjoyable and why (course code and instructor’s personal and contact information should be erased beforehand to protect personal instructor’s information, you don’t need to mention the instructors’ names). The follow-up interview, the third part of the study, intends to receive more evidence about possible aroused questions.

There are no known physical, psychological, economic, or social risks associated with this study. Your participation is absolutely voluntary. Please, answer all questions as frankly as possible, you should not feel obliged to answer any question that you find objectionable or that makes you feel uncomfortable. You can withdraw at any time with no effect on your standing in school. You can also ask to remove your data from the study. We will keep your responses confidential to the extent possible. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to this information. Results of this study can be disseminated. In accordance with Queen’s policy, data will be retained for a minimum of five years. After five years, data will be destroyed. If data will be used for the secondary analysis it will contain no identifying information. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at professional or scholar conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and
will never breach individual confidentiality. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings contacting the researcher.

Any questions about study participation may be directed to Anna Zyuzin at a.zyuzin@queensu.ca or my supervisor Dr. Liying Cheng at 613-533-6000 ext. 77431 or via e-mail living.cheng@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613-533-6081.
Appendix E

Consent Form

How summative and formative assessment practices influence the process of academic acculturation of international graduate students at one Canadian university

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Anna Zyuzin.

Retain the second copy for your records.

I, ________________________________, have read, understood, and retained the Letter of Information and have had my questions about the study answered, and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I will be participating in the study investigating how summative and formative assessment practices influence the process of academic acculturation of international graduate students at one Canadian university. I have been informed that my involvement consists of participation in a 60-minute conversational interview, submitting two course outlines (course code and instructor’s personal and contact information should be erased beforehand) and a 30-minutes follow-up interview with my full consent, the total time of participation in this study – 90 minutes. I know the conversational interview and the follow-up interview will be audio recorded with the audio recording device to do a transcription and analysis of my interview for the purpose of this research. I understand that my participation is purely voluntary, that I am not required to answer any uncomfortable questions to me, and that I am free to withdraw from the study with removal of all or part of my data at any time with no effect. If I wish to withdraw with the collected data I can also do it in case the study is not published yet. I can contact the researcher and tell about my wish to cancel my participation in this study. I have been assured that my name will not be used in this study and that my identity will protected to the extent possible. I know that the data will be used for research purposes only. There are no known risks for participation in this study.

If I have any questions regarding this research, I can contact Anna Zyuzin at 613-545-2272, e-mail: a.zyuzin@queensu.ca, or her supervisor Dr. Liying Cheng at 533-6000 ext. 77431, e-mail: living.cheng@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or e-mail: chair.GREB@queensu.ca

I have read the above statement and freely consent to participate in this research. I agree to be interviewed and audio recorded for the purpose of this research.
Appendix F

Sample of Interview Transcripts

Q1: What kinds of assessment practices have helped you to achieve your learning goals?

Pamela: Because I study humanities all my assignments are very theoretical but I have freedom to choose every subject. I really like all outlines they help me a lot to go through the learning process. They help me to understand what source I can use, procedures (for example for essay). If the instructor provides me in the beginning with these specific things (outline or advise) I find it very helpful. I can easily gather the information and write easily.

Q4: If you would remember and compare your experience in Canada and in your country at the university setting, what seems to you new in the process of assessment and evaluation? Why? Can you give an example?

Pamela: When I came here I found a big change in the (teaching) method I the of teaching and even in the subject. In the beginning it was very difficult for me.

Q: can you give me examples?

Pamela: In my country we deal with the book, we have to go through the text and learn it. We didn’t have presentations (power point). When I came I found it was very common to use oral presentations. I find it very useful in terms of communication, I became more confident to talk in front of the group, class. Useful, but at the same time very difficult. In my country, to present something I had to go and find information, just gather it, describe. The process is more descriptive, but here, it is more exploratory, exploring. For example, I had to find out the rules of the issue, reflect, be more creative about the subject and then to come to the conclusion. And it was more productive for me. I learned more. And it was the difference. Of course, in the beginning, it was very difficult but now I am more experienced than my peers in my country.

Q2: What is your most positive experience regards assessment practices at Queen’s University? What is the most frustrating one? Please, provide examples and let me know, why this happened? Please, don’t mention the name of you instructor to protect his/her identity.

Pamela: yes, I had a class with the professor, we had a presentation (3-4 people in the group), they were very experienced, my peers, probably principals, very professional. It was very difficult for me to come along with ideas, because they knew, what is going on with the Ontario educational system, I mean, what are the rules here. When I started to work with group it was very hard, so much pressure on me. When we presented, my peers did better than me, because I was so nervous speaking in front of the group. But in the end, the instructor personally came to me and told that it was a good job, expressed his appreciation of my ideas, told about my creativity. And I really liked it. I was surprised, he gave us good grades. He looked at me as good as other students. I got more happy, confident, I think, after that. It was important to be confident for me.
## Appendix G

### Emerging Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerged Categories</th>
<th>Pamela</th>
<th>Samantha</th>
<th>Amelia</th>
<th>Rachel</th>
<th>Sandra</th>
<th>Valery</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enjoyable and Challenging Assessment Practices:</strong></td>
<td>* * * * *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Performing Oral Presentations</td>
<td>* * * *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Receiving Feedback</td>
<td>* * * *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Doing Reflections</td>
<td>* * * *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Writing Assignments</td>
<td>* * * * *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Understanding Assessment Expectations:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Understanding expectations to multiple choice examinations</td>
<td></td>
<td>* *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Understanding expectations to oral presentations</td>
<td>* * * *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Understanding expectations to written assignments</td>
<td>* * * * * *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflection on Previous Educational/Cultural Background:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Developing Critical Thinking</td>
<td>* * * *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Academic Culture Awareness:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Supervisor/Instructor – Student Relationship</td>
<td>* * * *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Course Outline</td>
<td>* * *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychological and Physical Factors:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Second Language Anxiety</td>
<td>* * * * *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fatigue associated with cultural shock</td>
<td>* * * *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>