EXPLORING ACADEMIC ACCULTURATION EXPERIENCES
OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
WITH LOW ORAL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY:
A MUSICALLY ENHANCED NARRATIVE INQUIRY

by

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ABSTRACT

Situated within an increasing trend of globalization and internationalization, 97 percent of Canadian universities offer international experiences to students. Chinese international students are the biggest international student group in Canada, and they are also the group with the lowest spoken English scores. Studies have demonstrated that oral English capacity significantly influences international students’ academic acculturation. However, little is known about the lived academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students with limited spoken English. To address this literature gap, this study aimed to understand the academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students with limited spoken English currently studying at a Canadian university. A musically enhanced narrative inquiry approach was employed, building on traditional forms of narrative inquiry by utilizing sound and music. Data were collected through art-informed interviews with six Chinese international students, and were analyzed through both narrative and musical re-storying, resulting in the creation of both literary and musical narrative representations. Expectancy-Value Theory served as a theoretical framework that informed the study design and the interpretation of results. The narratives from all six Chinese students demonstrated high levels of psychological stress during their academic acculturation and that their motivation for spoken English learning was drastically improved in relation to their academic acculturation experiences. By exploring the experiences of Chinese international students with limited spoken English capacity through a musically enhanced narrative inquiry, this study contributes to the existing understanding of international students’ academic acculturation, and has uncovered implications for various associated stakeholders including Chinese students, parents, and teachers, and host country educators and support service personnel who work with international students.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 About Myself

As an English as a Foreign Language speaker, with first-hand experience of studying in English-speaking countries and teaching English language proficiency test preparation courses to Chinese students who wished to seek further education overseas, I have found that oral English proficiency and Chinese international students’ academic acculturation are profoundly connected.

Before I came to Queen’s University, I was filled with anticipation and excitement, dreaming of a new exciting life in a prestigious foreign education institution, despite the fact that it was thousands of miles away from home. When I landed at Toronto Pearson International Airport that sunny, autumn afternoon, I took a deep breath and smiled, as the clouds drifted so close in the clear blue sky, seemingly within reach for the first time in my life. My academic supervisor in China said to me before I left, “Cindy, everything will be perfect for you at Queen’s, because you, unlike most Chinese students, speak amazing English and always manage things on your own as you go.” I was not sure whether or not things would be as perfect as she described, but I was confident that I would be able to manage like I always had in the many strange places I had visited or lived alone in China. However, I neglected one very important difference: Canada is not just a strange place; it is a completely foreign place.

Reflecting now, in general, my academic acculturation has been successful. However, it has not been easy. As an international student by myself with nothing familiar around me, I have faced multiple personal challenges in both academic and non-academic settings. Despite my optimism and positive support from people in my academic life before Queen’s, I found myself
in many unanticipated situations immediately after commencing my study. All the academic strangeness of new educational norms engulfed me. As a fresh international graduate student, I was not acculturated to all the discussions and freedom of speech in class, the high portion of presentations amongst course work, or the research-oriented graduate curriculum. Also, everything else related to living in Canada was new. Unlike what I was used to in China, where everything is fast and right at hand, in Kingston, the bus comes only every 30 minutes in the daytime and every 60 minutes at night; almost everything requires an appointment ahead of time, including seeing a doctor; pedestrians are rare to see on the road; everyday life affairs such as grocery shopping are handled differently; and the whole place feels quiet, large, and alone. Fortunately, I have made it through and am now happily enjoying my studies. When I ask myself what truly helped with the success of my academic acculturation in Canada, I realize it was the interaction through oral communication that I had with people around me.

The sense of community and support that I acquired through oral communication helped me through all the difficult times as an international student. Whenever I found myself having difficulties, I talked them through with people around me. The conversations provided a great deal: comfort by reassuring me that it was not just me who was worried about the assignments; help with specific questions that I had in a new environment; useful feedback on my papers; inspiration for my thesis ideas; job opportunities when I needed them; insightful and soothing suggestions during my personal crises. All these interactions developed into friendships or supportive collegial relations that helped with my successful adaptation into my academic program, which could not have been achieved without my strong ability to communicate orally in English.
“To live is to have personal relationships” (Lafollette, 1996, p. 4). To have personal relationships, one has to communicate, in most cases, orally. When one suddenly lives in a foreign English-speaking country, one needs to communicate orally to form relationships. I had never been particularly thankful for my training in oral English until I moved to Canada and began my studies at Queen’s, because the oral component of English was not valued in the Chinese English language education system that I experienced. English language learners in China are generally not motivated or encouraged to train in oral English communication. Although my academic acculturation was stressful at the beginning, my interaction with people through oral English communication alleviated the stress, which was essential for my successful academic acculturation at Queen’s. Therefore, I attribute both my rich studying experiences and straight-A transcripts at Queen’s to my ability to communicate with people orally in English.

Looking back, although my academic acculturation has not been easy, it has been perfect because, for me, perfection is not about being happy in every moment but about the constant learning and growth out of both moments of happiness and of pain. That is exactly what I have experienced during my study at Queen’s. However, having recognized the significance of oral English proficiency in my own successful academic acculturation, I could not help but wonder what the academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency were like, and how their lives and motivations for future oral English learning have been impacted.

1.2 Rationale

Second language learning is a long complex process involving a variety of factors, with motivation being one of the most important contributors to the success of second language acquisition (Lu, 2014). Expectancy-Value Theory posits that the motivation behind individual
choices to engage in a learning activity can be explained by individuals’ expectancy of success and the subjective value they attach to the activity (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Both the subjective value and expectancy of success that Chinese students attach to oral English learning tend to be low (He & Shi, 2011; Jin, 2015), which explains their disengagement in oral English learning. This disengagement leads to their lower oral English proficiency, in comparison to other international students (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010).

Moreover, oral English proficiency influences international students’ academic acculturation profoundly. Academic acculturation is a complex and idiosyncratic interplay between academic and non-academic experience that is related to language proficiency (Cheng & Fox, 2008). Among the four skills of language proficiency, speaking is particularly important, because it affects international students’ ability to engage both academically and socially (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Oral communication with host nationals in both academic and social settings facilitates international students’ academic acculturation (Cheng & Fox, 2008; Zimmermann, 1995). Consequently, international students with low oral English proficiency struggle with their studies in English-speaking countries (Zhang & Beck, 2014).

Despite the clear and significant relationship between oral English proficiency and academic acculturation, no study has been specifically designed to explore how international students with low oral English proficiency describe their academic acculturation experiences. Further, no study has used Expectancy-Value Theory as a lens to explore international students’ motivation to engage in oral English learning activities in relation to their academic acculturation experiences. More specifically, no such study has been conducted in the Chinese international student community, the largest international student group in Canada (Canadian Bureau for
International Education[CBIE], 2013). This study aims to address this research gap in the current literature.

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the academic acculturation stories of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency who are studying at a mid-sized Canadian university. The research questions are: 1) What are the academic acculturation stories of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency? 2) How do these students describe their experiences of the relationship between low oral English proficiency and academic acculturation? 3) How do these students describe their motivation for enhancing oral English proficiency in relation to their academic acculturation experiences?

To address these three research questions, I conducted a review of current literature on the effects of low oral language proficiency for English Language Learners on academic acculturation, then designed and carried out a study that employed a musically enhanced narrative inquiry research approach. For data collection, I interviewed Chinese international students with limited spoken English capacity at a mid-sized Canadian university to listen to their academic acculturation stories. I used inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006) to analyze the data. I then applied both traditional narrative restorying (Creswell, 2005) and musically enhanced narrative restorying (Bolden, 2017) to present the academic acculturation stories of the interviewed participants. I then connected participants’ narratives to existing literature to answer all three research questions in the final chapter.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

To address the research questions, I begin by exploring literature related to two key aspects: 1) the relationship between oral English proficiency and Chinese international students’ academic acculturation; and 2) Chinese students’ motivation in oral English learning in their English language study. To achieve a comprehensive understanding, I first examine international students’ academic acculturation in general, and then move on to examine the relationship between international students’ academic acculturation and comprehensive English proficiency. Next, I focus specifically on the relationship between international students’ academic acculturation and oral English proficiency. Following this section, I review literature on Chinese international students’ academic acculturation in particular. Finally, I review literature on motivation in second language acquisition and Chinese students’ motivation in oral English learning.

2.2 International Students’ Academic Acculturation

To better understand international students’ academic acculturation, it is important to address the concept of acculturation. Initially, the term “acculturation” was used to refer to the process immigrants go through when settling in a new country (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Several different acculturation models have been developed to describe the acculturation process with differing emphases on the factors involved, but they all conceptualize acculturation as a psychological adaptation process (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In 1997, Berry conceptualized a stress and coping acculturation framework. In this framework, the psychological adaptation process involves handling a series of life changes. The individual cognitively appraises these
changes. If the individual perceives a change as an opportunity, then the change will not become an acculturation stressor. Conversely, if the individual perceives a change as a difficulty, then the change will be an acculturation stressor (Berry, 2006). The degree of psychological stress associated with acculturation is influenced by the adequacy of coping resources the individual facing the stressor employs. If the individual has adequate coping resources to overcome the stressor, then the experienced psychological stress will likely be low. In contrast, if the coping resources are not adequate, the psychological stress experienced will likely be high. The less adequate the coping resources are, the higher the psychological stress tends to be, which can lead to the point of psychopathology, such as depression (Berry, 2006).

Cheng and Fox (2008) defined international students’ academic acculturation as “the dynamic adaptation processes of linguistically and culturally diverse students engaging with the academic study cultures” (p. 309) in universities where English is the language of instruction. However, so far there is no single acculturation model that fully describes the acculturation of international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). For the purpose of this work, I view international students’ academic acculturation as a dynamic psychological adaptation process (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) influenced by students’ acculturative stressors and coping resources (Berry, 2006), and involving a complex and idiosyncratic interplay between academic and non-academic experience that is related to language proficiency (Cheng & Fox, 2008).

2.2.1 **English language proficiency and academic acculturation.** Through an extensive review of the literature concerning academic acculturation experiences of international students, Smith and Khawaja (2011) considered 94 studies, among which 81 were quantitative and 13 were qualitative. Their analysis revealed that common acculturative stressors encountered by international students include language proficiency, educational stressors, sociocultural stressors,
discrimination, and practical stressors. All these stressors could contribute to international students experiencing acculturative psychological stress. However, an earlier review by Chen (1999) on international students enrolled in postsecondary studies in Canada and the United States suggested that, among all the common acculturative stressors encountered by international students, language proficiency was a salient stressor, because it interacted with other stressors in both academic and non-academic settings. Language barriers induced psychological harm to students whose native language was not English (Pederson, 1991), as the inability to communicate using English could have “strong and long lasting impact on international students’ self-concept and other related cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects” (Chen, 1999, p. 51) during their transition into the host culture. Students who have inadequate language proficiency are vulnerable during their academic acculturation because language difficulty causes stress and anxiety, which pose psychological obstacles (Aubrey, 1991). A significant positive relationship exists between English language proficiency and international students’ successful academic acculturation (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012).

2.2.2 Oral English proficiency and academic acculturation. Among the four skills of language proficiency (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), speaking is particularly important for international students’ academic acculturation. The lack of ability to communicate orally in English with people in a new culture hinders the satisfaction of the three basic human psychological needs proposed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

According to SDT, all individuals require the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs to achieve personal wellbeing: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy concerns the feeling of one’s behavior as being choiceful and self-determined (de Charms, 1968); competence refers to feeling competent and confident in one’s behaviour (White, 1959);
and relatedness emphasizes the sense of belonging and feeling personally close to others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). All individuals require satisfaction of these three psychological needs to function in a healthy manner (Deci & Ryan 2000).

Concerning the feeling of autonomy, oral English proficiency influences international students’ ability to self-determine behavioural choices in various settings. In academic settings, international students with low oral English proficiency feel constrained when communicating with faculty members and classmates when they encounter problems, and feel they have to avoid courses or assignments involving group discussion and oral presentation (Zhang & Beck, 2014). In social settings, students with low oral English proficiency feel they have to withdraw from activities involving much oral communication (Yi, 2004). The inability to speak the host language fluently is a primary inhibitor for international students to become socially involved (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Therefore, the lack of oral communication competency narrows the range of international students’ behavioural choices, thereby undermining the satisfaction of their need for autonomy, leading to psychological frustration in their academic acculturation.

In addition, oral English proficiency is linked to international students’ sense of competence. Talking to native speakers is a prime factor in international students’ perceived communication competence (Zimmermann, 1995). Frequent intercultural contact based on oral communication enhances international students’ English language self-confidence (Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006), facilitating their academic acculturation success. Students who can effectively communicate orally tend to perceive themselves as more competent and, therefore, feel more confident during their adaptation process than students who have inadequate oral English capacity (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006). When international students feel competent and confident with their language communication ability, they not only benefit by
having their psychological need for competence satisfied, but also benefit by being more likely to engage in local encounters, which furthers language development and increases prospects of academic acculturation (Sawir et al., 2012).

Studies also demonstrate that oral communicative competence is closely connected to the satisfaction of international students’ need for relatedness, the sense of belonging and feeling personally close to others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The number of host culture friends that international students have in a new social environment is a major factor for them to acculturate successfully (Hong, Fox, & Almarza, 2007; Sam, 2001). The inability to speak the host language fluently is a primary inhibitor for international students to develop intercultural friendships (Hayes & Lin, 1994). International students who can communicate fluently in oral English have a higher sense of connectedness to English-speaking surroundings and lower cultural stress when compared with other international students with very limited oral English capacity (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006).

2.2.3 Chinese international students’ academic acculturation. Chinese international students are more likely to show lower English proficiency and experience more acculturative stress and psychological problems than other international students (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015; Li, Cheng, & Duanmu, 2010; Yan & Berliner, 2009). Han, Han Luo, Jacobs, and Jean-Baptiste (2013) used an anonymous online survey among Chinese international students in an American university and discovered 45 percent of the students showed symptoms of depression. The language barrier is typically the greatest obstacle faced by Chinese international students during their academic acculturation (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003).
The acculturation experiences of Chinese international students are heavily marked by frustration, loneliness, and isolation (Yi, 2004; Zhang & Beck, 2014). Communication difficulties isolate Chinese students from local persons, including other students, more than other international students due to their relatively lower oral English capacity (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Ippolito, 2007; Trice, 2003). Although some Chinese international students seek support and friendship from same-culture peers, they still feel disconnected from the larger educational surroundings in a foreign country (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014).

In summary, the literature indicates that English language proficiency—especially oral English proficiency—is closely related to international students’ academic acculturation. Oral English proficiency promotes the satisfaction of the three basic human psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness of international students, contributing to their academic acculturation. Chinese international students tend to experience higher acculturative psychological stress due to lower English proficiency in general and also lower oral English proficiency compared to other international students.

2.3 Motivation in Second Language Acquisition

The success of second language acquisition is a long, complex process influenced by multiple variables, with motivation being one of the most significant (Lu, 2014). In learning psychology, learning behaviours are often examined under Expectancy-Value Theory (Xie, 2013).

According to Expectancy-Value Theory, the motivation behind individual choices to perform an activity can be explained by individuals’ expectancy of success in the activity and the subjective value they attach to the activity (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Expectancy of success indicates students’ beliefs about their capability to successfully perform tasks (Schunk, 1991).
When given a task, students ask themselves: ‘Can I do it?’ Subjective value is the degree of importance students attach to a given task (Jacobs & Eccles, 2000). When given a task, students ask themselves: ‘Do I want to do it?’ (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Students’ answers to these two questions affect their motivation to engage in the task. If the answer to both questions is yes, students are likely to be motivated to engage in the task; if the answer to both questions is no, then students are likely to be demotivated to engage in the task (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

In the following sections of the literature review, I review the literature on the value factor in Chinese students’ motivation in oral English learning first. Then I move on to report on the other motivation factor, expectancy of success among Chinese students for their oral English learning.

### 2.3.1 Chinese students’ value of oral English learning

Unlike Western education philosophy, in the tradition of Chinese education, the ability to speak is not valued in relation to the abilities to listen, read, and write (Yang, 2011). “The majority of China exists today as a country known as the People’s Republic of China, but it also refers to a long-standing civilization comprising successive states and cultures dating back more than 4000 years” (Cheng, 2008, p. 15). It is a culture that values collectivism and teacher authority (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zheng, 2014). A typical classroom in China is full of students’ silence and only the teacher’s voice lecturing (Yang, 2011). “Silence is golden” and “the wise man speaks only a little” are common Chinese education doctrines (Sun, 2009). Students are not encouraged to speak or raise questions in class, and they are mainly required to work individually (He & Shi, 2011). Therefore, when it comes to learning, Chinese students have generally been acculturated to listen, read, and write (He & Shi, 2011). This education philosophy has been in place since Confucius, the very first Chinese education philosopher born in 552 BC (Sun, 2009).
Thus it is no surprise that China applies the same philosophy to English language education and, consequently, the speaking component is not valued. This lack of value is directly reflected in the English language testing system. All the major English tests designed in China are extremely high-stakes tests for Chinese students, as they are either required for school admission or graduation (Cheng, 2008). However, these language tests have tended to focus solely on reading and writing (Cheng, 2008). It was not until 1999 that a spoken English subtest was developed in the College English Test (CET) of China (Li, 1999). This speaking test is optional, only available to a small number of students, and not a requirement for graduation (Li, 1999; Yang, 2010).

The washback on English language teaching makes the subjective value of oral English proficiency even less to Chinese students. Washback is a term widely used in language testing, referring to the influence that testing has on teaching and learning (Xie, 2013), which leads to narrowed curriculum and downplays the goal of fostering language communication ability (Qi, 2005). In China, the washback of English language testing is severe. “Teaching to the test” has been a common practice for the whole country for decades (He & Shi, 2011). Because oral English is not tested, it is not valued in English teaching (Li, 2014). Consequently, being immersed in an English language-teaching context that does not value speaking English, Chinese students are not made aware of the value of oral English. Therefore, the perceived subjective value of oral English proficiency is very low in Chinese students nationally.

Only when Chinese students decide to seek international higher education are they required to take international language tests instead of the locally designed English tests in China. Two common measures of English language proficiency are the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).
These tests are often required for the admission of international students into English-speaking universities. Both TOEFL and IELTS have a speaking component that is equally valued as the listening, reading, and writing components, accounting for ¼ of the global test score. However, because Chinese students have already been taught in their decade-long academic careers that speaking is not important for studying and success in school (He & Shi, 2011), they still perceive reading and writing as more important in their TOEFL or IELTS test preparations. In fact, there is a popular belief among Chinese parents, teachers, and students that being able to speak English well is something that will just happen naturally soon after students arrive and study in an English-speaking country (Yi, 2004; Zhang & Beck, 2014).

In summary, despite the high objective value of oral English proficiency for international students to succeed in universities where English is the medium of instruction, the perceived subjective value of oral English proficiency is low among Chinese students. This value discrepancy is a result of the Chinese education philosophy that does not emphasize the ability to speak in academic settings and the severe washback of Chinese English language testing. The answer to the “Do I want to do it?” question for Chinese students’ oral English learning is likely to be “no.”

2.3.2 Chinese students’ expectancy of success in oral English learning. The low subjective value Chinese students attach to oral English proficiency is matched by their low expectancy of success in oral English learning. Most Chinese students are not confident in their oral English capacity. Due to the washback on English teaching in China, teachers and students teach and learn to the test, making passing the test the primary goal of teaching and learning (Jin, 2015). Consequently, Chinese students learn English in an environment that precludes much contact with oral English (He & Shi, 2011), and have likely not been exposed to proper oral
English training even in the very basics, such as pronunciation (He & Shi, 2011). Most Chinese students speak English with a strong Chinese accent that severely influences effective communication with native English speakers, contributing to students’ lack of confidence in their spoken English (He & Shi, 2011). In their decade-long English language learning experiences, Chinese students are generally only trained heavily on reading and writing (Jin, 2015). As a consequence, most Chinese students demonstrate a higher ability to read and write in English but a much lower ability to speak (He & Shi, 2011). This discrepancy of abilities results in Chinese students lacking confidence in their oral English. They show a tendency to perceive themselves as more capable in the reading and writing test components for TOEFL/IELTS tests required for their international education admission.

In addition, English in China is considered as a foreign language instead of a second language. The national context is an environment that provides very little opportunity for speaking English (He & Shi, 2011). Practicing oral English requires interaction with other English speakers, but only rarely do students have the occasion to actually use spoken English for communication. In contrast, practicing listening, reading, and writing is mainly individual work and is easy to accomplish by one’s own efforts. Therefore, for Chinese English language learners, the lack of practice opportunities also undermines their expectancy of success in oral English learning in contrast to listening, reading, and writing.

As a result of both the washback on English teaching and the non-English speaking national context, Chinese students tend to have low expectancy of success in oral English learning, which demotivates them to engage in the related learning activities. Their low expectation of success is negatively related to their motivation. The answer to the “Can I do it?” question for Chinese students’ oral English learning is likely to be “no.”
According to Expectancy-Value Theory, when the answer to both “Can I do it?” and “Do I want to do it?” is “no,” students are likely to be demotivated to engage (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Accordingly, the low perceived subjective value and low expectancy of success in oral English learning accounts for the lack of motivation in oral English learning among Chinese students.

2.4 Conclusion

In summary, this literature review reveals that 1) the relationship between oral English proficiency and Chinese international students’ academic acculturation is significant and positive; and 2) Chinese students’ motivation in oral English learning tends to be low in relation to other aspects of their language study. Despite the plethora of research on international students, there is still a shortage of qualitative studies exploring the lived experiences of international students to enhance understanding of their academic acculturation (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Specifically, there is no in-depth qualitative study on the lived academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students, the biggest international student group in Canada (CIBE, 2016). Further, individual factors occurring prior to and during acculturation, including motivation for language learning, need to be studied (Chirkov, Safdar, de Guzman, & Playford, 2008). Hence this study will contribute to the existing understanding of international students’ academic acculturation through the in-depth exploration of the academic acculturation stories of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency and their motivation in oral English learning prior to and during academic acculturation.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand the academic acculturation of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency who are studying at a mid-sized Canadian university through the stories they relate. The research questions include: 1) What are the academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency? 2) How do these students describe the relationship between their low oral English proficiency and their academic acculturation? 3) How do these students describe their motivation in improving oral English proficiency in relation to their academic acculturation experiences?

3.1 Musically Enhanced Narrative Inquiry

In alignment with the purpose and research questions, this study was structured as a musically enhanced narrative inquiry (Bolden, 2008). Musically enhanced narrative inquiry (MENI) is an arts-based research approach that involves working with participants’ spoken words acoustically to generate musical representations that complement traditional qualitative research methods (Bolden, 2008). As the name implies, musically enhanced narrative inquiry builds on narrative inquiry practices with the addition of musical exploration utilizing sound and music.

MENI was employed as the most appropriate approach for this study for two main reasons: first, because narrative inquiry is an effective methodology for understanding and representing human experiences (Clandinin, 2000), and second because utilizing sound and music to enhance the inquiry enables the capture and communication of nuances of human experience that would otherwise be neglected (Bolden, 2017).
Narrative inquiry is effective for understanding and representing human experiences because “the storied descriptions people give about the meaning they attribute to life events is the best evidence available to researchers about the realm of people’s experience” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 479). Narrative inquiry has three key features: it “attempts to understand how people think through events and what they value”; “looks closely at the sentences constructed by the storyteller and the information and meaning they portray”; and “captures how people make sense of the world” (Riley & Hawe, 2005, p. 229). These three narrative features effectively accomplish the general objective of this study: to gain understanding of the meaning contained in the complex stories that Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency tell of their academic acculturation experiences.

In addition, narrative inquiry suits the specific research questions this study seeks to address. The first research question is fundamentally concerned with the narratives of Chinese international students. The second research question requires documenting and understanding participants’ perceptions of the relationship between their low oral English proficiency and their academic acculturation. The narrative feature of looking “closely at the sentences constructed by the storyteller and the information and meaning they portray” (Riley & Hawe, 2005, p. 229) makes narrative inquiry effective for addressing this research question. The third research question explores participants’ motivation in enhancing oral English proficiency in relation to their academic acculturation experiences using Expectancy-Value Theory as a lens. The narrative feature of understanding how participants “think through events” and “what they value” (Riley & Hawe, 2005, p. 229) is essential in answering this research question.

Building upon traditional narrative practices, MENI involves exploring the meanings of the participants’ words and stories through musical processes (Bolden, 2017). Working in a
digital audio environment, I combined the participants’ spoken words with music that I composed to draw out and illustrate the themes from the narratives. The music represented my interpretation of the meaning of the participants’ words and allowed me to communicate my interpretations of those meanings. While narrative inquiry has mainly relied on literary forms, all forms of artistic expression are ultimately forms of storytelling (Bresler, 2005).

I chose to use music in this study for two reasons: 1) it is a common form of art accessible to a wide audience; and 2) the provocative power of music could help me, as the researcher, to strive for the fundamental purpose of qualitative inquiry: promoting empathic understanding, which “involves resonance, an embodied state of mind that is cognitive and at the same time, affective and corporeal” (Bresler, 2006, p. 25). The opportunity for the audience to connect sound to meaning can provide a powerful mechanism for eliciting memory and emotions (Trainor, 2010), as music activates human brain networks associated with memory and emotion processing (Chermak, 2010) and has long been utilized to enhance storytelling because of its tremendous capacity to represent and evoke emotion across cultures and contexts (Bolden, 2017). The personal academic acculturation stories of Chinese international students that this study aims to unpack are emotionally complex stories that have never been told. Musically enhanced research methods offer profound possibilities to foster deep understanding and connections among the participants, the researcher, and audiences that could not be achieved otherwise (Bolden, 2008; Leavy, 2009). Further, the musically enhanced representations I produce feature the actual recorded voices of the participants, although these voices are distorted; audiences will have the opportunity to understand and connect more fully to these students’ stories by listening to their voices describing their experiences.
3.2 Research Ethics

Prior to conducting this research, I received ethics clearance from the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board (see Appendix A). I received informed consent from all six participants. It was made clear to all participants that they had the right to check and revise the data they provided, stop their participation, or withdraw from the study should they feel uncomfortable at any point before the thesis submission without consequences. In order to protect the privacy of the participants, any use of the data conceals all identifying information such as names and locations mentioned. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Recruitment

I recruited participants from a mid-sized Canadian university where English is the language of instruction. I contacted the International Center and the School of English of the university for help with distributing the recruitment information. An email containing the research background, purpose, participation details, and contact information was sent by the International Centre and School of English to all Chinese international students attending the university. A poster outlining the same information was also posted on the information board at the International Centre and the School of English. Emails and posters were written in both Chinese and English.

In addition to the help from the International Centre and the School of English, I utilized my personal contacts to facilitate the recruitment. I informed the Chinese international students that I met at the university about this study and asked for their recommendations of potential participants to recruit (snowball sampling). Eventually, three participants were recruited through email responses and three were recruited through personal contacts.
3.3.2 Participants

International students’ admission language proficiency test scores were used as the sampling criterion. The recruitment information asked participants to self-identify as students with low oral English proficiency. When potential participants contacted me, I asked them to provide information of their original admission TOEFL/IELTS scores to verify their speaking scores. Chinese international students whose TOEFL/IELTS speaking scores were at or below the minimum requirement for admission into the undergraduate program were recruited into the study. (Often international students are offered conditional acceptance to an institution even though their language scores fall below the minimum requirements, with the condition that certain language courses be completed before or together with the program of study.) In total, I invited six Chinese international students to participate in this study. Because the study required in-depth understanding of Chinese international students’ academic experiences, a small number of individuals was best-suited for capturing the detailed stories, while allowing for a variety of experiences to be represented (Creswell, 2007).

3.3.3 Data collection tools

To collect data, I conducted enhanced semi-structured interviews which included asking participants to bring and discuss artistic artifacts.

3.3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews. Answering the research questions of this study required an understanding of participants’ personal stories. Interviews offer an interactional context for storytelling (Riessman, 2008) where the interviewer can position the interviewee in an autobiographical talk (Wortham, 2001). One-on-one interviews were conducted (rather than group interviews or focus groups) to allow the individual voices of the participants to come to the fore, unencumbered by influences of their peers, as personal stories can contain information that people may withhold in a more public context (Morgan, Ataie, Carder, & Hoffman, 2013).
A semi-structured interview format was used because it was flexible for capturing voices and experiences (Rabionet, 2011). I used a pre-determined interview protocol (see Appendix B) to help me elicit directly relevant data to answer the research questions (Leins, Fisher, Pludwinski, Rivard, & Robertson, 2014). I, as the researcher, was able to guide the interview, allowing detailed stories to emerge, while helping the participants avoid distractions and irrelevant information. The interview protocol in this thesis was designed following an interview protocol refinement (IPR) framework comprised of a four-phase process (Castillo-Montoya, 2016): “(1) ensuring interview questions align with research questions, (2) constructing an inquiry-based conversation, (3) receiving feedback on interview protocols, and (4) piloting the interview protocol.” (Castillo-Montoya, 2016, p. 811)

I first developed interview questions around the three research questions of this study to match the interview questions with the study’s purpose. Then I further condensed and refined all questions to be open-ended to construct an inquiry-based conversation, as the aim of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions but to understand the complex individual lived experiences of people (Seidman, 2013). Following these steps, two experts in qualitative research methods reviewed the protocol to generate feedback for further revision as a quality control measure. Finally, I trialed the interview questions on Chinese English as Foreign Languages speakers to ensure the wording was clear. The language utilized for the interview was Chinese, because the participants were, of necessity, low in oral English proficiency, and it was important for participants to use the language with which they felt most comfortable and were most likely to be successful in communicating the full richness of their experiences.

3.3.3.2 Artistic artifacts. To open up participants’ expression of richer answers, I incorporated arts-based interviewing informed by artistic artifacts into the interview protocol.
Arts-based interviews can be responsive to participants’ own meanings and associations, and can lead to richer communication processes that embrace the emotional and sensory multiplicity of embodied experiences (Bagnoli, 2009). In addition, arts-based interviews can compensate for the limitations of verbally based research methods for understanding and capturing the multidimensionality of lived experience (Blodgett et al., 2013). Prior to the first interview, participants were asked to choose or create a piece or multiple pieces of art to represent some aspect or aspects of their academic acculturation experiences. I encouraged participants to choose an art form with which they felt comfortable (e.g., poetry, songwriting, painting). Then, during the interview, I asked the participants to explain why and how the art works they chose or created represented their experiences, to ensure that my interpretation of the art works they brought was responsive to their own meanings and associations. The art works were collected as part of the data.

3.3.4 Data collection procedures

After receiving ethics clearance, I began my participant recruitment at a mid-sized Canadian university. Emails, posters, and personal contacts were utilized to reach the Chinese international student community. I presented a Letter of Information to the respondents and explained the purpose of the study and details of their participation. Relevant guidance about the art representation were given (i.e., participants were asked to create or choose a piece or multiple pieces of art work that somehow represented their experiences as Chinese international students, and bring a copy of the art work to the interview). Once I gained their permission, I distributed the Consent Forms (see Appendix C) to each of the participants and had the signed Consent Forms returned. It was clearly stated in the Consent Form that participation in the study was voluntary, and that they could terminate their participation at any time during the study up to the
point of publication of the thesis. I assured participants that confidentiality would be maintained to the extent possible throughout the data analysis, representation, and distribution process, in that I would not use the participants’ names. However, I reminded them that it might be possible for participants to be identified through the stories they told, and by the sound of their voices that were featured in the musically enhanced representations of their narratives. However, participants had the option of having their voices distorted in the musically enhanced representation if they wished to. While three of the six participants chose to have their voice distorted in their Consent Forms, I applied distortion to the voices of all six participants to minimize the possibility of identification through listening to their musically enhanced narratives to be consistent across representations.

I conducted one preliminary and one follow-up interview with each participant in person. A suitable time for both the researcher and each participant to meet was arranged. The interview took place in a quiet, comfortable room, because a comfortable and safe space is recommended as important for participants to tell personal stories (Morgan, Ataie, Carder, & Hoffman, 2013). The room also needed to be quiet so that the recording of the interview was clear and could be effectively used in the musically enhanced representations. Each interview began with greetings and an explanation of the procedures of the interview.

Each interview lasted for 45-60 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed. Probing questions were asked based on participants’ answers, because “an interview can be viewed as an unfolding story. It is emergent although studied and shaped” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 326). During each interview, the participant’s artistic representation of her or his experiences was discussed. After the interview was transcribed, the text was sent to the participant to verify that the transcription accurately captured what the participant meant.
3.3.5 Data analysis

The analysis of the data was conducted in two parallel analysis procedures. First, in keeping with narrative inquiry methods, I analyzed the data through the process of re-storying (Creswell, 2005). The re-storying involved (1) transcribing interview conversations into transcripts (I transcribed the interviews in the language used by participants, i.e., Chinese); (2) coding significant text segments from the interview transcripts using a general inductive analysis approach that involved closely reading the interview transcripts to identify text segments related to the research questions, labelling and organizing related segments to create categories (themes), and creating a model incorporating the most important themes (Thomas, 2006); and 3) organizing the coded text into a sequence for re-storying that highlighted and illuminated the most important themes.

Meanwhile, I carried out the processes associated with the ‘musically enhanced’ aspect of the narrative inquiry (Bolden, 2008). I worked with the audio data using digital audio software to listen to and consider the interview recordings many times. The addition of this sound dimension to the data enriched my literary analytical processes of theming and restorying. The intonation, pauses, and subtle sentimental meanings borne in the participants’ voices told me things that the transcribed texts could not. This process enabled me to confirm existing themes from the literary analysis and identify new emergent themes from the audio dimension of the data.

Ultimately, the goal of working with the data acoustically was to craft musical representations that re-told participants’ stories in their own words and with their own voices to highlight the most significant themes. First, I used digital audio software to organize participants’ recorded words in a way that best communicated the essence of the theme and the meaning the narratives contained, generating an audio story. Next I composed music that
corresponded to the audio story and represented my interpretation of the story. Then I situated the audio story within the composed music to further represent and communicate the participants’ stories and my interpretations. Because participants spoke in Chinese, I incorporated English translations into the musical representations so that the pieces would be accessible to English-speaking audiences.

Accordingly, I generated end products to represent the experiences of the participants from this study in two modalities: written narrative pieces and musical/audio pieces that complement the written narratives. Seven musical representation pieces were created with each piece highlighting one of the seven main themes generated from this study. Voices from multiple participants were used in one themed musical piece when needed. For the audio musical pieces, I provide a permanent link to the MP3 files in the theme chapter, so that readers can access the musical narrative representations in addition to reading the text of this thesis.

### 3.4 Validity and Trustworthiness

The notion of validity and trustworthiness generally refers to the believability of a knowledge claim (Polkinghorne, 2007). Validity of the research is not “inherent in the claim but is a characteristic given to a claim by the ones to whom the claim is addressed. Thus any knowledge claim is not intrinsically valid; rather, its validity is a function of intersubjective judgment” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 474). It is the audience that makes the judgment about whether a knowledge claim is plausible based on the evidence reported by the researcher (Torrance, 2013). Therefore, the validity of a study is enhanced if a knowledge claim is supported with sufficient evidence for the audience to reasonably believe it is so (Barone & Eisner, 2012).
As this study is guided by MENI, a methodology built upon narrative inquiry, much of this study’s validity and trustworthiness relate to the validity and trustworthiness of narrative inquiry and relates “specifically to personal meaning drawn from stories, not to an observable, measurable truth” (Thomas, 2012, p. 216). The “truths” sought by narrative researchers are “narrative truths,” not “historical truths” (Spence, 1982). “Storied evidence is gathered not to determine if events actually happened but about the meaning experienced by people,” and “storied texts serve as evidence for personal meaning, not for the factual occurrence of the events reported in the stories” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 479).

Additionally, narrative research informed by the arts is not meant for pursuing “truths,” but for opening up understanding (Bolden, 2017). My aim in utilizing sound and music in this work is to employ the power of music to evoke affective responses in the audience that can open up more understanding of the stories of the participants, and to strive for verisimilitude of the human experiences studied by retelling the narratives using participants’ own original words and voices. I make knowledge claims about the meaning life events held for my participants (as do all narrative inquiries) through a musically enhanced approach.

Researcher bias, that is, the thoughts and expectations brought to the data collection and analysis by the researcher, is a challenge inherent in qualitative research. To address this challenge, I paid careful attention to acknowledging my own impact upon the data, and ensuring that the analysis rang true to the actual lived experiences of the participants and the personal meaning they were attributing to those experiences. Various strategies, described below, were built into this study to ensure the narratives reported achieved verisimilitude and rang true, thereby crediting the study with trustworthiness and validity (Loh, 2013).
To enhance trustworthiness, interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions to allow participants’ voices to emerge, thereby guarding against simply eliciting the data I had expected. Artifacts’ interpretations were directly acquired from participants’ descriptions instead of my personal interpretations. Member checking was built in throughout the analysis process to assist in ensuring that the participants’ own voices were heard and the text was not primarily the researcher’s own creation. All transcripts (in Chinese) were sent back to participants for verification and revision to increase the likelihood that they captured what participants meant in interviews. All re-storied narratives (in Chinese) were sent back to participants for verification that they conveyed the meanings participants held for their experiences. The portion of these Chinese narratives reported in the narrative chapter and the musical pieces were translated into English for English-speaking audiences.

These strategies in the research design allowed verisimilitude for the human experiences researched and represented in this study. Therefore, the trustworthiness of this study is enhanced, as is the validity of the knowledge claims made concerning the lived academic acculturation experiences of my participants, and the corresponding personal meanings they ascribed to them.
CHAPTER 4
NARRATIVES

In this chapter, I report the narratives of the participants in this study. Because all six narratives share commonalities, I present the translated full narrative of one participant, Kandy, and then the translated excerpts from the other five narratives that highlight individual differences. I chose Kandy’s narrative to share in full, because it most effectively captured the range of experiences of academic acculturation that participants described. The excerpts from the other participants’ narratives that follow represent significant aspects of each participant’s acculturation experiences that were not common to the other participants.

4.1 Kandy: Full Narrative

At the time of the interview Kandy was enrolled in the math undergraduate program in the university. She was admitted to the program with an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) spoken score of 6 with an overall score of 6.5 out of 9. She had been in Canada for a year and a half when I spoke with her.

Figure 1. The Scream, artistic representation of Kandy’s story, chosen by Kandy (Munch, 1893)
4.1.1 Kandy’s description of her artistic representation. When I found myself not able to say what I thought and how I felt, I just felt like that person in *The Scream*. Once the Canadian students started to talk, I would start thinking in my head “Oh my God! Why are they speaking so fast? Oh my God! Why can’t I speak? Oh my God! Why didn’t I say it right? Oh my God! Why?” I felt so constrained and so confined. I could not talk with anyone about those frustrating feelings, and had to keep them all to myself. Sometimes, it was really hard to manage and I felt like screaming. But I couldn’t do it, because I was afraid that the sound would attract attention.

4.1.2 Kandy’s narrative. Before I came to Canada, I was pretty confident that I would be able to communicate in English and make many Canadian friends. Because in my high school English classes, all we focused on was English test preparation for good grades, and I usually could get somewhere around 135 out of 150 (90%), so all my teachers and parents were praising me and saying, “Your English sounds great!” Basically, as long as you could get a good grade, they would not really care about how well you actually spoke English. Now I realize they don’t even know what it really means to speak great English.

But, after all that praise, I started to think that my oral English was really good, thinking to myself, “Ah, it’s just speaking ABCs. How hard could it be?” So, I was so excited when I just arrived here, basking in the beautiful landscape of Canada. I felt so lucky to be able to study in such a wonderful place. I was very enthusiastic about communicating with people around me, trying to initiate conversations in English. Everything seemed so exciting.

However, very soon, my excitement was replaced by shock, embarrassment, and frustration. Canada is a place where people don’t use English just for testing, but for *everything*. It suddenly dawned on me that my oral English was worlds apart from the English spoken by Canadians. In fact, I found my oral English communication ability was at the very bottom of the
bottom among the students around me, and my English teacher back in China was not even speaking English but *Chinglish*, which is a blend of Chinese and English, the whole time. That discrepancy between my anticipated reality and the actual reality was a sudden and fierce blow to me. My excitement started to wash away when I felt my oral English communication ability was not adequate to support and sustain my excitement. When I constantly found myself not being able to say things that I wanted to say, I felt frustrated. The more excited I was, the more frustrated I got. Sometimes, I even felt ashamed because I was not even able to deal with simple English conversations after years of studying English. My oral English deficiency posed barriers in every aspect of my life in Canada, both academically and non-academically.

First of all, the all English-medium instruction of courses was totally overwhelming. I almost could not understand the lectures at all. When other students were listening and asking questions to communicate with the professors, all I could do was just try to frantically jot down as many pages of notes as possible. Sometimes, even the writing of the professor was indecipherable, so I had to try to figure out what he actually wrote down while frantically writing ahead, which was just slow. I also often found myself not able to understand my own notes afterwards when I went back to study them. But I know the professor probably had already explained things orally in class, because he would be talking and explaining while writing. But I was too consumed by writing down the notes to pay attention to what he was saying or I just did not understand what he said anyway. But other students with high English proficiency not only could understand the writing of the professor but also understand his talking, and were able to raise questions to have their confusions cleared right away. But I could not understand the lecture, nor was I able to ask questions. As a result, I had to spend much more time on the content than the Canadian students or students with adequate English listening and speaking
ability. Consequently, my time schedule was always tight, and I felt constantly tense and
stressed, both physiologically and psychologically.

My oral English deficiency not only made communication with the professors difficult,
but also with other Canadian students. When I just freshly came to school, there were activities
and parties going on in the residence building for students to get to know each other and
socialize. But once the Canadian students started to talk, I was just totally overwhelmed,
thinking to myself, “Oh my God! Why are they speaking so fast? I can’t follow what they are
saying at all.” I did not hang out with them much because it was just too hard to hang out with
people that you couldn’t communicate with. Then I panicked when I saw my name was the only
Chinese name on the group list for the Faculty orientation week. I had no idea who the other
students on the list were. We were not even in the same residence building so we would not even
have extra time to get to know each other. I was so nervous about meeting them the night before
the orientation week, constantly thinking to myself in my room alone, “What am I going to do
tomorrow? What am I going to say? How am I going to talk to them? Will they listen to my
talking?” Fortunately, the next day, I found there were a few patient students willing to listen to
my slow talking. I felt that was the best I could ask for. But during the breaks I would go to other
Chinese students in other orientation groups to talk, just as all the other Chinese students were
doing.

What stressed and frustrated me even more was the academic communication with other
Canadian students in classes or tutorials. I remember once a Canadian student asked me a
question in a tutorial session, and I felt really happy that she asked me. So, I started to explain to
her right away. I felt all fine until I saw that, “Uh…. I don’t understand what you are talking
about!” expression on her face. Then I started feeling so nervous that I could even feel my lips
trembling while talking and thinking to myself, “God! What part doesn’t she understand? What did I say that she doesn’t understand?” Then I got totally messed up and tried to explain to her all over again. But she still could not understand, having that question mark expression on her face the whole time. Then I felt so frustrated, embarrassed, and ashamed somehow. But there was nothing else I could do, because I had already tried to my best oral capacity. Then another student saw this, came over, and said, “Let me try.” Then the student who was confused by me understood right away. At that moment, I thought to myself “God! My oral English is so horrible! And everybody was telling me I spoke great English in China!” It shattered my confidence. That student never came to me for any questions anymore, and I would try to sit as far as possible away from her in the remaining tutorials as well.

Overall, I felt very constrained by my oral communication deficiency academically, and I got very nervous and anxious when talking with professors and other students in English. I was so anxious that I could not even sit still in class. I did not know where to look when talking, and would tap my feet on the ground when sitting. Because I found that my oral English was not good at all after I came to Canada. I was always slow and making mistakes when talking. Somehow, I felt I was not good enough compared to other Canadian students or other students with sufficient oral English proficiency.

Along with all these academic barriers that I faced due to my inadequacy of oral English proficiency, the obstacles and frustrations outside the classroom were no less frequent. I felt insecure because almost everything else I did outside of the classroom was related to speaking. Generally, there are not really that many occasions where you need to use writing in Canada. Most of the time, everywhere you go, people are just talking. For example, when I had just arrived, one of the first things I needed was to get a phone number and a phone plan. I did not
I knew how it worked in Canada, and I felt other Chinese students that I knew back then were pretty much confused themselves, so I called up the service line of the phone company. However, I could not understand what the operator was saying nor could he understand what I was saying. So, we ended up talking for a long time. What was more frustrating was that the problem I had still was not fixed after such a long and hard conversation. I felt like breaking down many times talking on the phone, and I felt the operator shared similar feelings. It was a very simple problem that would have been solved right away in China, but, at that moment, a simple problem seemed insurmountable. At last I said, “OK. Maybe I will call you next time.” He said “OK.” I could almost feel that he was relieved after what I said. Then I would call again because a phone was a necessity. And the same long conversation would happen again. After multiple times of calling and almost a week had gone by, I finally understood that I could fix the problem online myself. Then I went online and I have never called that service line ever again.

Even when I went out for eating, I was not sure whether I would be able to get what I wanted to eat. Once I went to a pizza store alone. The waiter’s speaking was too fast for me. I could hardly understand him. What made things worse was that I did not know how to say the things that I wanted properly, although I could read them. So eventually, I just said, “I want this and this and this…” Then I saw the other two staff giggling behind the counter while I was trying to get through this embarrassing situation of food ordering. Maybe they tried to be discreet. But I happened to be looking around because of the embarrassment, so I saw them laughing. It was a very empty store, and I remember clearly that I was the only customer. Even though they weren’t pointing fingers directly at me, I could feel literally that they were laughing at me for my mistakes. When I was already feeling so embarrassed for the mistakes I made, their laughing just made it painfully unforgettable, which is why I still remember this until now.
At the beginning of my study here, my Canadian roommates would invite me to events and parties with them. Every time when they asked me, I felt so happy. But after a few times, I started to think, “What’s the point of going anyway? I won’t understand what they will be talking about nor will I be able to really talk. I will just be making a fool out of myself again.” So, I stopped going and then after a while they stopped asking as well.

People always remember their failures and mistakes the best. Moments like this would come flashing back in front of me during specific occasions. Then I would regret how I simplified studying abroad in a foreign English-speaking country and why I did not train myself enough in oral English communication before I came. Only after I arrived in Canada did I realize how important oral English proficiency is to my study here, influencing everything in my life from the second I got on that international flight to the second I returned. It made my life here, academic and non-academic, unsecured and myself insecure.

When you are home surrounded by your family and friends, you probably feel it is not as big a deal when things get tough because you have someone to fall back on. But when you are an international student, far away from home, all alone, treading on completely foreign land, everything seems heavier on your shoulders. When I was alone in my room, I would think about those moments of communication frustration and embarrassment. Then I just felt I was not made to communicate with people in English and started to close myself up. Then I felt it was only safe to talk with Chinese students. As if I could get some sense of security from talking fluently and expressing freely with them. All the Canadian students are very nice and friendly, but if you can’t communicate with them, well, they are not going to really talk much with you, and then you feel rejected. Then you feel like an outsider with them. Believe me when I say the constant feeling of rejection is not a good one. So, I gave it up gradually and stayed in the Chinese
students’ community. The conversation between Canadian students and me just remained daily conversations only.

I am not complaining about the Canadian students or accusing them of anything. I know that I speak with a strong Chinglish accent. I feel this influences the feeling of acceptance from the Canadian students somehow, because the first thing one feels when talking to me is difference instead of familiarity. I know someone who has lived in Toronto for years and speaks very fluent English but with an obvious accent. And all her friends are still Chinese. Besides, I understand that if it is difficult to even talk about simple content with someone, one naturally would not want to go any further. Chatting should be spontaneous and at ease. If you constantly have to stop to explain things, the enthusiasm people have for continuing the conversation decreases. The more you explain, the less you talk. My oral communication deficiency imposes a challenge on the patience of the person talking to me as well. Although people are generally nice here and do not seem impatient or upset when talking to me, I think they probably are not happy about trying so hard to follow a conversation. I would feel the same way if I were in China, talking in Chinese with someone foreign that I constantly couldn’t understand. I would not want to nor try to talk too much with him either.

So, I mainly stay and communicate with Chinese students, speaking Chinese. It is very noticeable that Chinese students always flock together, and whenever Chinese students flock together, we usually all speak Chinese even if it is in Canada and we are well aware English is the most frequently required language. But when there are two language options available and you are only proficient in one of them and that one is your native language, you naturally just go with your native language. I mean, why speak English with people that you can talk to in Chinese when you can’t really understand each other in English? For communication
convenience and efficiency, we always speak Chinese. Another reason is that we don’t want to show our shortcomings in front of other people either, because we all know that our oral English is bad. Honestly, I am not living in an English-speaking environment even though I am studying in a Canadian university full of English-speaking students.

I was all excited to come and talk with other English-speaking people. But after so many frustrations, I started to close myself up. After all, communication is a two-way conversation, which you can’t do on your own. You can’t really become close friends with the English-speaking students if you can’t orally communicate well with them. Then you feel rejected and lonely. When you are on a foreign land, far away from home with nothing familiar around you, you naturally want to look for someone you can rely on. So that when you fill out the emergency contact at the hospital, you would not feel like there is no name to put down. It is not because I don’t want to engage in more conversations with English-speaking students but because it is just too hard when your language ability is not matching up with your desire for conversation. That feeling of being unable to speak is not just frustrating and embarrassing but also suffocating. That feeling of, “Oh my God! Why can’t I speak? Oh my God, why didn’t I say it right? Oh my God! Why?” is heart wrenching and overwhelming. It just feels like the person in The Scream. That kind of embarrassment when you can’t think of the words to say what you want to say—when you constantly stutter even if you have the words, when you find out they don’t understand you after you finally get the words out of your mouth—is beyond words, just like that person in The Scream. It is just so difficult, when your oral communication capacity is deficient, to become part of the world that you are supposed to be in, and social circles just don’t blend.

But I can’t tell those feelings to anyone. Because I don’t want my parents to worry nor do I want to disappoint them because they had expectations of me and thought I spoke great
English. Friends back in China can’t really understand what it is like even if I tell them because they have not really lived those experiences. I can’t talk about these feelings with other Chinese students around me either, because I feel they feel the same way and it would get too depressing for everybody if we started talking about those negative feelings. Every time when we started to talk about those depressing and frustrating things too much, I would diverge immediately to a lighter topic like, “Hey, what do you guys want for dinner?” I guess as international students, one thing we all have to do is control our feelings and emotions to take care of ourselves. I thought about using the counselling service on campus but then I realized, “It’s English. I can’t even talk with people about simple stuff. How am I going to talk with the counsellor? I want to go talk about my problem of talking but I would find myself not even able to talk about my problem of talking. It would just make me feel more embarrassed. Do you understand that?” So, I gave it up because of my oral communication constraints. I did not ask other Chinese students whether they used counselling service or how to use the counselling service either, because, back in China, people usually think of people who need to go to counselling as some kind of crazy maniac. So, it would be really weird to ask them.

Consequently, I had to keep all those feelings to myself though it was heart wrenching and I felt like the person in The Scream. When harbouring all those feelings in myself, it’s just like I could actually hear that silent scream in that painting. Depressing. The most I could do was just rip my blankets and punch my pillows alone in the room when it got too hard to manage, and I wanted to smash things to vent. I couldn’t smash those heavy and hard objects because I was afraid the sound would attract attention. It was a really lame way to vent but also the only way.

Meanwhile, I felt so regretful about not having trained myself to speak English well before I came. Now oral English proficiency is more important than reading, writing, and even
listening to me. Almost everything is based on oral communication here. Even when you just try to ask for directions, choose a course, rent a room, or go shopping. Literally almost everything. One might manage to handle the most basic survival things without much talking but anything else other than that would be very time consuming. It is just a brutal waste of life-time! Before I came, I just focused on preparing how to handle the lifestyle differences, like how to cook and live all by myself. But then I realized, if you are able to communicate in English properly, everything will be fine. Imagine if you study and live in China and you can’t speak Chinese, no matter how wonderfully you cook, it is still better that you can’t cook but are able to speak the Chinese language.

The English that I studied in China, whether at school or with those language testing preparation companies, was so different from the English that I am actually dealing with in Canada. I studied English more than 10 years in China. All those testing papers and the vocabulary books I crammed into my head are useless when I really need to use English to communicate here. My head literally felt like exploding when I was forced to cram so many words into it. But now either I don’t remember those words anymore or people don’t understand when I say the ones I do remember.

But I still really want to improve my oral English proficiency, and I think it is also possible. I am already in Canada. There are so many resources out there. I figure if I train myself hard enough, I should be able to communicate orally confidently one day. But the problem is I don’t know how to train myself. All that training I had back in China obviously did not work but I don’t know what else would work. I feel like I have tons of energy but I don’t know where and how to use it to really improve my oral English. I tried to ask Canadian students how they studied English. But then I realized it was a stupid question to ask. Just like if a Canadian student
were to ask me how to study Chinese, I would feel that it is a very valuable question but also a very difficult one to answer.

So, I am still utterly confused. Trying to imitate native speakers around me is not enough. For instance, I still don’t know how to say “gym” correctly. Every time I talk to the Canadian students, they think I am saying “dream” instead. So, whenever I tried to say “gym,” I would have to stop to think about it. They would always say, “repeat after me.” I would repeat after them every time. But every time I said it differently. Even I could tell that I said it differently every time. So, I still don’t know how to say “gym” correctly after more than a year in Canada. It is just frustrating. I see hope but I don’t know how to grasp upon that hope to make it happen.

4.2 Excerpts from Selina’s Narrative

Selina came to Canada for her final year of high school after studying two years in an international high school in China. At the time of the interview she was in the university language program, which she had to complete before she could officially start her undergraduate study. She was admitted to the program with an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) spoken score of 5.5 out of 9. Including her one year of high school study, she had been in Canada for a year and a half when I spoke with her.

*Figure 2. Artistic representation of Selina’s story, created by Selina*
4.2.1 Selina’s description of her artistic representation. To me, Canada is a place full of freedom and opportunities, very different from China. I almost felt like I was being released from jail when I came to Canada. However, I couldn’t seize any of those opportunities because I could not communicate in English. The falling star in the painting represents the opportunities and also the hope that I want to grasp. If I could grasp just one opportunity, I am sure I could grow and see a bigger world. But without the ability to fluently and efficiently communicate in oral English, I can only watch that star fall in front of me.

4.2.2 Selina’s narrative excerpts. Honestly, I feel happy about having another year of language study to re-learn the basics of English before I actually start my undergraduate program. However, my family feel the opposite. They don’t understand why I still need to study English after a year of studying in Canada. When I told my mom that I needed to attend the university language program, she asked me, “Why do you still need to study English after studying English for so many years?” It was saddening and upsetting when she asked me that, but I could not explain to make her understand. My parents just kept asking, “You are already in Canada where everybody speaks English. You are already using and speaking English all the time. Why is your English still so bad after more than a year of studying abroad?” They do not understand that I actually don’t have many opportunities to speak English in Canada. What they also don’t know is that I am afraid to speak English in Canada. They feel that they have already provided me with the best studying resources and sent me to an English-speaking country, so the reason why my English is still not proficient must be that I am not working hard. They cannot comprehend how hard it is for me, as an international student, to study in another country in a language that I am not proficient in. I felt my parents would never really understand no matter what I said, so I just stopped explaining.
Although I am attending language courses, those courses are mainly about grammar, and I do not find them very helpful for my oral communication. We only have two sessions of spoken English per week, which is not much. Although I find the content regarding the sound system of English that is occasionally covered in the spoken class extremely useful, it is not enough for me to improve my oral English to a level of communication confidence. Firstly, it is not systemically taught, probably because the teachers are all native speakers, so they do not perceive the foundations like phonetics as something important, and they only pick out some common mistakes with examples. Also, I think the approach by which native speakers acquire the sound system is very different from second language learners. Frankly, I feel English native speakers don’t really understand basic phonetic sounds very clearly. Just like when people ask me about Chinese pronunciation, I probably would just stammer. Therefore, it is actually difficult to learn the very basics of the pronunciation from native speakers.

4.3 Excerpts from Kevin’s Narrative

Kevin did one year of undergraduate study in China before coming to Canada to continue his education. He went into the undergraduate program directly with an overall IELTS score of 6.5 and a spoken section score of 5.5. He had been studying in Canada for about a year and a half when I spoke with him.

*Figure 3. Artistic representation of Kevin’s story, chosen by Kevin.*
4.3.1 Kevin’s description of his artistic representation. I chose this picture as the representation of my story because, to me, people are the most important element of life no matter where I am. I was a very social person in China, making friends wherever I went, but in Canada, I was forced to suppress my desire to talk by my limited spoken English. I could not develop relationships with Canadians, so I always felt alone. I have taken thousands of pictures of the fabulous landscape of Canada, but I chose this picture as the artistic representation of my story, because no matter how fascinating the landscapes were, I always felt something important was missing from the pictures, the people.

4.3.2 Kevin’s narrative excerpts. During orientation week, I had no idea what other Canadian students were laughing about around me. I just followed them around, feeling awkward and frustrated. When we had a group dinner together, the Canadian students were all chatting and laughing with each other. But I just sat there, among a big table of people, not understanding what they were saying. Occasionally, I could grasp a sentence or two but by the time I had finished thinking about how to respond, they had already moved on to something new. Then I opened my mouth just to find myself not able to say anything, voiceless. So, I just sat there, silently. I just felt like I was a transparent person sitting among them. Although they seemed to be right beside me within reach, they were a world apart from me, still thousands of miles afar. I thought to myself, sitting there, “What am I going to do with a life like this? How am I going to live a life like this?”

This went on until one day, I felt like I could not stand this whole messed up situation anymore. I decided that I would improve my oral English no matter what so that I could live like a normal Canadian student. I started to change myself. That process of change was so painful, but I knew if I wanted to become stronger, pain was a process that I had to go through. I think I
have some language talent and, with dedicated efforts, I believe I will be able to communicate in English confidently one day. It is a process full of frustrations, but I will keep trying. I know it is not easy to learn a foreign language, and the most important thing is not giving up.

4.4 Excerpts from Lisa’s Narrative

At the time of the interview, Lisa was enrolled in the Arts and Science undergraduate program and had been in Canada for four months. She was admitted to the university with an IELTS spoken score of 5.5.

Figure 4. Artistic representation of Lisa’s story, photograph taken by Lisa.

4.4.1 Lisa’s description of her artistic representation. Studying here in Canada with limited spoken English just feels like that barren tree in the picture. Unlike the other trees around it, it has lost all its leaves, all barren. It’s just like my life here as an international student in a Canadian university—I lost everything I had in China, my social influence, my confidence, my voice, and everything, just like that tree in the picture, barren. Nothing worked after I arrived here because of my inability to communicate, academically or socially.

4.4.2 Lisa’s narrative excerpts. My inability to speak English takes my voice away in the Canadian community. During a recent floor meeting, our residence don was asking for
feedback on our homecoming activities. She seemed to be talking about the football game and asked for a vote by show of hands. I did not really understand her but I saw other students hold up their hands, so I thought, “Well, they all have their hands up. I might as well do it too.” But the truth is I did not even go to the football games. I felt like I lost my real voice and had no choice but to follow, which made me sad. Then she asked us to give oral feedback one by one. A lot of Canadian students were giving quite a lot of constructive feedback. However, when it came to my turn and all eyes turned on me, all I could say was just, “Ok. That’s Ok. I think it’s good.” At that moment, the looks in Canadian students’ eyes hurt me. They seemed to be saying, “Wow, you don’t even have an opinion and can’t even speak in front of people.” That really hurt me. But the truth was my language expression ability was constrained in English. I felt so embarrassed and awkward. Although this event seems trivial, I don’t know what other big important decisions I will have to encounter in the future in my study here where I will be required to give my voice. I don’t want to see myself lose my say on important issues one day because of my oral English constraint.

I felt like Canadian students and I were not equal individuals because I could not express myself in English. When I could not say what I thought and how I felt, I felt weak among them, unable to have conversations with them on an equal basis. I think only when one can express oneself can one truly exercise the right to speak. And only when that person’s voice is heard can people really have respect for them.

4.5 Excerpts from Nick’s Narrative

Nick is enrolled in the engineering program and had been in Canada for six months when I spoke with him. Nick completed two months of language coursework before he officially
started his undergraduate study. He was admitted to the university with an overall IELTS score of 6 and a spoken score of 5.5.

Figure 6. Artistic representation of Nick’s story, photograph taken by Nick.

4.5.1 Nick’s description of his artistic representation. The photo I chose as my narrative representation is a photo I took in the library. I see it as the best description of my life here because I often stay there until midnight or 1 a.m. in the morning before I go back to my dorm. When I walk home in the dark and quiet midnight, I cannot help asking, “Why do I have to spend a supposedly happy weekend in the library like this?” It gets very depressing sometimes. You can almost feel that depressing feeling in the seemingly never-ending stairs in the picture. Every day, I was running up and down those stairs, but unable to read any of the books that I wanted to read because it was already too much for me to handle my academic course content. I really wanted to grab some books from the literature shelves, but I found myself not even able to afford the time to grab the book.

When I was looking down the stairs from the top floor of the library, I felt like I was being suffocated by all the review and preview for my exams and quizzes, desperately trying to catch a breath but to no avail. For a task that took one hour for the Canadian students, I would
probably need five hours, because they could understand the lecture content in class and ask questions, while all I could do was take notes and record the lectures to review afterwards.

4.5.2 Nick’s narrative excerpts. My inability to orally communicate could have serious direct impact on my grades, which stresses me a lot. A lot of assignments are based on group projects here, for which we need to communicate with other students in order to get the grade. Participation is often part of the grade. For example, recently, we were assigned a project for which we needed to write an individual report and also a group report comprised of several segments. Usually, each group member would be responsible for writing one segment of the group report and then all group members’ names would be on the assignment cover page for grading. I would not speak during group discussions unless they asked me something directly. Usually, my group members would just discuss among themselves, rarely asking me anything. I sensed that they assumed that I would not be able to produce quality work due to my language problems, so they did not even assign me any group task. I was very lucky in the sense that my group members still put my name on the group report cover page, although they did all the work themselves. So, I got the full grade for that project. But I felt guilty about getting the unearned credit and frustrated about not being able to help. I truly wanted to participate. If only my spoken English were better!

Although I was lucky, I know I cannot be lucky all the time. My roommate, for example, was not as lucky as me. His group project grade got severely reduced as a result of his language communication barrier. His group members were very strict on academic workload and standards. His group manager even sent an email to the professor claiming that my roommate did not cooperate or contribute to the group work. The professor even talked to my roommate in person asking him why he would not cooperate with other group members for the project. I know
that it was not that he did not want to, but that he was not able to contribute due to his inability to communicate properly in English. His group members assigned him his portion of the group task but were very unsatisfied with the work he produced and asked him to rewrite it again and again, until they finally said, “Fine. You don’t need to write it anymore.” In the end, his group members did the work and did not put his name on the final group report for grading. He went to the professor to appeal, but the professor said, “Because you did not contribute, you do not get the grade.” This was a very serious problem because that assignment counted for a very big portion of the whole grade. In the end, his contribution grade and peer assessment grade were all zero, which significantly influenced his final grade. It has become well known among Chinese students that we cannot get a good grade in courses with group projects unless we can work with Canadian students. In my geography course, Chinese students’ grades are generally 20 points less than the Canadian students’.

The truth is I don’t like staying in the Chinese students’ community in Canada. I feel that Chinese students always like to compare and compete. Many are snobbish and selfish. Some just fool around not caring about studying at all. Some do really well academically but are arrogant and not easy to approach.

Honestly, I prefer making friends with Canadian students over Chinese students, because Canadian students are generally more friendly and helpful, and also more straightforward compared to the Chinese students I know. For instance, Chinese students usually would not say “Hi” to you when you walk on campus unless you are very close, but a lot of the foreign students who I have only briefly encountered would happily greet me if they ever see me. I remember a Canadian student caught up with me on campus just to say “Hi” because I did not see him walking behind. I felt really happy every time when Canadian students greeted me but I felt
frustrated about not being able to say more than just simple greetings back. After a while, they might get the impression that I was not friendly, but the truth is I just did not know how to talk with them properly.

4.6 Excerpts from Amanda’s Narrative

Amanda had been in Canada for 4 months when I spoke with her. She was attending the university language program in preparation for her undergraduate study. She was admitted to the program with a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) spoken score of 23 out of 30.

Figure 6. Artistic representation of Amanda’s story, photo taken by Amanda

4.6.1 Amanda’s description of her artistic representation. I chose this picture as the representation of my academic acculturation story in Canada for three reasons. First, I felt somewhat protected by the big tree beside me, resembling the language program protecting me from the actual undergraduate study stress and my parents securing my educational expenses. Then, the moon on the top left corner reminds me of home when I miss home. The picture was taken around the Chinese Mid-Autumn festival. I was homesick. I got very homesick alone abroad when I encountered problems, especially when I got sick. When the doctor told me that I had to have an operation, I called my mom right away. Regardless of anything else, I needed to
hear her voice to make me feel safe. Lastly, the light is still there in the picture, just like my hope to learn English well eventually, although I am not clear how yet.

4.6.2 Amanda’s narrative excerpts. The happiest thing that happened since I arrived was meeting another Chinese girl in a Chinese girl chatroom. We immediately got along very well and became good friends. We go shopping or exploring around in town together. Making a new friend made me happy. Because everything was so new and different here and I was all by myself. Sometimes, I really felt helpless. So, when I made a good friend, somehow, I felt that I was not that alone anymore, as if I had someone to fall back on when I found myself in trouble.

But I am in Canada, and I know being able to speak English well is extremely important to me for my future. I am very eager to improve my oral English. Although I know I need to speak more to improve, it is really difficult to speak with others in English when you cannot communicate in English to begin with.

The language barrier is the main reason for my inability to communicate. For instance, I noticed some native speakers might not understand me simply because of the way I pronounce words. They had to find out the mispronounced words to understand or I had to find a way to explain. This process is time-consuming, which drags down the communication speed and also the conversation enthusiasm. It just feels like if you were holding hands with your beloved one and were just about to hug each other for intimacy when, “Boom!” a truck comes through without warning and then you get in a messy accident. That was how I felt when someone had to point out and correct my pronunciation mistakes to carry on the conversation.

Also, my English pronunciation has impact on my grades in the language program. Whether it is a presentation or debate, my clarity of expression is always part of the grade,
together with grammar and fluency. I actually found after I came to Canada that grammar and vocabulary did not influence communication as much as pronunciation.

However, pronunciation was totally neglected in my spoken English education in China. I had taken TOEFL test preparation courses for almost two years but my teachers just taught me test skills. For the speaking, I might have practiced speaking testing modules a lot but I never really knew the pronunciation mistakes I was making because my teachers never cared about my English pronunciation. My language courses here cover some common pronunciation mistakes, but I feel it is not enough to help solve my pronunciation problems fundamentally.
CHAPTER 5

THEMES

In addition to the narrative analysis represented through re-storying, I conducted a thematic analysis of the data from all six participants following a general inductive analysis approach (Thomas, 2006). This analysis involved a coding process of closely reading the interview transcripts to identify text segments related to the research questions, labelling and organizing related segments to create categories (themes), and creating a model incorporating the most important themes (Thomas, 2006). Seven broad themes emerged from the analysis: Excitement and Shock, Frustration and Pain, Anxiety and Inferiority, Loneliness and Isolation, Helplessness and Resignation, Awakening and Regret, and Hope and Uncertainty.

These themes generally followed the same sequence of appearance within each participant’s acculturation process. In keeping with the perspective of international students’ academic acculturation as a dynamic psychological adaptation process (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), I named each theme with two words rather then one, to acknowledge the shifting, dynamic nature of the theme. Using two words per theme enabled me to represent a greater breadth of emotions; by using two words I feel I was able to capture the varied nuances of the broader concept. For example, ‘loneliness’ and ‘isolation’ capture different aspects of a similar experience. A link to the musical representation piece that highlights each individual theme is provided under the theme heading. MENI transcripts and description of musical decision-making for each MENI piece can be found in Appendix D.

5.1 Theme 1: Excitement and Shock

Please click on the following link to access the musical representation for the theme: https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/06/10/MENI--theme--excitement-and-shock
I imagined that my university life would be all colourful and exciting in Canada...just like what I saw on television, walking with foreign students, boys and girls all together, talking and laughing out loud on campus. – Lisa

But once the Canadian students started to talk, I was shocked, thinking, ‘Oh my God! Why do they speak so fast? Oh my God! Why can’t I speak English like them? Oh my God! Why?’ – Kandy

The “Excitement and Shock” theme refers to the high hopes and optimistic outlook participants held for their international education journey before their arrival in Canada and the unexpected discrepancy between their hopes and reality. This theme is prevalent in all six participants’ narratives. When discussing their academic acculturation experiences, all six participants described positive feelings when they first arrived in Canada for their studies. Specifically, their positive feelings stemmed from their high expectations of the overseas study experience and an optimistic outlook regarding communicating in English. As Kandy framed it, “It’s just speaking ABCs. How hard could it be?” This optimistic outlook made them confident and excited about embarking on an international journey of study. All six participants were also looking forward to communicating with people from other countries and making international friends: “talking and laughing out loud on campus” (Lisa). Participants enthusiastically tried to initiate conversations in English with people around them at the beginning of their academic acculturation.

However, once they started using English to communicate in an authentic English-speaking environment, with native English speakers engaging in conversations at normal speed, they were shocked. In describing this situation to me, all participants used emotionally loaded expressions. For example, Kandy repeatedly used the exclamatory phrase “Oh my God!” when
describing her shock, while Kevin claimed that, “the real English communication in Canada was totally different” from what he had learned in China.

All six participants were overwhelmed by the discrepancy between the anticipated reality and the actual reality of English communication that they faced in Canada. The real situation of studying and living in an English-speaking environment was utterly shocking to them. Kandy’s and Kevin’s excitement for studying abroad was based on their confidence derived from the praise of their parents and teachers who only focused on grades, and the realization of their inability to communicate orally in English-speaking Canada tainted their academic acculturation process with negative experiences. Nick and Lisa anticipated that they “might encounter some English communication problems” (Lisa) but were still optimistic. However, as Nick explained, “I knew that I might encounter some problems for English communication in Canada, but I never thought the problems would be this insurmountable.” The other two participants, Amanda and Selina, similarly underestimated the severity of influence of their English oral communication deficiency on their study in an English-speaking country by thinking that their “English would be improving very quickly by listening to and speaking English all the time in Canada” (Amanda).

5.2 Theme 2: Frustration and Pain

Please click on the following link to access the musical representation for the theme:

I felt very uncomfortable with the Canadian English accent and Canadians could not understand what I said either. When I went to the restaurant, I would always get different food from what I ordered. – Kevin

That feeling of being unable to even open your mouth to talk like a normal person is beyond what words can describe. That kind of pain cannot be described in words; it can only be felt. – Nick
The “Frustration and Pain” theme refers to the negative experiences and psychological stress resulting from the communication barriers participants encountered, both in the academic and non-academic domains, during their academic acculturation process. Participants frequently used the words “Frustration,” “Embarrassment,” “Shame,” and “Pain” to describe their feelings while adjusting to a Canadian academic setting. Kandy’s, Kevin’s, Lisa’s, and Nick’s academic experiences were particularly frustrating and stressful because they were already in the undergraduate program studying together with other Canadian students. As Nick painfully pointed out, “For a task that took one hour for the Canadian students, I would probably need five hours.” Their academic pressure was higher than Selina and Amanda who were still in the language program. Those four in the undergraduate program could not communicate with professors or other Canadian students for help to tackle the academic challenges when needed. Low oral English proficiency resulted in the four participants in the undergraduate program “working alone and working extra-long hours” (Kandy), leaving them constantly stressed, as Nick explained, “both psychically and psychologically.”

In addition to frustrations in the academic domain, the participants’ non-academic oral communication experiences were no less frustrating. All six participants experienced barriers dealing with even basic daily life situations such as getting the right food in a restaurant because of their low oral English communication capacity. In the social aspects of their lives, none of them was successful in developing relationships with Canadians because they were “not capable of having in-depth and efficient social conversations in English” (Kevin). As Kandy explained, the “heart-wrenching feelings” resulting from her inability to communicate made her feel like “that person in The Scream.”
5.3 Theme 3: Anxiety and Inferiority

Please click on the following link to access the musical representation for the theme:
https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/06/10/MENI-Theme--Anxiety-and-Inferiority

I felt very…nervous and anxious when talking with professors and other students in English. I was so anxious that I could not even sit still in class. I did not know where to look when talking, and would tap my feet on the ground when sitting. – Kandy

I felt like Canadian students and I were not equal individuals anymore when I could not express myself in English. When I could not say what I thought and how I felt, I felt weak among them, unable to have conversations with them on an equal basis. – Lisa

The theme of “Anxiety and Inferiority” refers to the psychological stress of anxiety resulting from the pressure of oral English communication requirements and feelings of being inadequate or inferior compared to Canadian students or other international students with sufficient oral English proficiency. Feelings of anxiety and inferiority were evident in the narratives of all six participants. After arriving in Canada, all participants realized that the English they were taught to speak in China was, as Nick put it, “worlds apart from the English spoken by Canadians.” This realization was further confirmed by all six participants encountering frequent oral communication frustrations. As a result, they became anxious and nervous, because while studying in a university where English is the medium of instruction, they knew that they were “supposed to participate by speaking English” (Kandy), yet they were “not able to express themselves in English” (Selina). Kandy even got to the point of nervously “tapping her feet whenever sitting in the classroom,” while Selina felt “afraid to speak English” with other international students. Nick got so nervous that his “brain would just go blank while talking in English in front of people.”
Simultaneously, it was apparent that a feeling of inferiority accompanied the participants’ anxiety. In the interviews, they constantly compared themselves with Canadian students or international students with high oral English proficiency. The perceived discrepancy between themselves and other students undermined their confidence, leaving them feeling “somehow not good enough” (Nick), “lame” (Kandy), or “not equal” (Lisa) to the students who could communicate in English freely. The four participants in the undergraduate program showed this feeling of inferiority more prominently than the two still in the language program because they were directly engaging in learning activities together with Canadian students, while both Selina’s and Amanda’s classmates in the language program “were all Chinese students studying English” (Selina). However, Selina and Amanda still compared themselves to other students in the language program and claimed that they felt their spoken English “was not as good as other students in the program” (Amanda).

5.4 Theme 4: Loneliness and Isolation

Please click on the following link to access the musical representation for the theme: https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/06/10/MENI-Theme--Loneliness-and-Isolation

Because everything was so new and different here and I was all by myself. Sometimes, I really felt alone and helpless. – Amanda

I just sat there, silently. I just felt like I was a transparent person sitting among them. Although they seemed to be right beside me within reach, they were a world apart from me. – Kevin

The theme of “Loneliness and Isolation” refers to the participants’ experience of being alone in a foreign country without support systems, and separation from the Canadian community due to participants’ inability to communicate in oral English during their academic
acculturation process. Being far away from home alone without familiar social supports such as family and friends made all six participants feel lonely in a completely foreign country. The inability to communicate effectively in oral English also resulted in the participants failing to gain a sense of relatedness to the Canadian community. Due to their low oral conversation capacity, participants “could not engage in in-depth social conversations with Canadians” (Amanda). Consequently, they “could not bond with Canadian students” (Kevin), even though all of them felt Canadian students were very welcoming and friendly.

As a result of the inability to develop connections to Canadians, all six participants perceived themselves as “outsiders” (Kevin) in Canada. They felt Canada was “not a world of their own” (Nick), and they felt rejected by the host culture community. The feeling of rejection then caused the feeling of isolation. As Kevin pointed out: “Without relationships with the Canadians, no matter how beautiful Canada seemed to be or how well I did academically, I still felt empty inside and alone.” The feeling of isolation was particularly significant in Kevin’s narrative, because he did not seek bonding with other Chinese students around him. Because of his personal goal to become part of the Canadian community during his international education journey, he did not want to associate much with other Chinese students. As a result, the isolation he felt was the most prominent of all the six participants.

5.5 Theme 5: Helplessness and Resignation

Please click on the following link to access the musical representation for the theme: https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/06/10/MENI-Theme--Helplessness-and-Resignation

When I just came to a completely foreign place all by myself and I could not make friends, I felt like I did not even have someone to go to when I found myself in trouble. – Kevin
So eventually I just gave up trying to find a place in the Canadian community and stayed in the Chinese students’ community. The reason is simple. Oral communication in English is way too hard for me. How do I make Canadian friends if I cannot even talk with them? – Selina

The theme of “Helplessness and Resignation” refers to the helplessness participants felt because they were unable to access help or empathy for psychological stress, and the resignation they felt following repeated futile attempts to communicate in English. Being international students, all the participants’ established support systems, family and friends, were in China. Within the constraints of their low oral communication ability, they were not able to develop new support systems in the Canadian community. Selina and Amanda mentioned that they had tried to explain to their parents about the difficulties they were experiencing in Canada, but Selina’s parents still blamed her for not working hard enough. Amanda’s parents shared similar reactions but gradually accepted the fact that Amanda needed to study in the language program to further improve her English communication ability. The other four participants withheld the language deficiency difficulties they encountered from their parents out of “fear of disappointing them” (Kandy). As Nick mentioned, “I could only tell my parents that my English was slowly improving. Even though I told them so, my mom would still ask me why my English was just improving slowly instead of quickly. I did not dare to tell them that my English was not improving at all.” Besides the fear of disappointing parents, Kandy chose not to share her struggles because she was reluctant to have her family in China worry about her.

All participants talked about how their domestic Chinese friends could not offer the empathy they needed because they “had not lived the academic acculturation experience” (Kevin). In addition, both Kandy and Nick pointed out that they were not able to voice their
feelings of frustration to their Chinese friends in Canada either, because they were afraid sharing each other’s frustrations would just make things even heavier and more depressing for their Chinese friends who shared similar experiences. The last resource available, the university counselling service, was not accessible either, due to their inability to communicate with the counsellors. Four of the six participants clearly stated that they “needed help from psychological counselling” (Kandy), but they chose to give up, either out of spoken English limitation or lack of trust in the counselling service quality. Amanda and Nick were not aware that there were campus counselling services available.

Eventually, after repeated communication frustration, five of the six participants started to close up emotionally and gave up trying to find a place in the Canadian community. In order to feel psychologically safe and connected, they chose to associate only with the Chinese students’ circle for socializing. Their daily communications involved always speaking Chinese with other Chinese students. Although they knew that English was the language required to study or do “almost everything” (Kandy) in Canada, they chose to speak Chinese out of “communication efficiency” (Kandy) and “avoidance of embarrassment” (Nick). Naturally, they were separated from the host culture community and were “not living in an English-speaking environment” (Nick), even though they were studying in an English-speaking university. The only exception was Kevin. Although Kevin also experienced moments of helplessness and resignation, he summoned up his courage again and again to keep trying, and claimed that he would not give up trying.

5.6 Theme 6: Awakening and Regret

Please click on the following link to access the musical representation for the theme:
I feel so regretful. If I could go back in time, I would change the way I learned English and prepared for my study in Canada. I would spend the time spent on memorizing useless words on training myself to be better at speaking real English. If I become an English teacher when I go back to China, I would not teach my students test-taking skills because they are useless in real communication. – Nick

I originally thought that my English would improve very quickly after I came to Canada as I imagined that I would be listening to and speaking English every day through making many international friends. However, the reality in Canada is just the opposite of what I expected. – Amanda

The theme of “Awakening and Regret” refers to the realization of the misconceptions of overseas study and language education held by participants, their parents, and their English teachers back in China, and the regretful feelings associated with the recognition of the participants’ misguided preparation before their international study in Canada. Given the experience that “almost everything is based on oral communication” (Selina) in Canada and communication difficulties were encountered frequently, participants quickly started to reflect on their English learning experiences back in China. Their reflections led to regret about “spending time mainly on test papers and memorizing words and grammar” (Selina), which was “useless” (Kandy) when English was needed for real communication in Canada. This reflection made them awaken to the misconceptions their parents and teachers had held regarding English language education. Participants’ parents and teachers in China held the mistaken belief that, as long as students received good grades for the English tests, their English was good enough. However, although they were receiving good grades for the English tests in China, they “were not really learning how to communicate effectively in English, especially in oral English” (Amanda).
When asked about suggestions for other Chinese students planning to study overseas, all six participants suggested assertively that students should stop “wasting time on testing papers and memorizing vocabulary lists” (Nick), and parents should look beyond grades and “listen to international students’ real stories” (Kandy) instead of “what application agencies have to say” (Kandy). The painful moments during the academic acculturation process led participants to these moments of reflection and awakening.

Only Kevin did not have a strong feeling of regret, although he did realize all the misconceptions he had held before his international education. He claimed that he was already working really hard to improve his spoken English in China compared to other Chinese students he knew. However, he felt it was beyond his capacity to learn oral English well in China because there were no good available resources even if he had tried. As he pointed out, “I had tried everything I could to improve my spoken English, but it was just not good enough. There was nothing else I could do. In China there was no English-speaking environment around me.”

5.7 Theme 7: Hope and Uncertainty

Please click on the following link to access the musical representation for the theme: https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/06/10/MENI-Theme---Hope-and-Uncertainty

I really hope that I can improve my spoken English in Canada. I mean, I am already in Canada where people speak English all the time. If I still cannot improve my oral English, it will be so embarrassing. –Lisa

If I continue to be isolated from the Canadian community, I do not think my oral English is really going to improve much. I am worried that my English will still be as bad as it is now after I graduate. Also, I think it is impossible to speak English without my Chinese
accent, because I have never met a Chinese international student that can do that except for one. –Nick

The theme of “Hope and Uncertainty” refers to the perceived possibility of oral English improvement participants held because of the English-speaking environment that surrounded them in Canada and their doubts and worries about whether or not this possibility could be transferred into reality due to the isolation they faced in their academic acculturation process and their confusions about oral English training strategies.

Despite all the difficult moments of communication the participants experienced throughout their academic acculturation process, they still had “hope” (Lisa) to improve their oral English proficiency. The extremely high value of oral communication capacity became clear to all six participants in their academic acculturation process in Canada. Their hope mainly stemmed from “the English-speaking environment out there” (Lisa) in Canada, which made them feel that improvement was more “possible” (Amanda) in Canada compared to the Chinese learning context. All six participants mentioned difficulties finding a community that could speak authentic English with them in China, while, in the Canadian context, all six participants felt there were more opportunities to practice with native English speakers. Even though they felt it was difficult to utilize these opportunities due to their oral English deficiency, the existence of these opportunities gave them some sense of assurance and hope.

However, this hope was shadowed with uncertainty. Although the English-speaking environment in Canada gave these students some assurance, it was “far from enough” (Nick) to help them improve their oral English to the level of being able to communicate with confidence. Due to the social isolation they had already encountered, all of them were mainly communicating with other Chinese students in Chinese and their “communication with native English speakers
remained short and sporadic” (Nick). Additionally, none of the six students had an effective strategy to guide her or his oral English study. Even the most basic component of spoken English, pronunciation, remained confusing for all of the six participants. Kandy was the participant who had studied in Canada for the longest time, but she was still not able to say the word “gym” correctly after being repeatedly corrected by English native speakers. All six participants realized that “the English learning methods taught in China were not helpful” (Kandy), but they did not know “how to train” (Nick) properly for the improvement they needed to communicate confidently. Accordingly, the hope they had was shadowed with uncertainty.

5.8 Theme Song: The Sound of Silence

In addition to the seven MENI theme pieces, I also created a theme song as a distillation and synthesis of the participants' experiences. First, I took direct quotes from participants’ transcripts and distilled them into shorter sentences to provide a sense of participants' experiences. Next, I rearranged those sentences into a sequence that made sense poetically. After the completion of the lyrics, I composed a melody that communicated my interpretation of the lyrics, and arranged corresponding accompaniment music for the melody. Then, I used digital audio software to record both the vocal and accompaniment piano for the song. Finally, I combined the vocal and accompaniment piano recordings in music editing software and exported the completed song in MP3 format so that it can be accessible to audiences. Lyrics can be found in Appendix E.

Please click on the following link to access the theme song:
https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/06/25/Theme-song--%E5%AF%82%E9%9D%99%E4%B9%8B%E5%A3%B0-The-sound-of-silence
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION

This study aimed to tap into the academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency at a mid-sized Canadian university. Three central research questions guided this study: 1) What are the academic acculturation stories of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency? 2) How do these students describe their experiences of the relationship between low oral English proficiency and academic acculturation? 3) How do these students describe their motivation for enhancing oral English proficiency in relation to their academic acculturation experiences? These three research questions guide the discussion in this chapter.

Chinese international students constitute the biggest international student body on Canadian campuses (CIBE, 2016). They are also the group with the lowest spoken English proficiency test scores compared to other international student groups (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). All six Chinese participants from a Canadian university in this study described very harsh academic acculturation experiences due to the limitations of their oral English proficiency. Consequently, these harsh academic acculturation experiences significantly enhanced their English learning motivation, particularly their oral English learning motivation.

6.1 Revisiting Research Questions

6.1.1 What are the academic acculturation stories of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency? As viewed in this work, international students’ academic acculturation is a dynamic psychological adaptation process (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) influenced by students’ acculturative stressors and coping resources (Berry, 2006). It involves a complex and idiosyncratic interplay between academic and non-academic experiences that are
often impacted by language proficiency (Cheng & Fox, 2008). Through the processes of narrative re-storying (Creswell, 2005), the creation of musically enhanced narrative representations (Bolden, 2017), and general inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006), it became apparent that the academic acculturation stories of the six participants in this study were penetrated with: (a) excitement and shock, (b) frustration and pain, (c) anxiety and inferiority, (d) loneliness and isolation, (e) helplessness and resignation, (f) awakening and regret, and (g) hope and uncertainty. Although the magnitude of these psychological responses varied amongst the six participants due to individual differences, all these responses were present and significant in the six narratives in this study.

All six participants described the inability to communicate orally in English. They reported that this inability imposed barriers in multiple aspects of their lives in Canada, academically and non-academically. The lack of oral language proficiency became a salient academic acculturative stressor for all six participants that interacted with all other stressors (as identified previously by Chen [1999], such as educational differences and sociocultural differences (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These interactions resulted in psychological stress in all participants. As proposed in the acculturation framework presented by Berry (2006), the degree of psychological stress that results from acculturation is influenced by the adequacy of coping resources the individual facing the stressors employs. Due to the inability to express themselves in English, all six Chinese students in this study found it difficult to access help or support within their Canadian context. Also, the participants in this study were not able to utilize the coping resources they used to have in China, out of fear of disappointing their family or due to a lack of understanding and empathy from their family and friends back at home. As a result, the psychological stress experienced by the participants in this study was very high. Although no
professional diagnoses indicated that the degree of stress had led to the point of psychopathology, four of the six participants clearly stated that they wanted professional counselling help. They had not accessed this support due to their oral English communication constraints.

As pointed out by Pederson (1991), a language barrier induces psychological harm to students whose native language is not English in English-speaking countries. The inability to communicate using English can have a “strong and long-lasting impact on international students’ self-concept and other related cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects” (Chen, 1999, p. 51) during their academic acculturation process. Psychological harm, impact on self-concept, and influence on other related emotional and behavioral aspects were all found in the narratives of the six Chinese students in this study. The feelings of inferiority described by participants indicated the significant negative impact of their low oral English proficiency on their self-concept. These feelings of inferiority were combined with strong emotional feelings like anxiety, loneliness, and helplessness. Participants resorted to the behavioral change of resignation; they stopped trying to find a place in the Canadian community.

The principles of self-determination theory (SDT) were strongly evident in the academic acculturation stories of participants in this study. According to SDT, all individuals require the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in order to achieve psychological well-being. The need of autonomy is met when one identifies one’s behavior as being choiceful and self-determined (de Charms, 1968); the need of competence is met when one feels confident and capable in one’s actions (White, 1959); and relatedness centers around the need of belonging and feeling personally connected to others (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
Regarding autonomy, all six participants described frequent experiences of oral English proficiency restricting them from doing what they truly wanted to do, that is, it limited their choices. In academic settings, participants described how their low spoken English capacity limited their choice of elective courses and exerted negative influence on their grades in compulsory courses. For example, Kevin was really eager to express his opinion in a group discussion, but because of his low oral English proficiency, all he could say when he opened his mouth was “Ok. That’s good.” Similarly, Lisa claimed that she “would never choose any courses that involved oral presentations” before she could improve her spoken English to a sufficient level. Non-academically, as Nick pointed out, staying in the Chinese students’ community for socializing was not a preferred choice but a result of his inability to socialize with other Canadian students; he “had to” stay in the Chinese student’s community. All participants described a number of experiences where they “had to” (Lisa, Kandy, Kevin, Nick, Selina, Amanda) give up preferred choices as a result of their inability to communicate orally. In summary, all participants’ experienced a significantly diminished sense of autonomy as a result of their limited spoken English capacity.

In addition, findings from this study confirm the positive correlation identified in the literature between oral English proficiency and international students’ sense of competence. Talking to native speakers is a prime factor in international students’ perceived communication competence (Zimmermann, 1995). In this study, failure to engage in both intercultural social contact and academic contact undermined participants’ self-confidence, leaving them feeling “somehow not good enough” (Lisa) compared to other Canadian students or students with sufficient oral English capacity. A decrease in self-confidence was significant for all six participants, causing them to engage even less in local encounters, hindering further language
development and decreasing prospects of their academic acculturation success (Sawir et al., 2012), which in return, further undermined their sense of competency.

Finally, the relationship between spoken English communicative capacity and the satisfaction of the need for relatedness, the sense of belonging and connection (Deci & Ryan, 2000), was also evident in all six participants’ narratives of their experiences in Canada. The theme of loneliness and isolation was prevalent in all six participants’ narratives. The number of host culture friends that international students have in a new social environment is a major factor for them to acculturate successfully (Hong, Fox, & Almarza, 2007; Sam, 2001). However, as a direct result of the inability to engage in meaningful and smooth social conversations, none of the participants claimed that they had close intercultural relationships. Even when Nick felt Canadian students were more friendly to him and he “really wanted to make some international friends,” he could not successfully develop intercultural friendships as his inability to speak English fluently was too inhibiting to the cultivation of social relationships (Hayes & Lin, 1994). All participants described an inability to acquire a sense of connectedness to the English-speaking people around them. Although they were in Canada, “it did not feel like a world they could call their own” (Kevin).

In summary, the academic acculturation stories of the participants in this study clearly demonstrated that, as a result of their limited spoken English capacity, participants’ psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness were not met. Consequently, participants experienced substantial stress and anxiety; the language communication difficulties severely impacted their psychological well-being during their time studying in Canada.

**6.1.2 How do these students describe their experiences of the relationship between low oral English proficiency and academic acculturation?** All six participants stated their low
oral English proficiency constrained them in multiple aspects of their lives in Canada, exerting a significant negative influence on their academic acculturation. Low oral English proficiency was related to the negative experiences they had in their academic acculturation process, out of the simple reason that “literally everything” (Kandy) was related to speaking English in Canada. Participants’ low oral English communication ability dampened their initial excitement and enthusiasm for studying in a new country and communicating with English speakers. Furthermore, their inability to communicate effectively with others in English led to various experiences of frustration in both academic and non-academic situations.

Academically, the inability to express themselves in English constrained all six participants’ academic performance, narrowing down their “academic circle” (Nick) and suppressing “at least half of the academic capacity” (Kevin) they had. For the four students in the undergraduate program, their low oral language ability inhibited their capacity to contribute to group work with other Canadian students, with negative ramifications for their grades. Lisa explicitly mentioned that she “would never choose a course that involves presentations, because usually the grades of Chinese students are lower than Canadian students.” For Selina and Amanda, oral English proficiency was directly assessed as part of the grade in the language program. Without a passing grade, they would not be permitted to continue their studies.

Research has also shown the number of host culture relationships is a major factor contributing to international students’ academic acculturation success (Hong, Fox, & Almarza, 2007; Sam, 2001). The oral English deficiency of all participants in this study posed severe difficulties for them when it came to developing intercultural relationships. Participants’ low oral English proficiency exerted a negative influence on both their daily life and social interactions. Barriers existed for them in handling basic daily life needs, like getting food or troubleshooting
internet problems. Socially, all participants were isolated from the Canadian community as a result of their inability to effectively communicate orally with Canadians during their academic acculturation. Although all participants reported that Canadian students were friendly and nice, initiating conversations with them and inviting them to social events at the beginning of their academic acculturation, none of the six students was able to engage in smooth social conversations in English. Without such conversations, participants felt it was impossible to develop those opportunities into meaningful relationships.

6.1.3 How do these students describe their motivation for enhancing oral English proficiency in relation to their academic acculturation experiences? All six participants described drastically increased motivation for enhancing oral English proficiency in relation to their academic acculturation experiences in Canada. This increase of motivation was mainly attributed to the new subjective value of oral English proficiency acquired by participants in their academic acculturation process, particularly as a result of their acculturation frustrations. In addition to the increased subjective value acquired by all participants, the English-speaking environment in Canada helped them raise a certain degree of expectancy of success for improving spoken English, although this increase of expectancy came with a premise that they fix their oral English fluency and accuracy problems. In the following paragraphs, I discuss in further detail how participants described these two factors influencing their motivation for oral English learning before and during their academic acculturation in Canada.

As Expectancy-Value Theory suggests, the motivation behind individual choices to engage in a learning activity can be explained by individuals’ expectancy of success and the subjective value they attach to the activity (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). What the six students described about their motivation for oral English learning before their academic acculturation in
Canada was consistent with what the existing literature shows: both the subjective value and expectancy of success attached to oral English learning by Chinese English language learners tends to be low (He & Shi, 2011; Jin, 2015).

When asked how they valued oral English before they began their studies in Canada, five of the six participants referred to oral English proficiency as “unimportant” because it was not addressed in their English tests. Only Selina, who attended an international high school, thought spoken English was somewhat important. The washback of English language testing is prominent in China; teaching and learning are often focused only on material that will be tested (He & Shi, 2011). All six participants did not attach value to the spoken component of the language learning because it did not figure prominently in the testing they experienced during their English language learning in China.

Even when these participants had to take non-Chinese English proficiency tests that had an oral component, like IELTS or TOEFL, it was an unimportant grade to them. They had already been acculturated into the belief that speaking is not an important component of English language study (He & Shi, 2011). As a result, during their test preparations for IELTS or TOEFL, they were still focusing on “wordlist memorizing” (Selina) and “test paper drilling” (Amanda). All six participants took IETLS or TOEFL test preparation courses in private educational centres, but all the course content heavily “emphasized test-taking skills instead of actual language communication ability” (Lisa). All six students in this study had very little idea how oral English was going to influence their life in an English-speaking country. They focused on handling lifestyle differences instead of the language differences involved in studying in an English-speaking country. In short, none of the six participants’ subjective value attached to oral
English before their study in Canada matched up with the objective value it holds for international students’ academic acculturation.

However, due to the negative experiences in all six participants’ academic acculturation processes related to their inability to communicate orally in English, they came to a painful but clear realization of the importance that oral English proficiency holds for their international study. All six students described being able to communicate orally effectively and confidently as “the biggest barrier” (Nick) to their success studying in Canada. Although participants recognized that there were multiple aspects of using English that related to their study in Canada, they particularly valued the spoken component because it was the area where they experienced “the biggest gap” (Lisa) between them and Canadian students. Lisa even claimed that improving her oral English to communicate confidence and efficiency was “more important than the academic courses” for her, because she realized her inability to communicate in English not only influenced her academic study but also cost her many other affordances that she used to have in China.

Regarding the expectancy of success component of oral English learning motivation, Chinese students tend to have a low expectancy of success in China because of the lack of contact with authentic English speakers in the Chinese learning context (He & Shi, 2011). In line with this finding, all six participants in this study described having a higher expectancy of success after arriving in Canada compared to the Chinese learning context, although this expectancy of success was accented with uncertainty.

In describing the English language learning context in China, participants mentioned four reasons that contributed to their lack of contact with authentic English speaking opportunities. Two of the four reasons are present in the literature. First, English is a foreign language in China,
and there is no broad national context for speaking English (He & Shi, 2011). Second, the severe washback of English testing on English teaching excludes students from oral English contact in the English education process at school (Li, 2014; Qi, 2005).

The other two reasons for participants’ lack of contact with authentic English speaking were the low oral English capacity of their teachers and the high financial costs associated with oral English education. All participants mentioned that their English teachers in China could not speak English well themselves, and rarely spoke to them in English during their classes. As Selina commented, “My teachers spoke ‘Chinglish’ with an accent that was totally odd!” Nick had one teacher in his junior high school who told him to pay attention to speaking English properly, but was not able to teach him how. The teacher told Nick not to follow his example, aware of his own “Chinglish,” but he did not explain to Nick how to speak real English. The fourth reason that participants provided for a lack of contact with authentic English speaking was financial. Kevin stated that, in order to have opportunities to practice spoken English frequently, he would have to hire a foreign teacher to help. The cost would be too hard for any regular students to afford.

Therefore, the expectancy of success for learning oral English was low for all six participants before they came to Canada. After their arrival in Canada, despite all the frustrations in oral English communication, all six participants’ expectancy of success of oral English improvement increased to some extent due to the English-speaking environment in Canada, and the potential for them to engage in oral English practices. However, they also expressed uncertainty regarding this increased expectancy of success, because they felt their low oral English proficiency had already isolated them from the Canadian community. Although the existence of an English-speaking environment increased the perceived possibility for their
improvement, all participants were concerned that, without the oral English ability to utilize this English-speaking environment in the first place, improvement would remain a possibility instead of becoming a reality. As Nick put it, “If I keep on being isolated from the Canadian community and staying in the Chinese community, I don’t think my English is going to improve much even after four years of study in Canada.”

He and Shi (2011) identified that Chinese English Language Learners are often not even taught the correct basics of oral English, such as pronunciation. In line with this finding, all six participants mentioned that they still had problems pronouncing English words correctly. Literature shows Chinese students often speak English with a strong Chinese accent that severely influences effective communication with native English speakers, and contributes to students’ lacking confidence in their English speaking (He & Shi, 2011). This was also the case with the six participants in this study; all six students described communication frustrations due to their pronunciation mistakes in conversations that created significant communication barriers.

Exacerbating the frustration, none of those six participants knew how to fix their pronunciation problems. All of them were confused about the phonetics of English, including the two students who were attending language courses in the university, and Kandy who had studied in Canada for the longest time. All six participants expressed the “impossibility” or “unlikelihood” of fixing their pronunciation problems when speaking English. The existence of potential opportunities to speak English in Canada increased the participants’ expectancy of success for improving oral English fluency. Moreover, all participants expressed a pessimistic outlook regarding improving the accuracy of their English pronunciation. This pessimism mainly stemmed from two reasons: (1) they were not introduced to the right basics of the sound system of English in their many years of English education in China; and (2) they found it was too
difficult to pick up the basics of spoken English solely through talking with native speakers in Canada.

To summarize, all participants’ expectancy of success of improving oral English increased because the English-speaking environment in Canada offered potential opportunities for them to practice speaking English. However, after experiencing the reality of living in Canada, participants realized they would need to improve their oral English communication to a certain level first in order to be able to effectively utilize these potential opportunities for practice.

In conclusion, the subjective value these six students attached to oral English proficiency was drastically increased in relation to their academic acculturation experiences. Their expectancy of success increased as well, but to a lesser degree due to the isolation they experienced from the Canadian community. Despite the challenges, all participants’ motivation in oral English learning was significantly increased in relation to their academic acculturation experiences as a result of the extremely high value they attached to oral English proficiency during their academic acculturation in Canada.

6.2 Implications of the Findings

Through this musically enhanced narrative inquiry, I have acquired an in-depth understanding of the academic acculturation experiences of Chinese students with low oral English proficiency studying at a university in an English-speaking country. More importantly, the findings from this study have implications for various associated stakeholders, including Chinese English language students, parents, test preparation centres, test designers, and educators. In addition, findings from this study have implications for host country educators and support service personnel who work with international students.
6.2.1 Implications for Chinese English language students, parents, test preparation centres, test designers, and educators. The gap between the objective and subjective value of oral English proficiency in English education among Chinese English language students, parents, test preparation centres, test designers, and educators needs to be narrowed. Chinese parents and students need to be made aware of the value of oral English proficiency and the relationship between oral communication and international students’ academic acculturation and performance. Parents and students can make effective English language education choices only when the gap between the objective and subjective value of oral English proficiency is narrowed.

The booming test preparation industry in China indicates that Chinese parents and students are willing to invest in English language education. However, evidence from this study and elsewhere (e.g., Matoush & Fu, 2012) suggests that they are not sufficiently critical of test preparation practices and approaches.

All six participants stated that test preparation courses in China focused on the improvement of test skills at the expense of actual English proficiency. All six students in this study dedicated a great amount of time and energy in their coaching courses to memorizing wordlists by rote and drilling with test papers, hoping for a score that would lead to a bright future abroad. Parents scrimp and save to pay high prices for classes that seem able to predict test items (Matoush & Fu, 2012). It is of urgent importance to mobilize the findings of this study together with other studies on international students’ academic acculturation (e.g., Yi, 2004) so that Chinese students who study abroad have the best possible chance of success in their international studies. Mobilizing the findings of this study is particularly important as China is the dominant origin country for international students (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010).
Basing English language proficiency test preparation instruction on close analysis of test items or test-wise skills without considering students’ real long-term language needs is neither appropriate nor ethical (Matoush & Fu, 2012). Test preparation centres should attempt to reconcile test preparation with useful learning, emphasizing authentic language learning that values speaking alongside listening, reading, and writing. Test preparation teachers should also be aware that achieving the required test scores cannot be the sole focus of time and attention, sacrificing oral proficiency for test score improvement. The practice of narrowed test preparation curriculum deprives students of opportunities to understand the long-term goal of learning language for real-world communication. If English language test preparation fails to give students the ability to use the language authentically for communication in a foreign university, that preparation is failing to help them envision, much less reach, their more significant long-term goals of successfully operating in an English-language context.

In addition, the English testing system (as well as English teaching and learning) in China needs to be enhanced for better testing quality (Cheng, 2008) by the addition of a mandatory speaking component. Not only should this addition render the tests a more authentic assessment of a student’s English language capacity, but the washback would likely exert a positive influence on English teaching and learning. With the speaking component made mandatory for high-stakes admission and graduation English tests, teaching to the test should require the focus of attention to shift from reading and writing to speaking. This shift of focus would likely positively influence students’ perceived value of speaking English. Only when both educators and learners are aware of the importance to language development of listening, reading, writing, and speaking, can it be possible for the full, authentic use of a language to be achieved.
This study also has implications for the preparation of English language educators. English language teachers need specific training so that they are able to help students to communicate confidently and effectively in spoken English. As the old Chinese proverb posits, “Those who lead must walk the walk before the talk.” If the ones who teach students can only speak “Chinglish” that severely influences communication with English native speakers, it is very unlikely that the students will be able to learn from them to be able to speak fluent and authentic English.

6.2.2 Implications for host country educators and support service personnel who work with international students. In addition to implications for the Chinese English language education community, the findings from this study have implications for host country educators and support service personnel who work with international students.

Universities that offer language programs to international students with low oral English proficiency need to enhance the education experiences they provide to EFL learners. Specifically, the often-neglected sound system of the English language deserves more attention to help students develop solid ability and confidence for oral English communication.

Moreover, any educators who have international students in their classes should be made aware of the particular challenges those students face, related to, for example, group work, oral presentations, the inability to confidently articulate questions, and following instructors who simultaneously write on the board as they lecture.

Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that universities should reconsider admission language proficiency test score requirements. If low oral English proficiency significantly hinders international students’ success, a more stringent requirement for the spoken score should be considered instead of just focusing on the overall score of a language proficiency
test (comprising listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Even with high scores in listening, reading, and writing, a low score for speaking could indicate the likelihood of severe challenges for international students to acculturate into the academic setting.

Finally, a more in-depth understanding of the academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students would help universities all over the world to enhance the support they provide to international students. In order to be truly international and inclusive, universities should pay particular attention in the design of support programs to better reach international students with low oral English proficiency on campus, recognizing that low oral proficiency inherently creates a barrier to accessing many support programs, such as academic and personal counselling.

6.3 Contribution of the Musically Enhanced Narrative Inquiry (MENI) Approach

The MENI approach employed in this work builds on traditional forms of narrative inquiry by utilizing sound and music (Bolden, 2017). This process of analyzing and forming representations through sound and music enabled me, as the researcher, to strive for the fundamental purpose of qualitative inquiry: promoting empathic understanding, which “involves resonance, an embodied state of mind that is cognitive and at the same time, affective and corporeal” (Bresler, 2006, p. 25). Specifically, the MENI approach contributed to this study by enriching the analysis of the data and the representation of the findings.

The MENI representations that I created involved working artistically with the digital audio from the interviews; I combined and framed the participants’ recorded words with music. Working artistically with the data enriched my analysis in two ways. My understanding of the data was enhanced by (a) repeatedly listening to the participants’ voices, and (b) examining and reconsidering the meaning within the stories from a musical perspective.
As an inherent aspect of crafting the MENI representations, I listened repeatedly to the participants’ words as spoken by their own voices. The addition of this sound dimension to the data enriched my analytical process of theming and restorying. As a result of listening to and considering the interview recordings many times, I was not only able to confirm existing themes from the first stage of literary analysis but also to identify new emergent themes from the sound of the data. Specifically, I was able to pay close attention not only to the participants’ words, but to the way they spoke those words. I realized that the intonation, pauses, and subtle sentimental meanings borne in the participants’ voices could tell me things that the transcribed texts could not. For instance, Kandy’s voice speaking the words, “Oh my God! Why?” was dramatically emotionally loaded. The expression in her voice lifted those few words out from the data and powerfully communicated her feeling of shock directly to me, on a level of emotional rather than cognitive understanding. When I went back to read the transcripts to work out the meaning behind the words, the emotional meaning her voice had communicated to me was also there, together with the transcribed words. Her voice was in my ears, informing the literary identification of themes. This iterative process of going back and forth between working analytically with the data in the musical and audio context versus the literary and written text context enabled me to identify and highlight meanings that would have been otherwise neglected.

Further, my understanding of the data was enhanced by examining and reconsidering the meaning within the participants’ stories from a musical perspective. As I crafted the MENI representations of the data, my artistic process required me to listen to the stories repeatedly to consider and test the match between the meaning conveyed by the participants’ spoken words and by the music I was carefully composing. I needed to relate to my participants’ stories from a
musical perspective. For instance, when composing the music to match the sadness Kevin conveyed when describing his experiences of isolation, I had to carefully consider whether or not the timbre of instruments used and the tempo and the structure of the music were appropriately matching what the participant was communicating. This process of art making therefore required a further exploration and interrogation of the data, thus developing my understanding of them.

Additionally, since interviews were conducted in the participants’ first language, Chinese, I needed to do narration in English for the musical representation pieces, together with the participant’s voice in the background. When I was using my own voice to capture and communicate the emotion of their experiences, it brought me to an even deeper understanding of the data and the embodied experiences of my participants; I was taking on my participants’ experiences as my own. This same process of embodied experiences happened when I was directing a male narrator to do male participants’ voices so that I could infuse all my understanding of participants’ experiences into the representations.

Moreover, the process of song-writing was also a process of exploring and developing deeper understandings of my participants’ stories. In the composing and recording process of the song, I had to carefully consider and reconsider the matching between the lyrics, melody, singing, and accompaniment. Each listening was an opportunity for me to further explore and understand the experiences contained in the song. Eventually, I was able to infuse all my understanding in the version that I sent forward.

In addition to enhancing my analytical capacity to identify and understand the meanings my participants’ stories held, the MENI approach enriched my ability to communicate the findings of this research. The findings of this research are not only communicated through
written words but also through eight sound compositions that feature the authentic voices and words of participants supported and framed by music that I have composed.

Our experiences in the world are construed from “multimedia” events and are not limited to what we read (Barone & Eisner, 1997). Sound has the capacity to situate us in the world like no other sense does (Bowman, 2004). The musical representations based on participants’ original spoken words allow audiences to access the stories through the modality of sound, listening to spoken words rather than reading them. By listening to participants’ voices instead of just reading texts, listeners can be brought closer to the lived experiences and stories of the participants and can perceive nuances that are ineffable but are borne in the subtlety of voices.

Additionally, music can symbolize meaning efficiently and powerfully because of the power music has to represent and evoke emotions (Bolden, 2017). It is a medium utilized across cultures and contexts in sharing stories. This study explored the academic acculturation experiences of Chinese students with limited spoken English at a Canadian university. The stories of all six participants were filled with strongly felt emotions. By utilizing music in the presentation of participants’ stories, the findings of my research have the potential to affect audience members in new ways (Leavy, 2015) that can engender resonance and empathy that are not available to other forms of communication.

In particular, my intention with the theme song I composed from the source material of my participants’ stories is to make use of the power of music to provoke evocative and affective responses (Bolden, 2017), and empathic understanding of participant’s lived stories. Writing this song allowed me to frame and emphasize certain aspects of the stories, and use music to fuel the audience’s meaning making of those emphasized aspects of participants’ experiences. Given that music can tell stories in ways that written words cannot (Bolden, 2017), this song has the
potential to increase my ability to communicate my understandings of the participants’ experiences. It informs and engages the audience in an active process of meaning making; and it explicitly intends to evoke and provoke emotion, thought, and action, as one of the defining elements of arts-informed research (Knowles and Cole, 2008).

By combining traditional narrative methods with MENI processes, I not only gained a deeper understanding of the stories of my participants, but, more importantly, I felt their stories and the urgent need to share them. By employing a research approach using music and sound, it made it possible for me to step closer to the fundamental purpose of qualitative inquiry: promoting empathic understanding (Bresler, 2006). My intention in creating the MENI representations is to bring the audience closer to the lived experiences of the participants, with resonance and empathy. I hope the emotions that I have felt in carrying out this work and creating these pieces will transfer to listeners, and so help to enrich their understanding of the experiences of my participants.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Due to the in-depth narrative nature of this study and the scale of a master’s thesis project, only six undergraduate Chinese students from one Canadian university were included. The participants represented students in math, engineering, arts and science, and the university language program. For future research, it would be informative to study the academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency from a variety of universities and include participants from more programs, particularly the business programs whose curricula require substantial amounts of oral communication (Brink & Costigan, 2015).
This research was also limited by its focus on participants with low oral English communication capacity. Additional research that examines how Chinese international students with a high level of English oral communication capacity in English-speaking countries acculturate into their overseas studies would further help the understanding of the relationship between oral proficiency and academic acculturation.

In addition, this study was limited by solely looking at undergraduate students’ academic acculturation experiences; further studies involving graduate students with both low and high oral English proficiencies would help to increase understanding of the relationship between English oral language proficiency and academic acculturation amongst Chinese international students in English-speaking countries.

5.5 Conclusion

Currently in Canada, there are more than 350,000 international post-secondary students, creating over 81,000 jobs and $8B for the economy (CIBE, 2016). More of these students come from China than from any other country. However, Chinese international students generally demonstrate the lowest spoken English capacity, and are often viewed as “the silent group” on campus, separated from the host culture community (Yi, 2014). This study demonstrated, however, that Chinese international students with limited spoken English were in fact very eager to acculturate into the host culture community, but instead experienced isolation that resulted not primarily from personal choices, but largely from frequent communication barriers. Additionally, in the process of academic acculturation, all six participants in this study experienced substantial psychological stress, including shock, anxiety, frustration, loneliness, and helplessness.

These students did not have effective means to alleviate these painful emotions. Limited spoken English capacity hindered all participants from accessing support systems like
counselling or intercultural friendships in Canada. Their regular support systems of family and friends in China were not able to fully alleviate their academic acculturation stress either, because participants’ domestic support groups tended to lack both understanding of and empathy towards their academic acculturation difficulties. This lack of understanding and empathy resulted from the misconceptions that Chinese parents, students, and teachers held concerning English language learning, the participants’ actual spoken English capacities, and the realities of overseas educational contexts. Consequently, the psychological stress experienced by all six participants was exacerbated by reduced access to support systems.

The musically enhanced narratives produced as a part of this study provide an opportunity for audiences to learn more intimately about the complexity and nuances of the academic acculturation experiences of these Chinese international students in Canada, inviting a deep and empathic understanding by presenting participants’ own voices telling their stories, artistically framed and situated within a musical context. I hope these stories will help educators and people working with international students all over the world to enhance the support they provide. If those individuals working in the education sector truly wish to honour the spirit of diversity and inclusivity, they have to understand the stories of students coming from other countries to live and study, particularly those who struggle. Furthermore, I hope these stories will help Chinese parents, students, and teachers realize the objective value spoken English capacity holds for the successful academic acculturation of Chinese international students. Finally, I hope the stories help to clarify the misconceptions that Chinese parents, students, and teachers hold regarding English language learning, international education, and the actual lived experiences of Chinese students with limited spoken English in English-speaking countries. If Chinese parents and educators do not prepare students to envision the real journey on which they embark for their
overseas study, these parents and teachers will fail to help these students achieve their long-term educational goals.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
ETHICS CLEARANCE

September 30, 2016

Miss Deyu Xing
Master’s Student
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University
Duncan McArthur Hall
511 Union Street West
Kingston, ON, K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-827-16; TRAQ # 6019220
Title: "GEDUC-827-16 Exploring Academic Acculturation Experiences of Chinese International Students with Low Oral English Proficiency at a Mid-sized Canadian University"

Dear Miss Xing:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GEDUC-827-16 Exploring Academic Acculturation Experiences of Chinese International Students with Low Oral English Proficiency at a Mid-sized Canadian University" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2 (2014)) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405.001), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). 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 submit an amendment form, access the application by at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies". Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Ms. Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services 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.

Sincerely,

John Freeman, Ph.D.
Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c: Dr. Benjamin Bolden, Supervisor
Dr. Richard Reeve, Chair, Unit REB
Ms. Erin Wicklam, Dept. Admin.
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Section A: Breaking the ice.

- Greetings.
- General conversation (e.g. name, major, and length of stay in Canada).
- Explanation of the purpose, and procedures of the interview.

Section B: Answering research questions.

RQ #1 - What are the academic acculturation stories of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency?

- Can you tell me about your life studying here in general?
- Can you tell me one of your happiest memories studying in Canada?
- Can you tell me one of your most frustrating experiences studying in Canada?

RQ #2 - How do these students describe their experiences of the relationship between low oral English proficiency and academic acculturation?

- Can you share our oral communication experiences with other students, instructors, and English-speakers outside of school?
- Can you share one experience where you found oral English communication difficult studying in Canada?
- Can you share one experience where you found oral English communication easy studying here?
RQ # 3- How do these students describe their motivation in enhancing oral English proficiency in relation to their academic acculturation experiences?

- How important was oral English to you before you came to Canada? Why?
- What strategies did you use to enhance your oral English? Why?
- How confident were you with your oral English before coming to Canada? Why?
- How important is oral English to you now in Canada? Why?
- What strategies do you use now to enhance your oral English? Why?
- How confident are you in your ability to improve your oral English proficiency now?
- What plans do you have for enhancing your oral English in the future? Why?

Section C: Artwork discussion.

- Why did you choose/create this piece for the representation of your acculturation stories?

Section D: Closing the interview.

Do you have any additional thoughts you would like to add?
APPENDIX C

LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORMS

LETTER OF INFORMATION & CONSENT

Exploring Academic Acculturation Experiences of Chinese International Students at a Mid-sized Canadian University

This research is being conducted by Deyu Xing (Master of Education, candidate) under the supervision of Dr. Benjamin Bolden, in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. This study has been granted clearance by the General Research Ethics Board according to Canadian research ethics principles (http://www.ethics.gc.ca/default.aspx) and Queen’s University policies (http://www.queensu.ca/urs/research-ethics).

What is this study about? The purpose of this research is to explore and document the academic acculturation stories of Chinese international students with low oral proficiency that are studying at a mid-sized Canadian university. Data will be collected and analyzed to tell these academic acculturation stories with a focus on how Chinese international students describe their experiences of the relationship between low oral English proficiency and academic acculturation and how Chinese international students describe their motivation in enhancing oral English proficiency in relation to their academic acculturation experiences.

What is involved to participate in this study? The study will require you to participate in an initial one-on-one interviews with the researcher for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. 1-2 follow-up one-on-one interviews are also needed after analysis of the data from the initial interview, depending on conditions of data collection. In total, participating in this study will require approximately 1.5 to 3 hours. Interview will be audio recorded. You will also be asked to choose/create a piece/multiple pieces of artwork (e.g. a song, a drawing, a video or anything you personally relate to) that could somehow represent your academic acculturation stories and bring a copy/copies to the interview for discussion. There are no known physical, psychological, economic, or social risks associated with this study. This study will not benefit you directly. However, the results will be shared with the academic community, Chinese parents, students, and English teachers to make positive changes for Chinese students’ English education.

Is participation voluntary? Yes. You do not need to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. You can choose to withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your personal life. If you wish to withdraw, contact Deyu Xing at 14DX5@queensu.ca. If you withdraw, you may request removal of your data from the study.

What will happen to your responses? Your responses will be kept confidential. Only the researcher and her supervisor have access to this information. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible. Results from this study may be published in journals or presented at conferences, but any such presentations will maintain individual confidentiality. In accordance with the General Research Ethics Board Standard Operating Procedures, data will be securely/password protected for a minimum of five years or beyond. If data are used for secondary analysis they will contain no identifying information.

What if you have concerns? Any questions about study participation may be directed to Deyu Xing at 14DX5@queensu.ca or by phone number of 613 770 9881. 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.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study.
Please sign one copy of this Letter of Information/Consent Form and return to the researcher.  
Retain a second copy for your records.  
I have read the statements above and have had any questions answered. I freely consent to participate in this study.

I agree to allow Deyu Xing to use the art work/original audio of our session for the following purposes:

1) Publication in a Journal  
   Signature: _______________________________

2) Demonstration to students, parents, and teachers  
   Signature: _______________________________

3) Demonstration at a Conference  
   Signature: _______________________________

Date: _______________________________

I agree to allow Deyu Xing to use the art work/distorted audio of our session for the following purposes:

1) Publication in a Journal  
   Signature: _______________________________

2) Demonstration to students, parents, and teachers  
   Signature: _______________________________

3) Demonstration at a Conference  
   Signature: _______________________________

Date: _______________________________

Participant’s Signature: _______________________________

Date: __________________________  E-mail address: _______________________________
APPENDIX D

MENI TRANSCRIPTS AND COMPOSING PROCESS

Theme: Excitement and Shock

Composing Process

In this piece, I used an upbeat, uplifting piano melody to communicate the feeling of optimism and excitement participants held for their international education journey when they first arrived in Canada. Then, I used a different, contrasting piano melody to suggest the painful undertone of the unexpected discrepancy between their optimistic outlook and reality. Within the second half of the contrasting melody, I also incorporated chord accents in the upper register to represent the unexpectedness and magnitude of the shock of this discrepancy. Finally, I used an abrupt ending of the upward progressing music, in a contrasting tonality, to further represent the shock of unexpectedness to the audience.

Recording Transcript

Kevin: I was so excited when I first arrived here, drowning in the beautiful landscape of Canada. I felt so lucky to be able to study in such a wonderful place. I was very enthusiastic about communicating with people around me. Everything seemed so exciting.

Kandy: But once I started to talk with people in English, I was shocked. It suddenly dawned on me that my spoken English was worlds apart from the English spoken by Canadians. Once the Canadian students started to talk, I was just totally overwhelmed, thinking in my head, “Oh my God! Why are they speaking so fast? Oh my God! Why? Why can’t I speak?”
Theme: Frustration and Pain

Composing Process

In this piece, I used a very slow minor piano melody to communicate the sad undertone of the theme. The chromatic motif communicates the frustrations and psychological stress participants experienced from communication barriers during their academic acculturation process. When the chromatic motif resolves upward, it represents painful emotions closer to the surface. The fully accompanied variation of the melody at the end represents pain of increased magnitude and indescribability.

Recording Transcript

Selina: It was extremely difficult to communicate with people in English. And everything seemed so frustrating after I came because I could not communicate. It’s just like the tree in the picture, all barren. It has lost all its leaves, all barren. I lost everything I had in China, my social influence, my confidence, my voice…everything, just like that tree, all barren, all barren.

Nick: At the very beginning of my studies, one Canadian student asked me very curiously “Why do Chinese students always only hang out with Chinese students?” Canadian students might think Chinese students do not want to hang out with them, but it is the opposite. It’s just that when I constantly found myself not able to say things that I wanted to say, I felt frustrated. The more excited I was to talk, the more frustrated I got. That feeling of being unable to even open your mouth to talk like a normal person is beyond what words can describe. That kind of pain cannot be described in words; it can only be felt.

That kind of pain cannot be described in words; it can only be felt.
Theme: Anxiety and Inferiority

Composing Process

In this piece, for the first half of the music I used a flowing piano melody with a contrasting range of note repetitions (in the middle range) to represent the unsettling anxious feeling experienced by the participant. I embedded syncopated high notes to relate to the anxious tapping of feet in class. Then I used a slower melancholy melody to communicate the sad inadequacy of the participant’s English proficiency compared to Canadian students or other international students. The descending progression swells to bring out key words from participants. I ended on a crescendo to further represent and communicate the magnitude of these anxious and inferior feelings, and the heavy consequences of the participant losing her voice and respect due to her inability to speak.

Recording Transcript

*Kandy:* I got very nervous and anxious when talking to professors and other students. Because I knew I was supposed to participate by speaking English, but I also knew that I was not able to express myself in English. Then I got so anxious that I could not even sit still in class. I did not know where to look when talking, and I would nervously tap my feet when sitting in class.

*Lisa:* I felt I was not good enough compared to other Canadian students or other international students with sufficient oral English capacity. I felt like Canadian students and I were not equal anymore when I could not express myself. When I could not say what I thought and how I felt, I felt weak among them. I think only when one can express oneself can one truly exercise the right to speak. And only when that person’s voice is heard can people really have respect for them.
**Theme: Loneliness and Isolation**

**Composing Process**

In this piece, I used a slow, hypnotic progression of middle-range minor chords to represent the sorrowful undertone of the participant’s feeling of being isolated from the Canadian community (in Canada) due to his inability to effectively communicate in oral English. I used meandering low range chords, and single high range, wider-separated notes to further accent the words directly associated with the theme like “having no one to share with.” I ended with very slow low range piano chords to represent and communicate the saddening emotions resulting from the isolation faced by the participant due to his inability to communicate.

**Recording Transcript**

*Kevin:* When I was back in China, I was a very social person, making friends wherever I went. But in Canada I was forced to suppress my desire to talk because my limited spoken English would not allow me to talk. Sometimes, I really just wanted to talk to someone to make a friend or two, but after the general greeting of “Hello,” I would just get stuck there, unable to say anything more. So I could not make friends with Canadian students and I always felt alone.

I had taken thousands of pictures of the fabulous landscape of Canada. But I had no one, but I had one to share them with around me.

During the orientation week, when we had the group dinner together, the Canadian students were all chatting and laughing with each other at the table. But I just sat there, struggling to understand what they were saying. Occasionally, I could grasp a sentence or two, but by the time I had finished thinking about how to respond, they had already moved on to something new. Then I was not able to say anything. So I just sat there, feeling like an outsider, an invisible person, among a big table of Canadian students. Although they seemed to be right
beside me, within my reach, they were still a world apart from me. I thought to myself, sitting there, “What am I going to do with a life like this? How I am going to live a life like this?”

Although Canada seemed so beautiful, it did not feel like a world where I should be. It did not feel like a world where I should be.

Theme: Helplessness and Resignation

Composing Process

In composing music for this piece, I used both solid and broken minor chords to represent the depressing experiences described by the participant under this theme. I used the “stratosphere” sound to represent the overwhelming and engulfing feeling of helplessness experienced by the participant. Then I embedded contrasting vibraphone sounds to accent key descriptions directly related to resignation. Finally, I ended with a very slow lingering vibraphone melody to further bring out the participant’s questioning of people’s understanding of her experience of helplessness and resignation.

Recording Transcript

Kandy: When you are home surrounded by your family, you feel like you have someone to fall back on. When you are all alone, far away from home, everything seems heavier.

But I couldn’t tell anyone those feelings, because I didn’t want my parents to worry or be disappointed with me. I couldn’t talk about these feelings with other Chinese students around me either, because I felt they felt the same way and it would get too depressing for everybody if we started talking about those things too much.

Later on, I thought about using the counselling service but then I thought to myself: “It’s English. I can’t even talk with people in simple English. How am I going to talk to the counsellor?” I mean, I want to go talk about my problem of talking to make myself feel better
but then I would find myself not even able to talk about my problem of talking. How would you feel? Of course, worse. So I gave it up. So I gave it up.

So I had to keep all those feelings to myself, though I felt like the person in *The Scream*. The most I could do to was just torture my beddings in my room alone when it got too hard and I wanted to smash things to vent. I couldn’t even smash those hard objects because I was afraid that the sound would attract attention. It was a really lame way to vent but also the only way.

When I was alone in my room, I would just sit there and think about those embarrassing and suffocating moments when I couldn’t talk, and I just felt like I was not made to communicate in English with people. Then I started to close myself up. Do you understand that?

**Theme: Awakening and Regret**

**Composing Process**

To compose the music for this piece, I used an underlying low range piano progression (based on i and iv chords) as the musical foundation to represent the heaviness of the emotion of awakening and regret. I used higher pitched major chords to accent key moments of realization that participants described, concerning the misconceptions of overseas study and language education held by themselves, their parents, and their English teachers back in China. I ended with contrasting amplified high-pitched chords to further represent and communicate the awakening and painful regrets associated with the recognition of the participants’ misguided preparation before their international study in Canada.

**Recording Transcript**

*Amanda:* I originally thought that my spoken English would improve really quickly after I came as I imagined that I would be listening to and speaking English every day by making lots of Canadian friends.
However, the reality in Canada was just the opposite of what I expected. I found my spoken English was at the very bottom of the bottom among the students around me in Canada. And I realized my English teachers back in China were not even speaking English but Chinese English the whole time. And they told me I spoke great English just because I got good grades for the tests.

Nick: I feel so regretful now. If I could go back in time, I would definitely change the way how I learned English and prepared for my study in Canada. I would spend the time spent on memorizing useless words on training myself to be better at speaking real English. If I were to be an English teacher when I went back to China, I would not teach my students test-taking skills because they are useless in real communication.

**Theme: Hope and Uncertainty**

**Composing Process**

In composing the music for this piece, I used a moderate tempo and major scale to create the motif for hope—the perceived possibility of oral English improvement participants held because of the English-speaking environment that surrounded them in Canada. Then I used contrasting low and high range piano sounds at various points to represent participants’ doubts and worries about whether or not this possibility could be transferred into reality. The piece ends with an amplified melody with chords to further represent the uncertainty that shadowed the hope participants held for their educational journey in Canada.

**Recording Transcript**

Lisa: I hope, with efforts, I will be able to communicate with people confidently in Canada one day, becoming someone that I used to be again. I mean, I am already in Canada
where people speak English all the time. If I still cannot improve my spoken English, it will be so embarrassing.

However, I cannot do this all by myself. I need help. If I continue to be isolated from the Canadian community, I do not think my spoken English is really going to improve. I am worried that my spoken English will still be as bad as it is now after I graduate.

*Kandy:* Although I feel it is easier to get along with Canadian students, my limited spoken English places a direct barrier for any interaction between us. I know only when I fix my pronunciation and fluency problems in English can I really make some international friends. But I don’t know how to really fix these problems, especially pronunciation. For instance, Canadian students still think I am saying the word “dream” when I am actually saying the word “gym” even after being corrected repeatedly by them. It is so embarrassing and frustrating. I desperately want to fix it, but I don’t have a clue about where and how to start.
APPENDIX E

THEME SONG LYRICS

寂静之声
The Sound of Silence

独自一人 异国他乡

Alone, treading on a strange land, alone.

无法开口 言伤

Mouth open, silence.

独自一人 异国他乡

Alone, walking in a foreign world, alone.

热闹非凡 旁观

Faces smiling, silence.

你可曾体会 那无言的忧伤

Have you ever felt that sadness without the words?

你可曾听见 那无声的呐喊

Have you ever heard that mad scream in silence?

我翻山越岭 漂洋过海 难道只为 这繁华似锦下的孤单?

Sitting inside the room,
I asked myself, alone.

“Did I come,
across the mountains and the sea,
thousands of miles away from home,
to be alone?”

独自一人 异国他乡

Alone, walking on a strange road, alone.

无法开口 言伤

Autumn leaves falling, barren.

独自一人 异国他乡

Alone, walking in the lamplight, alone.

落叶飞扬 影孤长

Midnight shadows swinging, soundless.

你可否明白 那无言的绝望

Have you ever felt that despair without words to compare?

你可否感受 那无声的惊慌

Have you ever felt that trembling running through the veins?

我翻山越岭 漂洋过海 难道只为 这雪花飘零下的冷淡?

Standing under the moon,
I asked myself, alone.

“Did I come,
across the mountains and the sea,
thousands of miles away from home,
to be alone?”

你是否明白？
Do you understand?

我悔恨的是 那蹉跎的美好光阴
Regrets. Time wasted on useless things.
我愤恨的是 那南辕北辙的苦行
Rage. Endeavours exerted in vain.
愿胸怀世界的你
听到我的声音
How I wish,
you who have the minds to see the worlds,
will hear my voice,
and walk a different path.
蓦然回首时
不再像我一样
独自一人 异国他乡
无法开口 言伤
So when you go across the ocean to see the world of your dream,
it will be like your dream, unlike me,
walking in a foreign world, alone, in the sound of silence.