SMALL TALK: A BIG CHALLENGE
FOR CHINESE GRADUATE STUDENTS IN CANADA

by

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Abstract

This phenomenological inquiry explores the lived experiences of Chinese graduate students in Canada when making small talk with native English speakers. The focus is on the challenges they face, possible causes for these challenges, and potential solutions. The theoretical frameworks consist of a combination of the communicative competence model and the concepts of languaculture and communities of practice.

Ten Chinese students in Canadian universities were interviewed to collect data on their experiences making small talk with instructors, classmates, and other members of their local communities and on their progress with social interaction and integration.

In addition, eight Canadian instructors and classmates were invited to participate by completing an online questionnaire which asked them to outline their experiences with Chinese students. They were also presented with sample narratives from the interviewees revealing difficult personal interactions and asked to provide commentary and suggest strategies they would use under similar circumstances.

Thematic data analysis was used to codify and categorize the information collected. The results indicated the most challenging issues for these Chinese students were related to comprehension, participation, initiative, confidence, social connections, and propriety. There were many direct or indirect causes for these challenges, but most were the result of problems tied to language proficiency, cultural differences, and personal attributes. Suggested solutions include practicing communicative skills, improving English language proficiency, learning social and cultural norms, developing communicative strategies, and becoming active members in communities of practice.
It is hoped that the results will provide useful information for Chinese and other international students to better prepare them for academic life in Canada. Policy makers, instructors, and other native speakers can also benefit by gaining an understanding of one of the significant social barriers faced by international scholars and other immigrants.
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List of Abbreviations

BICS - Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills
CALP - Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency
CBIE - Canadian Bureau for International Education
CLA - Communicative Language Ability
ESL – English as a Second Language
GREB - General Research Ethics Board (Queen’s University)
IELTS - International English Language Testing System
IP - Interview Participant (Chinese Graduate Students in Group A)
IRCC - Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
LC - Languaculture
QP - Questionnaire Participant (Canadian classmate or instructor in Group B)
TOEFL - Test of English as a Foreign Language
Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Context and Rationale

This study examines the experiences of Chinese graduate students in Canada. The specific focus is on their ability to use *small talk* as a mechanism to enable effective interaction with other members of their local communities, and the role it plays in their academic success and social integration.

There is, and will continue to be, a large and growing number of Chinese international students in Canada who not only speak a different language but who have been fostered in a very different and distinctive culture. To provide help and support for these individuals, and for foreign students from all corners of the globe, it is useful to examine the factors which impact academic achievement in a new learning environment.

In 2020, statistics from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) indicated there were 530,540 international students at all levels of study in Canada—a figure which represents an increase of 135% since 2010. Of this population, almost 117,000 students, or 22% of the total, were from China, which ranked second only to India in the number coming to Canada to further their education (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2021). The Government of Canada (2019) has clearly indicated that China and India would remain important markets for Canada in international education.

Whether students can persevere to complete their studies and achieve educational goals largely depends on their degree of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975,

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1 The 2020 total is a decrease of 17% from 2019 when there were 642,480 international students in Canada; the decline has been attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic which severely limited global mobility. In 2019, Chinese students also made up 22% of those coming to Canada.
Social integration is mainly achieved by engaging in informal conversations with peers, interactions with faculty, and extracurricular activities (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Social interactions are important for students because they provide emotional comfort, and for international students, interactions with instructors and classmates can help them adapt to a new environment and develop a sense of belonging (Nelson, 2018; Parsons, 2007; Xiao, 2020; Zhou & Zhang, 2014).

A group of researchers in the UK conducted a three-year study examining student retention and accomplishment in higher education in 22 educational institutions and found that “finding friends, feeling confident, and above all, feeling a part of your course of study and institution” were the starting points for academic success (Thomas, 2012, p. 3). The research also indicated that a “strong sense of belonging” (Thomas, 2012, p. 3) was at the core of this success, and this sense of belonging can be established through “supportive peer relations” and “meaningful interaction between staff and students” (Thomas, 2012, p. 9).

Wang (2016) studied the life and learning experiences of Chinese international students who dropped out from a pre-university English language improvement program in a Canadian university and found that while academic failure was the direct cause of their withdrawal, one of the reasons for this failure was their inability to develop relationships with teachers and other students. They were dissatisfied with their learning experiences because they did not have regular and effective contact with teachers, socialized only with people from their own language and culture, and had difficulty making friends with locals. The inability to socially interact with instructors and
classmates played an important role in their failure to adapt to a new learning environment and ultimately resulted in withdrawal from the university.

Small talk is the preliminary step leading to the exchange of information at a more substantive level; it serves as a “curtain raiser for the business to follow” (Hargie, 2011, p. 307) and is used to “break the ice” (Hargie, 2011, p. 307) in social encounters. As a main component of social interaction, small talk “enacts social cohesiveness, reduces inherent threat values of social contact, and helps structure social interactions” (Coupland, 2003, p. 1).

Therefore, it is useful to explore the underlying factors that influence the ability of Chinese international students to comfortably make small talk and how this affects their capacity to participate in social activities with other residents of their new communities.

The existing research regarding Chinese international students mainly concentrates on their experiences in terms of academic learning, language barriers, acculturation, and adaptation in a new learning context, as well as social networking (Xing, et al, 2020; Zhang-Wu, 2018; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Studies which have examined social networking or communication have focused on the use of the internet and social media such as QQ, Facebook, and WeChat (Fraiberg & Cui, 2016; Li & Chen, 2014; Yan, 2018), while social interactions with instructors and peers were only included as one part of their experience during the process of acculturation and adaptation (Zhang, 2019), but were not specifically studied. Existing research about small talk is primarily centred on the workplace (e.g., Burnard, 2003; Cui, 2015; Holmes, 2000a, 2000b, 2005; Mak & Chui, 2013). The issue of small talk with the spotlight on Chinese international students in an English-speaking country has rarely been considered.
As a graduate student at Queen’s University who is originally from China, there have been many situations where my lack of competence in making small talk in English has created a social barrier. For example, failing to take my turn in a conversation can sometimes result in awkward silences during interactions with others; a lack of familiarity with safe and interesting topics to discuss with my Canadian counterparts also causes problems; and humour, especially as it relates to Canadian culture, is often very difficult to understand or identify with. All these challenges provided a strong motivation to carry out this study.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges faced by Chinese graduate students in Canada when making small talk with native English speakers including their instructors and other faculty, university staff, classmates, roommates, and neighbours; to examine how these challenges are influenced by linguistic, cultural, and other factors; and to identify potential practices to help overcome these challenges. To address these issues, the following research questions guided this research:

1. What are the main challenges Chinese graduate students face when making small talk with other individuals in Canada? (challenges)

2. What are some of the linguistic, cultural, and other factors that contribute to these challenges? (causes)

3. How can they overcome these challenges to increase interaction and engagement with others in their academic and social communities? (suggestions)
1.3 Significance

This study contributes to the literature related to the experiences of Chinese international students when making small talk in English; in addition, it adds to and complements existing research exploring their efforts at social interaction and integration in Canada.

It is hoped the findings of this study will provide useful information for Chinese ESL learners and instructors to better prepare students who are planning to attend universities in Canada. The results should also benefit those international students currently in Canada, as the study examines successful and unsuccessful attempts to engage in small talk with instructors, classmates, and other individuals in Canadian society, and presents suggestions about ways to use small talk more effectively.

Native speakers can also benefit by gaining an understanding of one of the significant social barriers faced by all international students, and perhaps the results will help them recognize that difficulties with communication may stem from a combination of linguistic, cultural, and other issues. Educational institutions and instructors can also learn more about the challenges international students face which can help to better facilitate their adaptation and acculturation.

1.4 Definitions

1.4.1 Small talk

The concept of small talk was first introduced by Malinowski (1923) who referred to it as “phatic communion” (p. 315). It was defined as “a type of speech in which ties of union are created by mere exchanges of words” and it “serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and
does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas” (Malinowski, 1923, pp. 315-316). This definition set the tone for further research. For example, phatic communion was referred to by some scholars as “chit-chat” and “schmoozing” (Meltzer & Musolf, 2000) or a “conversational routine” (Schneider, 2012). Lyons (1968) echoed Malinowski’s notion by stating that it “serves to establish and maintain a feeling of social solidarity and well-being” (p. 417).

Based on Malinowski’s view, Laver (1975) argued that phatic communion was complex, and the “ties of union” were achieved by “subtle and intricate means” (p. 216) instead of the “mere exchange of words” (Malinowski, 1923, p. 314). Laver claimed that phatic communion had three social functions: first, the propitiatory function to alleviate the potential hostility engendered by silence when speech was usually expected, or, according to Malinowski (1923), “the strange and unpleasant tension caused by the silence” (p. 314); second, the exploratory function designed to reach a “working consensus” (Goffman, 1956) between interactants; third, the initiatory function to enable interactants to cooperate in launching a comfortable and smooth interaction. In addition to these three social functions, Laver also asserted that the prime function of small talk is the “communication of indexical facts about the speaker’s identities, attributes, and attitudes, and that these indexical facts constrain the nature of the particular interaction” (p. 217).

The term “small talk” is used interchangeably with “phatic communion” by some scholars as a more colloquial way to say the same thing. Graham (2013) regarded the terms as synonyms and Burnard (2003) equated phatic communion with ordinary chat or small talk. However, some others hold a slightly different opinion and feel the two terms
are different, but they are interrelated in that phatic communion is a form of small talk (Jin, 2018; Urbanova, 2007). Laver (1975) asserted that phatic communion penetrated all the three phases (opening, medial, and closing) of an interaction, especially the opening and closing phases, which eased the transitions from non-interaction to interaction and from interaction to departure. During the process of interaction through speech, phatic communion was mostly applied to “choices from a limited set of stereotyped phrases of greeting, parting, [and] commonplace remarks about the weather” (p. 218), while small talk only dealt with the “marginal phases of interaction” (p. 218). Holmes (2000a) defined small talk at the workplace as a continuum which extends from phatic communion to social discussion, to work-related talk, and then finally to core business communication.

In this study, the working definition of small talk, drawn from the views of Holmes (2000a) and modified from Manzo’s (2014) thesis, is the following: small talk is a discourse mechanism which extends from ritualized exchanges of greeting or departing, to social conversation about general issues, and to business or work-related communication during the transition to different topics, with a primarily phatic and relational function focused on establishing and maintaining social bonds. Although it is sometimes seen as superfluous or irrelevant, the functionality of small talk exposes a complex cultural, normative, cognitive, and linguistic structure (Manzo, 2014, p. 19).

Although referred to as “small”, which for many may suggest that it is trivial and unimportant, some scholars say it is essential social grease, and part of a ritual that helps us connect with friends, colleagues, and people we have just met (Bernstein, 2013). It is important in a whole range of social, commercial, and professional settings as it weaves
the social fabric, enacting and reinforcing social roles (Roberts, 2015). According to Scheff (1990), social bonds which bring people together are the foundation of society, and small talk serves as a discourse mechanism that can establish and maintain social bonds, which is of great importance in social life (Manzo, 2014). It is also seen as a social lubricant which can reduce awkwardness, avoid silence, and facilitate the opening, transition, and culmination of conversations (Coupland & Robinson, 1992; Laver, 1975; Padilla, 2013; Schneider, 1988).

In a workplace study done in New Zealand, it was found that small talk usually happens at the beginning and end of the working day, but it can also occur at the beginning and end of individual interactions during the day (Holmes, 2000a). The study also cites several examples of small talk which can include ritual greetings such as “Hello!” and “Good morning!”, and phrases used to address or inquire about the health of the speakers or their families, such as “How are you?” or “How is your son?”. Other examples can be comments on the weather (“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?”), expressions which refer to past activities (“How was your weekend?”), or future plans (“What’s your plan for this summer?”), and remarks related to recent sports, musical, or other social events, among many others.

In the university context, ideas can be exchanged with classmates about research interests or progress, current social events, TV shows, films, and news or sports stories during any informal occasion. Even in class, opening and closing exchanges as well as some off-topic discussions are all examples of small talk. The power of small talk is that it facilitates the most basic social interaction which can help create a rapport between participants in a number of areas.
1.4.2 Chinese Graduate Students in Canada

In this study, the designated research cohort, Chinese graduate students in Canada, include international graduate students born and educated in China who have come to Canada as visa students, and immigrant graduate students, also born and educated in China, who have come to Canada as permanent residents (Zang, 2007). Reports show that many international students, including those from China, have the intention to stay in Canada after graduation (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2018; Li & Tierney, 2013). These students are serious about integrating into the Canadian social environment and could benefit from learning how to use small talk to build relationships.

Furthermore, these students have been selected as the research cohort because they are known to possess the basic linguistic competence to make small talk, as demonstrated by the results of language proficiency tests such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which were required for admission to graduate school. In addition, graduate students are usually mature enough to have the interpersonal skills and competence to make small talk with their classmates, instructors, and other people in the wider community.

1.5 Theoretical Frameworks

Small talk is usually studied under the framework of theories related to linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and culture. For Chinese international students, learning to make small talk in a second language requires a variety of communicative competences and knowledge of a second language which can be gained by participation in

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2 In subsequent sections of this research report, the study group, “Chinese graduate students in Canada”, whether classified as international or immigrant, will be referred to using the term “Chinese students”.
communities of practice. Therefore, in this study, theories of communicative competence and the concepts of languaculture and communities of practice are used as the theoretical frameworks.

1.5.1 Communicative Competence

The term *communicative competence* was coined by Hymes (1972) and further expanded and developed by Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983), Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) and Celce-Murcia (1995, 2008). Hymes (1972) created the term in response to Chomsky (1965), who focused only on linguistic competence (knowledge of linguistic rules), while Hymes (1972) incorporated both linguistic knowledge and sociolinguistic competence, the rules for using language appropriately in context, and proposed that linguistic theory should be based on practical needs in the real world.

Canale and Swain (1980) expanded the theory by adding strategic competence, which they defined as the ability to use various types of plans to compensate for problems in communication. Canale (1983) added discourse competence, the ability to go beyond the sentence level when producing and interpreting language, to the theory. Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) proposed that the ability to understand and produce significant speech acts and speech act sets, which they called actional competence, should also be a part of communicative competence.

Finding gaps in the previous model, and in order to give a more central role to formulaic and paralinguistic competences, Celce-Murcia (1995) divided sociolinguistic competence into three components: sociocultural competence (the ability to express messages appropriately in various social situations), formulaic competence (the use of lexical chunks and prefabricated routines, collocations such as fixed expressions, and
idioms and lexical phrases associated with certain speech acts and other pragmatic functions), and paralinguistic competence (nonverbal features of oral communications such as body language and conventions regarding touch, silence, and other nonlinguistic sounds) (p. 702). As a result, “sociolinguistic competence” was redefined and referred to as sociocultural competence along with the other two individual components, formulaic competence and paralinguistic competence.

More than ten years later, Celce-Murcia (2008) combined paralinguistic competence and actional competence together with a new subcomponent in communication – conversational competence, which refers to knowledge or skills about turn-taking; how to open and close a conversation; how to get, hold, and pass the floor; how to interrupt, collaborate, and backchannel, etc. (p. 48), and included them all under the category of interactional competence, because all these three subcomponents are important factors which influence smooth interactions.

As a result, the latest version of the model includes six interrelated components: linguistic competence, strategic competence, discourse competence, interactional competence, formulaic competence, and sociocultural competence. Figure 1.1 is a schematic representation of the communicative competence theory developed by Celce-Murcia (2008).
In the area of language assessment, Bachman (1990) introduced a model of communicative competence based on the work by Canale and Swain (1980) called Communicative Language Ability (CLA), which was further developed by Bachman and Palmer (2010). This new model emphasized the interrelationship between language knowledge and strategic competence. Other related peripheral abilities that may influence language use were also identified—topical knowledge, personal attributes, and affective and cognitive strategies. Although this model was developed with language assessment in mind, it covers most elements for communication and language use.

The ability to engage in small talk fits within the realm of communicative competence and overlaps with some of the theoretical components such as strategic competence (in the sense that strategies are used for easing awkwardness, or fixing a
breakdown in a conversation), interactional competence (more specifically, conversational competence, which covers ways to open and close conversations, establish and change topics, get and hold the floor, interrupt, and collaborate, as well as non-verbal competence which includes body language, pauses, and silences, etc.), formulaic competence (in the use of fixed expressions and routines in conversation), and sociocultural competence (in that social contextual factors, stylistic appropriateness, and cross-cultural awareness should be taken into consideration) (Celce-Murcia, 2008). Therefore, the components of Celce-Murcia’s (2008) revised model, supplemented by other elements from Bachman and Palmer’s (2010) model such as topical knowledge, personal attributes, and affective and cognitive strategies, can provide a good theoretical framework for discussing the phenomenon of small talk.

1.5.2 Concepts of Languaculture and Communities of Practice

Languaculture. Agar (1994) introduced the term *languaculture* to describe the essential ties between language and culture. The author believed that the actual use of a language by an individual involved “all manner of background knowledge and local information in addition to grammar and vocabulary” (Agar, 2006, p. 1), such as their biography, past knowledge, and the nature of the situation. Agar defined the source languaculture, or native languaculture of the researcher as Languaculture One (LC1), and the target languaculture, or that of the studied group, as Languaculture Two (LC2). Culture was characterized as “a lens built for LC1 that focuses on problematic meanings in LC2 and the contexts that render them understandable”, and “an artificial construction built to enable translation between them and us, between source and target” (Agar, 2006, p. 8).
LC2 learning is often driven by *rich points*, which are “those surprises, those departures from an outsider’s expectations that signal a difference between LC1 and LC2 and give direction to subsequent learning” (Agar, 2006, p. 2). An individual modifies their languaculture, expands their global perspective, and makes progress with communication by placing a focus on these rich points. However, progress in communication diminishes if rich points are not resolved; they are then identified as problems or deficiencies which must be eliminated to attain a certain standard.

To relate a personal example, it was very surprising at first when many of my Canadian university classmates addressed our instructors by their first names in class. This is unacceptable in China, where teachers are only addressed in a formal manner by the pattern of “Surname + Teacher”, or “Surname + Professor”. In another instance, a colleague who was born and raised in Canada, went to China to teach ESL. At first, he thought it was only natural to address his peers, the other teachers in his department, by their given names, as would have been normal in his home country. He was soon quietly informed that in China, calling someone exclusively by their given name is only done between family members and very intimate friends. He quickly developed the habit of addressing his co-workers in a more formal fashion, such as Mr. Zhao or Ms. Qian. The misunderstandings caused by these differences in the manner of addressing people are illustrations of rich points, both for me in a Canadian university and for my Canadian colleague in China.

According to Agar (1994, 2006), when communicating in a second language, the speaker is moving from LC1 to LC2. During this process, the speaker will encounter rich points whenever differences or problems arise, so will need to make connections between
these differences and organize them by learning from members of LC2. The individual needs to talk with those who introduced the rich point, listen to what they have to say, and engage in conversation with people from this different languaculture. With the help of people from LC2, it becomes possible to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the specific rich point, which can then be used on other occasions with different LC2 members to test the accuracy of this understanding.

In this study, the Chinese students are translating from their LC1, their domestic Chinese languaculture, to LC2, the Canadian target languaculture. Their understanding of the new languaculture can be improved by identifying personal rich points, which are the challenges and problems identified when they attempt to engage in small talk and addressing them through further communication with LC2 members. In this way, the Chinese students learn how to make small talk naturally and comfortably in English.

**Communities of Practice.** Lave and Wenger (1991) used the term *community of practice* to describe how novices learn in naturally occurring established communities of experts, for example, someone learning a skill through apprenticeship. Communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). Examples of communities of practice, as described by Wenger et al. (2002), are engineers who discuss the intricate details of their specialty, soccer parents who share tips and insights about parenting, artists who debate a new style or technique, gang members who learn from each other how to survive on the street, and managers who get together to learn about the latest technologies. These individuals do not have to meet very often, and the meetings and discussions do not
always follow a certain format, but they find value in their interactions. As time passes, these interactions lead to a unique perspective on the specific topic. Personal relationships and established methods for interacting are also developed; in the end the participants become a community.

In these communities, there are newcomers, who may encounter certain barriers on their way to full acceptance, especially when they interact with the longer-term members of the group, and there are experts, who are also known as old-timers. Lacking familiarity with the rules of appropriate behaviour, newcomers can find themselves in what is known as the “zone of legitimate peripheral participation”. If there is no assistance or guidance offered by old-timers to help integrate the newcomers, their legitimacy as community members can be questioned for a long period of time.

The theory explores how novices learn to use their actions, behaviour, and language to signal increasing membership in the community. These signals also show the movement of the individual from the periphery to a more central responsibility and legitimacy. The theory also provides a description of the learning that occurs through a situated process of participation and socialization. This situated learning can help the newcomers “move toward fuller participation in a given community’s activities by interacting with more experienced community members” (Morita, 2004, p. 576).

As stated by Wenger et al. (2002), “[c]ommunities of practice are everywhere” (p. 5), and we are members of many of them. We are aware of and recognize some of them, but many others remain largely invisible. When Chinese international students are newcomers to Canadian universities and society, they must also undergo the process of learning through social practice with the more experienced old-timers. For example, in
class, the instructors and other classmates, whether native speakers or not, form their communities of practice. These communities help the newcomers identify cultural differences, learn proper protocols for social and academic interaction, and slowly guide their progress from peripheral to full participation.

To illustrate the concepts of languaculture and communities of practice, a schema has been developed to show the transition from LC1 to LC2 by exposure to and experience with a variety of interactions in different communities of practice. After participation in the various communities of practice, the learners can make progress in understanding the target languaculture and practice this new understanding to test its accuracy. When applying the concept developed by Agar to explain the experience of Asian students in an Australian university, Norris and Tsedendamba (2015) developed a model to illustrate Agar’s concept of languaculture. In their model, the area between LC1 and LC2 is called the translation arena because this is the place where learning activities take place. In this current study, the idea of the translation arena is adopted, and then adapted to include the concept of communities of practice. Figure 1.2 shows the schema of languaculture and communities of practice.
The theories of communicative competence, languaculture, and communities of practice form the theoretical frameworks for this research. The challenges faced by Chinese students when attempting to make small talk usually result from a lack of communicative competence, especially sociocultural competence. These challenges present themselves as barriers, or rich points, for the newcomer, which must be identified, understood, and resolved. Active participation in various communities of practice, be it in the classroom or through engagement in other clubs and organizations, can help them remedy the problems they encounter and enable them to participate more fully in their target culture.

1.6 Chapter Summary

As noted, the goal of this study is to explore challenges faced by Chinese graduate students in Canada when making small talk with native English speakers. This opening
chapter started with an outline of the context and the rationale for the research and introduced the three research questions. This was followed by a brief discussion of the significance of the study and detailed definitions of the two key elements of the research.

The chapter concludes with a review of the theoretical frameworks. It introduces the communicative competence and CLA models, and then includes the concepts of languaculture and communities of practice. These models and concepts can provide explanations for the experiences of the Chinese students when making small talk with local Canadians and offer clues to guide us in answering the research questions.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This study aims to explore the challenges faced by Chinese students when making small talk with local Canadians, determine the potential causes for these challenges, and identify solutions or suggestions for future students and others. To review the existing research in this area, this chapter will open with a section on social integration of Chinese and other international students and conclude with an overview of the research on the topic of small talk and the related Chinese cultural perspectives.

Since the subject of small talk among students has rarely been studied, and as small talk functions as an opener or icebreaker for social communication and is closely tied to social interaction and integration, this review is mainly concerned with the literature related to the social life, social challenges, social interactions, and social integration of international students and immigrants.

2.1 Social Integration of International Students

The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) did a survey in 2018 to gather information about the experiences of international students in 46 Canadian post-secondary institutions in all ten provinces. The results from over 14,000 complete and usable responses showed that 60% of all respondents intended to apply for permanent resident status in the future and over 70% indicated their intention to find work in Canada following their studies (CBIE, 2018). Li and Tierney (2013) surveyed 38 Chinese international students in master’s programs to study their preferences and experiences and found that over half hoped to stay in Canada after graduation. As a result, it would
seem evident that a large number of international students have the need and motivation to socially integrate in Canadian society.

International students encounter many challenges related to social integration, especially in the first years of their studies. In some of the previous research, international students are combined with expatriates and migrants because they are “groups of cross-cultural travelers” (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016, p. 785) and have many similarities in cross-cultural adaptation. In addition to major predictors such as language proficiency, cultural differences, availability of opportunities for interaction, and social connections with local people (Aydinol, 2013; Nelson, 2018; Wang, 2016; Zhou & Zhang, 2014), other factors which influence cultural adaptation and adjustment have also been examined. These factors include personality, gender, age, length of residence in the host country, willingness to communicate, the cultural distance between home and host country, and social stressors (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002; Caligiuri et al., 2020; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Kim, 2001; Wilson, 2011).

Zhou and Zhang (2014) examined the challenges faced by first-year international students at a Canadian university using Tinto’s (1975) retention model as the theoretical framework. The authors utilized a mixed method approach to collect data through surveys and focus groups. An online survey, sent to 350 first-year international students via email, gathered information from 77 respondents about their home country, first language, age, gender, university program, and the type of high school they attended. Eighteen volunteers (12 males and six females) from various home countries and academic programs were invited to form five focus groups. Information about challenges in adjusting to their new environments, coping strategies they developed, and how their
universities assisted them throughout the process was collected. The findings showed that first-year international students encountered problems with social integration (they did not have much interaction with local students or instructors and their relationships with local students were superficial) which were mainly attributed to language and cultural barriers, as well as the different instructional contexts and requirements.

Nelson (2018) conducted an action research project focused on providing support for international students which examined their experiences and the opinions of staff and faculty in a Canadian college in Saskatchewan. The researcher used interviews and focus groups to collect data on institutional and individual factors affecting the experiences of these students. The factors explored included academic experiences, social experiences, language, and the ability to satisfy the need for basic necessities. The author found that the international students were more concerned about social opportunities than academics, as making friends and having social connections could reduce homesickness and promote cultural adaptation.

Aydinol (2013) also examined the experiences of international students from their own perspectives. Six international graduate students in an American university were interviewed and their experiences were described in terms of everyday life issues, academic issues, social interactions, and personal growth. Regarding social interactions with people from the host country, the results indicated it was challenging for them to make friends and maintain relationships in a new learning environment and culture because of their substandard English skills and confusion about cultural and social norms. As a result, closer relationships were developed with people from their own culture or with other international students because they shared more commonalities.
Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) studied the social interaction patterns at an American university among international students, most of whom were from China, India, and South Korea. Based on interviews with 60 individuals, the authors concluded there were four primary patterns for social interaction. These patterns fell in a continuum ranging from self-segregation (socializing only with those from their own country of origin), to exclusive global mixing (interacting with co-nationals and other international students but excluding those from the host country), to inclusive global mixing (making social interactions with diverse groups of individuals including co-nationals and students from other countries and the host country), to host interaction (mainly connecting with members of the host community). The findings showed that very few cases of host interaction were identified, and almost two-thirds of the participants claimed they did not develop meaningful connections with host nationals, but self-segregation was not the major form of social interaction; instead, global mixing, which incorporated inclusive and exclusive mixing, was the dominant pattern.

Wilson (2011) used a three-phase sequential mixed method to study how cultural adaptation among 129 international graduate students in an American university was affected by factors such as gender, age, length of residence in the United States, region and country of origin, English language ability, and whether there were family, friends, or student mentors in the host country. The main findings revealed women had more difficulty adapting culturally than men; older age groups found it harder to deal with university staff; the length of stay in the US was not significant; Asian students had more problems than students from other regions; and those who had no friends, family or student mentors in the host country experienced more frustration.
Cultural distance is defined as the extent of the differences between two countries as observed through the lens of various cultural values (Shenkar, 2001). It examines the differences and distances between the characteristics of the two native languages, the types of family systems or structures, the socioeconomic levels, religious beliefs, and the values of the participants (Ang & Dyne, 2008). It can be identified by using the cultural value dimensions initially proposed by Hofstede (1980, 2001) which include individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity, long-term versus short term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint. For example, Ang and Dyne (2008) explained that Canada and the United States are both highly individualistic, while China is significantly more collectivistic, which are important elements that help to illustrate the distance between their cultures. China shares fewer common cultural values with these two countries, while the US and Canada have a much smaller cultural distance because they are relatively similar in a number of key cultural dimensions.

Research shows that although international students make great efforts to integrate within their new communities, language barriers and a lack of knowledge regarding social and cultural norms make it difficult to develop and maintain close friendships with people from the host country.

2.2 Social Integration of Chinese International Students

Chinese international students also face significant challenges with social interaction. Zhang and Beck (2014) studied the learning stories of three female Chinese international students at an IELTS school in Vancouver. The study was framed by several linguistic and sociological theories including sociocultural theories of second language learning,
communities of practice, and Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital theory. Narrative inquiry was chosen as the research method and the three participants were invited to tell stories about their learning experiences preparing for the IELTS test in Canada. The major findings indicated that although the participants were eager to engage in communication with local people in order to improve their language proficiency and cultural integration, they could not get effective access to the community. The explanation was that low levels of language proficiency excluded them from social interaction with native English speakers, leading to other problems with socialization and identity issues.

Zhang and Zhou (2010) used qualitative and quantitative data from questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups to investigate the perspectives, expectations, and experiences of Chinese international students in a Canadian university and explored the possible causes of challenges they confronted while in school. The findings indicated that friendship with native English speakers was positively correlated with both their satisfaction with the learning experience and their confidence in completing the program successfully. The study also determined that language, English speaking skills in particular, was the major cause of the challenges they faced, and developing close friendships with local and other international students was difficult because common topics of conversation were hard to find due to different cultural backgrounds.

Xing et al. (2020) also emphasized the significance of linguistic proficiency in the acculturation of Chinese international students and used a musically enhanced narrative inquiry approach to investigate the experiences of six Chinese international students studying in a Canadian university. The article starts with a quote from one participant, vividly depicting a sense of helplessness, who felt voiceless and transparent among so
many Canadian students during orientation week on campus. The student could not understand what others were talking or laughing about and found it difficult to engage with them in conversation. The study also revealed that before arrival the participants were over-confident about their language proficiency and potential to thrive in a new learning environment. Once the reality of their problems became apparent, the previously supportive families and friends became another source of stress because of their misconceptions regarding the language proficiency of the students. Seeking help and support for the students, the authors explained that these Chinese international students had become effectively isolated from the host community.

Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) conducted a study on the psychological and sociocultural adjustment of Chinese international students in a British university. One of the main findings was that most students did not experience many difficulties in sociocultural adjustment in general but found social interaction with British locals challenging because of different values and a lack of common ground. As a result, they only built social networks with Chinese students and believed that co-national friends provided more emotional support and practical help.

The research on Chinese international students shows that they have problems with social interaction and integration because of language issues and a lack of cultural and social awareness, especially in their early years of study (Jiao, 2006; Zhang & Beck, 2014; Zhang & Zhou 2010). In a commentary on studies related to the experiences of Chinese students in American universities, Heng (2020) stated that some would exhibit contradictory behaviour, they say they would love to make friends with fellow students from the host country, but often shied away in reality. The study also attributes this issue
partly to “the mental strain of communicating in English” and an “uncertainty over socially appropriate ways to engage their American peers” (p. 542).

As a main component of social interaction, small talk helps structure social interactions (Coupland, 2003). Therefore, it is useful to examine the factors which impact the ability of Chinese international students to comfortably make small talk and take part in social activities with other residents of their new community.

2.3 Studies on Small Talk

The topic of small talk has been studied in various social contexts. Beinstein (1975) studied recorded public conversations collected from 127 beauticians, barbers, and pharmacists in Philadelphia, and found that small talk most often took place between residents of similar socioeconomic status. The conclusion was that public conversations reflected family orientations, socioeconomic status, and the level of racial integration of residents in the community and can be further defined as a form of social gesture.

The setting where small talk has most often been studied is the workplace. For example, one large scale project, which produced many relevant publications, was conducted by Professor Janet Holmes and colleagues at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. The Language in the Workplace Project, based on a database of recorded interactions from workplaces such as government agencies, private organizations, and factories, is an attempt to determine what makes interpersonal communication at the workplace effective from the sociolinguistic and cross-cultural perspectives, and how these findings can help non-native English speakers in the Englishspeaking workplace. Their articles defined the boundaries of workplace small talk to include ritualized exchanges for greetings and departures, social conversation about
more personal issues, and work-related communication (Holmes, 2000a). They identified the content of topics, distribution patterns, and functions of small talk, and indicated that small talk at the workplace presented special challenges for non-natives speakers (Holmes, 2000b; Holmes, 2005) and workers with intellectual disabilities (Holmes, 2003; Holmes, 2005; Holmes & Fillary, 2000). The topics for small talk are usually about non-controversial issues such as the weather, personal or family health, and recent or future social activities (Holmes, 2000a). The social functions of workplace small talk include "expressing friendliness, establishing rapport, and maintaining solidarity" (Holmes, 2005, p. 253).

Holmes (2005) agreed with Clyne (1994) who indicated that "cross-cultural communication breakdown occurs at the discourse and pragmatic levels, rather than being caused by phonological, lexical and morphosyntactic questions" (p. 211) and suggested that successful integration for non-native speakers required learning local ways of being sociable and local norms for managing small talk.

The project includes a Workplace Communication Skills course to help skilled non-native speaking immigrants develop socio-pragmatic and communication skills. Their work indicates that a combination of classroom instruction and real-context interactions work together to improve the socio-pragmatic competence of migrant workers (Holmes & Riddiford, 2011).

Another popular setting for research into small talk is in the medical sector, where interactions between doctors and patients are studied (Burnard, 2003; Jin, 2018). For example, Jin (2018) analyzed data from 69 consultations among practitioners of both Chinese Traditional Medicine and Western Medicine in China and pointed out that the
boundaries of small talk in medical interviews range from “the phatic greeting and parting exchanges to social talk, and to some point of the medical-related talk” (p. 43). One interesting finding was that small talk was more frequent in the clinical interviews for Chinese Traditional Medicine than Western Medicine; the reasons suggested were differences in clinical philosophy, priority of the patient when seeing a doctor, and length of visit. The study also indicated that phatic communion at the opening of the doctor-patient meeting was limited, which differed from the results of a study in the UK conducted by Coupland et al. (1994).

However, among international or Chinese international students, the subject of small talk has rarely been investigated. As international students and immigrants have many similarities in terms of their problems with language and social interaction, the focus of this review now turns to the literature related to the social interactions and integration of immigrants in English-speaking countries.

2.3.1 Small Talk for ESL Speakers

Some research has been done on specific groups of people, such as immigrants. As noted by Padilla (2001), “the pragmatics of phatic communion varies across cultures and communities of practice unveiling differing underlying value systems” (p. 132), therefore, people from other cultures need to learn and develop the skills of small talk.

Yates and Major (2015) conducted a study of immigrants to Australia from non-English-speaking countries to examine their perspectives on small talk and pragmatic needs for social interaction which was based on an understanding that both socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic skills are necessary to communicate successfully with native English speakers. The authors used qualitative data gathered from 16 immigrants
who were interviewed and asked to answer general questions about their experiences. It was found that the most common pragmatic issues identified were the level of informality, the indirectness in giving negative comments, the capacity to understand sociability, the need to be pragmatically flexible, and the prevalence of small talk. Among these issues, the prevalence of small talk was their greatest challenge.

Cheng et al. (2020) studied English language use and communication challenges among newcomers doing entry-level jobs by interviewing 14 immigrants who had been in Canada from one to ten years. The primary challenges identified were related to unfamiliar topics (for example, one participant had difficulty discussing a hockey game because they had no personal experience with the sport), problems with language (including organizational knowledge in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence structure, and pragmatic knowledge regarding appropriate language use in real-world settings), a lack of communication strategies (the most commonly used strategies when communication broke down were to ask the speaker to repeat themselves or speak more slowly), and personal attributes (for example, being nervous affected the ability to understand and be understood).

2.3.2 Small Talk for ESL Speakers from China

China has a distinctive culture from that of English-speaking countries. As a result, Chinese ESL users can have considerable problems making small talk in an English-speaking context. Cui (2015) identified and examined the underlying sociocultural reasons for challenges faced by Chinese immigrants in Australia when making small talk with their non-immigrant colleagues at work. The article begins with a quotation from Mei, a Chinese immigrant: “It’s hard to have deeper conversations… I will just sit there
and pretend to do what they are doing. It’s really awkward (p. 3)” This common social experience among these Chinese immigrants made them feel “defeated and despairing” (p. 3) and also caused the Australians to be “puzzled or affronted” (p. 3). Previous studies in this area revealed that the problems stem from the lack of sociopragmatic and sociolinguistic skills, but the exact missing piece was not identified.

Cui (2015) surveyed 80 Chinese immigrants (36 males and 44 females, aged between 25 and 40 years) who were engaged in various professions in Melbourne and had been living there from two to ten years. After the survey, 15 volunteer respondents (eight females and seven males) with one or more identified problem were interviewed and asked to recall and write about an unsuccessful small talk experience with their colleagues at work. These accounts were later used as discussion points in a focus group of eight male and six female Anglo-Australians, who shared their opinions on these problematic experiences. The findings indicate that Chinese immigrants were not well equipped to make small talk in English in their workplace and the major causes of problems were discrepancies in beliefs and values about the nature of personal identity and interpersonal relationships, as well as how relationships beyond the intimate circle should best be managed.

To sum up, small talk is an important part of social communication; its function of creating “ties of union” (Malinowski, 1923, p. 315) is achieved by “subtle and intricate means” (Laver, 1975, p. 216) and will be especially difficult for ESL speakers because the pragmatics of small talk varies in different cultures (Padilla, 2001).
2.4 Chinese Cultural Perspectives on Small Talk

We are who we are because of our culture, as it frames our values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour (Dadfar, 2001). Dadfar (2001) related culture for humans to water for fish, stating that one does not really know how the water tastes until one swims in a different type of water, which means one must really experience other cultures to fully realize the extent of their complexity.

According to Halliday (1978), all talk is simultaneously realizing three functions: the textual function of organizing information, an ideational function of enacting experience, and an interpersonal function of negotiating relationships. Coupland (2003) used a comment on the weather to an acquaintance at the train station as an example. When an individual says, “Lovely day today!”, it carries textual, ideational, and interpersonal meanings, but for the purpose of the exchange in this given setting, the interpersonal focus is at the foreground, because in conveying such a formulaic message about the weather, the speaker intends to develop sociable contact. As small talk is mainly used to serve an interpersonal function, acknowledging Chinese cultural values and beliefs associated with interpersonal communications and relationships will help with understanding their behaviour and habits, especially as it is widely accepted that Chinese place great emphasis on a harmonious society and that interpersonal relationships are traditionally highly valued (Hwang, 1987). For example, Chinese people may greet an acquaintance or friend by asking “去哪呀 (Qv nar ya)? [Where are you going?]” or “吃了吗 (Chi le ma)? [Have you eaten yet?]”, questions which may seem intrusive or unusual to people from English-speaking countries (He & Ran, 1988). In fact, these are just greetings used to show friendliness and care for the wellbeing of the other party, and
no specific answers are expected; people can respond vaguely by saying “我出去一下
(Wo chu qv y xia) [I am going out]”.

An interpersonal relationship can be defined as something that “exists to the extent
that two people exert strong, frequent, and diverse effects on one another over an
extended period of time” (Jackson-Dwyer, 2014, p. 18). Duck (2007) states that
interpersonal relationships are a typical part of everyday life; all activities, including
shopping, gossiping, working, sorting out our leisure activities, and deciding what to have
for dinner, involve the building and reinforcing of interpersonal relationships.

As the first sociologist to study social relationships in China from a cultural
perspective, Fei (1947) proposed a “differential mode of association” (p. 13) to describe
the structure of these relationships. Although Fei’s theories were first proposed several
decades ago, and dramatic changes have taken place in Chinese society since that time,
they are still regarded as the most influential indigenous interpretations in the study of
interpersonal relationships. These theories have been studied, supplemented, and
developed by other sociologists and researchers, but they continue to be used to explain
the notion of the interpersonal relationship in contemporary Chinese society, and the
codes they provide for managing different types of relationships are still widely followed
(Cui, 2015; Song & Liao, 2007; Wang & Chen, 2010).

A Chinese scholar (Hwang, 1986) divided interpersonal relationships among Chinese
people into three categories: affective - relationships with family members and close
friends; instrumental - relationships with parties with whom one deals in order to achieve
practical ends; and mixed - relationships that have both an affective and instrumental
dimension. For relationships that fall into different categories, there is a set of norms which guide the building and maintenance of the relationship.

Chinese people also have distinctive boundaries between 自己人 zijiren (insider; people on our own side) and 外人 wairen (outsider, people who do not belong to our intimate circle) (Gao, 1996). Insiders can belong due to kinship, spatial relationships, and selection, and come from families, relatives, neighbours, classmates, colleagues, and others who have developed special relations over time at work or elsewhere (Fei, 1947; Gao 1996; Gu, 1990). Insiders are almost always treated differently from outsiders and a person with insider status often enjoys privileges and special treatment (Gao, 1996; Gu, 1990). In the same vein, Hofstede (1980) also suggested that in collectivistic cultures there were clear distinctions between in-group and out-group members, and different standards were applied in each case. As a result, these interpersonal relationships make it difficult to develop connections with strangers because it is time-consuming and arduous to turn an outsider into an insider (Gao, 1996), and a third party is often needed to introduce and help with the social relational construction (King & Bond, 1985). In addition, insiders are often treated with high standards and given privileges which are not suitable for outsiders, and there are no ready rules or regular procedures for dealing with strangers. Therefore, as stated by Gao (1996), “most Chinese do not feel knowledgeable about dealing with outsiders” (p. 88).

The study by Cui (2015) regarding problems for Chinese immigrants when interacting with local Australians at work revealed that the main difficulty the Chinese ESL learners had with small talk came from mismatches in beliefs and values about the nature of small talk, interpersonal relationships, and how to manage relationships. The
Chinese participants did not feel it was necessary to engage in small talk because they typically have strong in-group and out-group distinctions, which are separated by high barriers. They do not usually socialize with people in the out-groups, so there are no recognized interactional standards to guide them in regulating relations between themselves and these others at different levels of closeness. However, for those who belong to their in-groups, they feel that small talk is not deep enough to reinforce their relationships. Therefore, as there are no designated standards for out-groups, and the norms for in-groups may not be suitable for out-groups, many Chinese do not know how to deal with outsiders.

As personal behaviour has deep-rooted cultural foundations, developing an awareness of the cultural differences in interpreting the nature of interpersonal relationships is important in understanding the behaviour of Chinese students who seek to engage in small talk.

2.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter begins with an overview of the literature discussing social integration for international students from China and elsewhere. These studies reveal that students regularly face challenges with social interaction in their new learning environments, and many tend to socialize only with co-nationals or other internationals because they share more common bonds. The major problems identified were with language barriers and cultural differences.

In addition, the studies on small talk among newcomers also revealed that most of the research has been conducted in the workplaces of immigrants, and the available literature exploring small talk among Chinese international students in Canadian society
is very limited. Articles about Chinese immigrants in Australia suggested that small talk was prevalent in English-speaking countries, which presented a significant challenge for these individuals as they were not accustomed to this cultural irregularity.

The last part of the chapter reviewed the literature regarding Chinese cultural perspectives on small talk. As small talk usually has an interpersonal function, and as interpersonal relationships are traditionally highly valued in China, these studies can help illuminate the behaviour of Chinese people when making small talk.
Chapter 3

Methodology

The approach used in this study is qualitative in nature as the intent is to explore both the successful and unsuccessful experiences of Chinese students when engaging in small talk with local Canadians. The focus is on identifying the challenges the students encounter, the causes of these challenges, and possible solutions to help overcome these challenges.

To address these issues, the following questions guide this research:

1. What are the main challenges Chinese graduate students face when making small talk with other individuals in Canada? (challenges)

2. What are some of the linguistic, cultural, and other factors that contribute to these challenges? (causes)

3. How can they overcome these challenges to increase interaction and engagement with others in their academic and social communities? (suggestions)

This chapter outlines the rationale for using qualitative research methods, describes the ethics considerations, research design, and the recruitment, data collection and analysis procedures.

3.1 Methodological Approach

Silverman (2013) proposed that in choosing a research method, everything depends on what you are trying to learn. The issues to be considered are the type of research questions to be asked, whether the focus is on details or standardized and systematic comparisons, how other researchers have dealt with the topic, which method will enable the researcher to learn more about the topic, and which approach works best for the
researcher. This study uses the qualitative approach as its foundation for the following reasons. First, in a broad sense, the research questions are asking about the “what” and “how” instead of “how much” (Frey et al., 1992). Second, this study explores what is happening and what the participants think or feel (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008), and the focus is on the details of each individual experience. Third, most previous empirical research on small talk has used qualitative methods; the instruments employed, including interviews, observations, and focus groups, are often used to collect the details required for an in-depth study of this nature; and the data for analysis are usually based on interview transcriptions, written responses, documents, field notes, observations, recorded conversations, and corpus.

Qualitative research consists of several forms of inquiry where the researcher is studying a social context, while causing as little disruption as possible in the natural setting (Merriam, 1998). Phenomenology “focuses on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as a shared meaning” (Patton, 2014, p. 190). According to Patton (2014), for phenomenology, the core question of inquiry is “[w]hat is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people” (p. 190). Creswell and Poth (2018), based on studies done by other researchers, indicate that the best problems for phenomenological research are ones that require understanding the common or shared experiences of a phenomenon by several individuals. The phenomenological research methodology is suitable for the topic under investigation; these research methods are used to explore the experiences of Chinese students making small talk with peers, instructors, and other individuals in Canadian communities, and to
examine “how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2014, p. 190).

In this study, the research interest is in the experiences of Chinese students who wish to be successful in their studies and integrate into Canadian society. For this purpose, it is both appropriate and suitable to use in-depth interviews to learn more about their successful and unsuccessful episodes of small talk with classmates, instructors, and others, and to gather first-hand data from their lived experiences.

3.2 Ethics Considerations

Prior to the start of data collection, it was necessary to obtain ethics clearance from the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at Queen’s University (see Appendix A – GREB Review Clearance Letter). This detailed process highlighted the importance of ensuring all potential and actual participants were well informed about the nature of the research project, including its purpose, expectations for the participants, how the research will be conducted, what information will be collected and published, etc.

Before any information or data could be collected, each potential participant was provided with a detailed Letter of Information and Consent (see Appendix B - Letter of Information/Consent for Group A Participants) which briefly outlined the information described above as well as the policies on confidentiality and freedom of withdrawal, and also informed them of their rights and any potential risks from taking part in the study, that their cooperation was completely voluntary, and that they would receive no direct benefits by participating. Once signed consent was received, the potential interview participants were contacted to establish a time to meet, and at the start of each of these sessions, verbal consent to continue was also obtained.
In order to follow COVID-19 protocols and maintain social distancing, all correspondence with participants was conducted through the internet. This approach made it easier to contact potential participants but may be seen by some as an invasion of privacy. Therefore, special consideration was given to “netiquette”, which refers to “rules or guidelines about how to act ethically when using the Internet” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 187), so participants were not contacted by the researcher until confirming they were willing to take part.

The recruitment process for the interview participants (identified as *Group A*) for the first stage of the study was initiated by submitting a poster describing the project to *WeChat* groups with the expectation that only those willing to take part in the research would respond, thus ensuring voluntary participation. To recruit the questionnaire participants for the second stage of the study (identified as *Group B*), members of *Group A* were asked to send emails of invitation to classmates and instructors, and only those who voluntarily contacted the researcher were sent the link to an online survey questionnaire. The opening screen of the questionnaire consisted of a second Letter of Information and Consent (see Appendix C - Letter of Information/Consent for *Group B* Participants), and at the bottom of this screen individuals had the option to exit or to consent and complete the questionnaire.

During the collection process, all data were stored in encrypted folders accessible only by the researcher. Participants have only been identified by code, both during the data collection and analysis process, as well as in this final report; thus, confidentiality has been maintained at a very high level.
3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Recruitment

After ethics clearance was received, participant recruitment started. To begin the process, a recruitment poster was created to introduce and explain the purpose of the study, and to seek out and attract potential interview participants for Group A. The poster, written in both Chinese and English, described the nature and purpose of the study, criteria for potential participants, and provided application and contact information. In addition to these essential details, the researcher also revealed that even after learning English for more than 20 years, making small talk in English is an ongoing burden, and encouraged other Chinese students, with or without problems, to share their experiences and feelings (see Appendix D – Recruitment Poster).

This notice was posted in various WeChat groups frequented by Chinese students in different universities in Canada. WeChat is a messaging application that is very popular in China and many Chinese international students in Canadian universities are members of one or more online chat groups accessed through this app. Individuals who saw the poster and were interested in taking part in the study were asked to contact the researcher by email. If the respondents met the requirements of the study, as discussed below, they were sent a recruitment email (see Appendix E – Email to Invite Group A Participants for an Interview) which contained a link to the Letter of Information and Consent stored on OneDrive. Those who agreed to take part and provided signed consent were officially recruited as participants.
Each week the poster was sent to a different WeChat group until enough volunteers were found for Group A. In total, ten interview participants from four universities in two provinces of Canada were recruited in this way.

This study also included a questionnaire to be completed by classmates and instructors of the Group A participants. It was planned that these Group B participants would be recruited through snowballing, that is, the interview participants would be asked to share the details of this study by email with their Canadian classmates and/or instructors inviting them to take part. Once the interviews were completed, the members of Group A who indicated they would be willing to help solicit individuals to complete the questionnaire were contacted and provided with a suggested draft email they could send to classmates and instructors (see Appendix F – Email to Group A Participants to Recruit Group B Participants).

However, in actual practice, there were many difficulties. First, since some interview participants were in programs attended only by international students, they did not have any Canadian classmates, which severely limited the pool of potential contacts. Second, some interview participants were the only Chinese students in their program, while the planned criteria required potential Group B classmate participants to be in a class with at least three Chinese students. Third, feedback from those who shared details of the study indicated their contacts felt it was too troublesome to send an email advising the researcher of their interest.

To cope with these issues, a one-page invitation was created using Qualtrics which introduced the study, outlined criteria for potential members of Group B, and asked those who would be willing to complete the detailed questionnaire to include their email
address at the bottom of the invitation (see Appendix G - Qualtrics Invitation for Group B Participants). The link and the QR code for this document was distributed to Chinese colleagues and classmates of the researcher who were asked to share it with their classmates and other possible candidates. Ultimately, eight participants were recruited as members of Group B.

3.3.2 Participants

In order to increase the trustworthiness of the research results, triangulation can be used in terms of data, investigator, theory, and methodology (Cohen et al., 2002). To examine the issues from both sides of the interactions, two groups of participants were included in this study: ten Chinese graduate students in Canadian universities (Group A) and eight Canadian instructors and classmates (Group B).

**Group A Participants.** In the original recruitment plan, it was proposed that Group A participants should meet the following criteria: self-identify as a Chinese international or immigrant graduate student; received their K-12 and/or undergraduate education in China; and currently be enrolled in a graduate program at a Canadian university. However, during the data collection process it became apparent that due to COVID-19 restrictions, almost all students enrolled in 2020 had classes online, and many had never been to Canada. Students in a master’s program usually complete their required courses within one year, but in this case, classes only happened online. As a result, the data lacked input from master’s students with in-person classroom experiences. Therefore, to enrich the information, when two recent graduates showed interest, the recruitment criteria were expanded to include those who had completed a graduate program within
the past year. The original research plan was to interview eight Chinese students, but this was increased with the inclusion of these other two participants.

During the data collection process, preliminary analysis was done concurrently, which informed subsequent data collection decisions (Creswell, 2012; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008). The recruitment poster was sent to WeChat groups frequented by Chinese international students at five universities in three Canadian provinces until informational saturation was reached, a situation where there were no new themes for challenges, causes, or suggestions which emerged from either of the last two interviews.

Of the ten interview participants in Group A, two of them were recent graduates and the others were all enrolled in graduate programs at the time the interviews took place. From this latter group, four were in master’s programs, three in the first year and one in the second, and four were pursuing PhD’s; two PhD students were in their second year, one in the third year, and one in the fourth. Most of them have lived in Canada longer than they have been in school here. Only one student was in the first year living in Canada, and one in the second; two were in their third year and two in their fourth; three have been here for six years and one for nine.

Table 3.1 shows basic information for the ten Group A participants; this group has been coded IP (Interview Participant) and individuals assigned a number.
Table 3.1

Basic Information for Group A Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Year in the Program</th>
<th>Year Coming to Canada</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IP 1</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP 2</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP 3</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP 4</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP 5</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP 6</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP 7</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP 8</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP 9</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP 10</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Group B Participants.** There are eight Group B participants; five identified themselves as classmates and three as both a classmate and instructor. The criteria for the instructors stipulated that they had taught or supervised Chinese students for more than one semester in a Canadian university. Since many instructors have been classmates or interacted with Chinese international students in the past, given that China has been a top source of international enrollments in most broad university program areas in Canada for many years (Frenette, et al., 2020), this stipulation ensures they have had experience interacting with these students from the perspective of an instructor, which is different from that of a classmate.

To qualify as participants, the Canadian classmates were required to speak English as their first language, received their K-12 and undergraduate education in Canada, and must have attended classes with at least three Chinese students (either together or separately) during their university studies. As the communicative competence for making small talk can vary from person to person for many reasons, such as personal attributes or a lack of topical knowledge in a certain area (Bachman, 1990), it was felt that participants
with very limited exposure to Chinese students may not have the background to competently complete the questionnaire, which would affect the quality of their responses.

The basic information provided by the Group B participants about their relationship with the Chinese students, the rank they gave for frequency of interaction (where 1 = *never* and 5 = *very often*), and their personal ranking for the perceived level of challenges faced by the Chinese students, is listed in Table 3.2. This group has been coded QP (Questionnaire Participant), and individuals assigned a number.

**Table 3.2**

*Basic Information Provided by Group B Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Instructor or Classmate</th>
<th>Small Talk Frequency</th>
<th>Challenge Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QP 1</td>
<td>Classmate</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Slightly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QP 2</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Extremely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QP 3</td>
<td>Classmate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QP 4</td>
<td>Classmate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QP 5</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QP 6</td>
<td>Classmate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Slightly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QP 7</td>
<td>Classmate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QP 8</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Extremely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2014, p. 311). Sample size depends on a variety of factors, including the purpose of the inquiry, the coverage of the participant samples, and the quality of data in their responses (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012). Considering the suggested sample size for qualitative research, Saunders (2012) differentiates the participants into homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, and notes that a range of four to twelve participants will be sufficient for homogeneous groups, and 12 to 30 participants for groups that are heterogeneous. Creswell (2012) indicates the size can range from one or two to 30 or 40, but a large
number of participants may lead to unmanageable data and superficial perspectives. Morse (2000) states that when doing phenomenological research, there is often a large amount of information from each participant and therefore only six to ten participants are needed. Polkinghorne (1989) also recommends that in phenomenological studies researchers interview from five to twenty-five participants who have experienced the phenomenon in question. The literature suggests that the sample size can vary from one to forty depending on the circumstances.

In this study, the ten Chinese students formed a homogeneous group, and they were the key informants sharing their experiences; each individual in-depth interview lasted from one to two hours and there were follow-up communications for clarification and to ask if they had anything further to contribute. In addition, as no new themes emerged during the last two interviews, it would seem appropriate to conclude that the ten participants provided sufficient data to adequately explore the challenges that were identified as part of their successful and unsuccessful experiences.

The reason for recruiting instructors and Canadian classmates was to explore other aspects of the social transaction and seek suggested solutions for problems from the perspective of the native speakers. For this group, the initial plan was to recruit a minimum number equal to the total participants in Group A, but in practice the comments and opinions provided by the members of Group B were very homogeneous, thus the number of actual participants could be reduced with no apparent impact on data quality.

3.3.3 Data Collection

Patton (2014) indicates that a variety of data collection methods can reveal different aspects of empirical reality and social perception, and combinations of interviews,
observations, and document analysis are expected in most fieldwork. Qualitative studies mainly use data from three sources: in-depth open-ended interviews, direct observations, and written communications. In phenomenological research, qualitative data is collected from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon by using in-depth interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2014). Moustakas (1994) indicated that two general questions should be asked about what the participants have experienced in terms of the phenomenon and what contexts, or situations have typically influenced these experiences. The answers to these two questions can form “a textual and structural description of the experiences, and ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 128).

In addition, observations, journals, taped conversations, formally written responses, and other forms of art may also be collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Written responses include a variety of documents such as publications, personal diaries, and open-ended written replies to questionnaires and surveys. Despite the shortcomings of collecting data with open-ended questionnaires, such as “limitations related to the writing skills of respondents, the impossibility of probing or extending responses, and the effort required of the person completing the questionnaire” (Patton, 2014, p. 74), it can lead to fruitful results both in depth and in detail.

In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants in Group A and open-ended questionnaires were distributed to the participants in Group B. For this latter group, the identified limitations of using open-ended written questionnaires did not pose any problems; all the instructors and classmates are well-educated individuals, so their written responses were clear and informative; any confusing comments were easily
clarified through further correspondence; and the respondents had flexibility in terms of time to complete the questionnaire.

**Data Collection Tools.** Data were collected from semi-structured individual interviews with the selected Chinese students (Group A) conducted through Zoom meetings and open-ended questionnaires completed by the instructors and classmates of Chinese students (Group B).

**Semi-structured Individual Interviews.** Semi-structured interviews were utilized in this study because they provide the necessary flexibility for capturing voices and experiences (Rabionet, 2011). One-on-one interviews were conducted to allow participants to focus on their own experiences, and free them from the influence of others as personal experiences can contain information that people may withhold in a more public context (Morgan et al., 2013).

The interview questions were developed based on the three research questions to ensure the resulting responses would help fulfill the purpose of the study. All questions were refined and improved to be more open-ended, which allowed the participants to relate their own experiences, as the aim of an in-depth interview is not merely to get answers but to understand the complex lived experiences of people (Seidman, 2013).

A pilot study was conducted with one individual who had the same background required of the participants to check whether the questions were clearly worded, whether more were needed, and to determine if modifications were required to elicit the most comprehensive responses about experiences and opinions. This step helped to enhance the interview process as questions were added and removed from the original list. For example, there was no question asking about the frequency of small talk in China and
Canada. During the pilot, it became evident that personality was a possible challenge, so it was deemed useful to include a question to determine whether participants were also naturally shy or quiet in their own culture. In addition, originally there was a question comparing university life in both countries designed to provide extra background information and help create a more relaxed interview experience, but it was dropped when the pilot revealed it would lead to a prolonged answer which was not relevant to this study.

Based on the pilot, the interview process and protocol were improved, and an interview guide was drafted and presented to a professional researcher for further review and feedback (see Appendix H – Interview Guide for Group A Participants).

**Open-ended Questionnaires.** An open-ended questionnaire was developed which contained general questions about the respondents and their experiences making small talk with Chinese students. Four true-life but anonymous narratives based on the disclosures of the Group A members were also included to provide examples of scenarios the Chinese students found very challenging. These scenarios were developed after the interviews were concluded; problematic situations from four participants that seemed to typify the most common challenges were written as anonymous narratives and then reviewed by these individuals, three of whom stated they could relate to most or all the challenges described.

After each scenario, the specific challenges were clearly stated and Group B respondents were asked whether they have faced similar social situations, how they did or would react in such situations, and to outline their opinion on the nature of the perceived problem. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were also asked to suggest
strategies to help Chinese students with small talk and with social integration (see Appendix I - Questionnaire for Group B Participants).

During the process of preparing the questionnaire, a link to a pilot version was sent to an experienced researcher for a trial to test whether questions were clearly worded and to help estimate the time required for completion.

**Data Collection Procedure.** There were two stages in the data collection process, interviews and questionnaires. The data collection procedure covered a period of two months.

**Semi-structured Individual Interviews.** After receiving signed consent and arranging a time for the interview, each participant was sent a Zoom link together with a copy of the interview guide. The interview guide, written in both Chinese and English, expressed appreciation for their help, advised them they did not need to turn on their camera for the interview, and informed them they could choose either English or Mandarin as the language for the online meeting. The guide also listed some of the core questions to be asked about their educational background, feelings about school life, social interaction and integration in Canada, successful and unsuccessful experiences making small talk, and so on.

The interviews began casually to create a relaxed and trusting atmosphere, and some time was spent introducing the study and reviewing the Letter of Information, followed by a request for a verbal consent to proceed. The participants were again informed that they could choose to turn off their camera and again offered the choice of using either English or Mandarin. This was done because previous studies indicated that some people felt more comfortable sharing their intimate experiences in their native language (Wang,
2016; Zang, 2007; Zhang 2005). Two out of ten participants chose to use Mandarin while the others were interviewed in English.

During the interview, individuals were asked general questions about their experiences as a graduate student; the focus was on their feelings and ideas, and successful and unsuccessful experiences, related to engaging in small talk with native English speakers. Although questions were designed in advance to elicit a comprehensive account of their experiences, the questions changed with the flow of the interview. The interviewer is responsible for creating an atmosphere in which the participants will feel comfortable so that they will respond honestly and comprehensively (Moustakas, 1994).

With permission, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions from those who used Mandarin were translated to English by the researcher, and all transcriptions were shared with participants for member checking and verification as a further measure of trustworthiness.

Further communication took place with all participants using either email or the WeChat messaging app to seek clarification or to discuss related issues as required.

**Open-ended Questionnaires.** When potential Group B participants made contact with the researcher, they were sent an email introducing the study in detail together with a link to the online questionnaire. After the completed Qualtrics questionnaires were received, the answers were exported for analysis, and an acknowledgement was sent to thank the participants and discuss their responses if necessary.

In order to maintain confidentiality, all participants were assigned an identification code when the interviews were transcribed and the questionnaire answers exported from Qualtrics. The interview participants are coded as IP 1, IP 2, to IP 10, and the
questionnaire participants are coded as QP 1, QP 2, to QP 8. These codes appear in the transcriptions, the questionnaire answers, and in the report of the findings. When direct quotations from the original transcripts are used in reporting the findings, they are referenced with information showing the participant code and the line number or numbers where the quote appears in the transcript for that participant, e.g., (IP 1, lines 25-26).

When using responses submitted by questionnaire participants, these are also referenced by a participant code and the question number, e.g., (QP 1, Question 3).

3.3.4 Data Analysis

Creswell and Poth (2018), based on the work of Moustakas (1994) and other researchers, state that phenomenological research will “generate themes from the analysis of significant statements” (p. 79). The analytical steps are: “[f]irst go through the data (e.g., interview transcriptions and questionnaire answers) and highlight significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (p. 79). This process is called horizontalization, a procedure in which every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and question is regarded as having equal value (Moustakas, 1994).

Second, clusters of meaning from these significant statements are used to generate themes. Then, significant statements from the previous steps are used to compose textual and structural descriptions of the participant experiences and how these experiences were influenced by their context.

In this study, the empirical analysis followed the procedure outlined above. First, transcriptions from recorded interviews and responses to open-ended questions from the questionnaire, together with the notes and memos taken during and after the interview,
were imported to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package, and read and reread to get a general sense of the material. The words, phrases, and sentences that can provide an understanding of the participant experience in making small talk with others were highlighted, classified, and assigned code labels.

Second, after completing the initial coding, the clusters of meaning from significant statements were developed into categories and then to themes, and the overlapping and repetitive statements were removed (Moustakas, 1994). In other words, codes with some shared characteristics were grouped together in a logical way to form categories, which were then used to derive the major themes used to identify specific challenges.

The following mind map, Figure 3.1, provides an illustrated example of the codes and categories that were used and developed to derive the theme for the challenge caused by problems with Comprehension (see Chapter 4).

**Figure 3.1**

*An Example of Codes and Categories*
In this mind map, the phrases in orange boxes are codes which have been assigned to represent the specific problems or challenging situations mentioned by the interview participants; the phrases in green boxes are more conceptual and represent the abstract categories developed from the codes; the heading in the blue box, Comprehension, is the theme which has been derived from the codes and categories. As a result, it has been determined that these specific difficulties (in orange) all point to problems with comprehension (in blue) as being one of the six identified major challenges faced by Chinese students when making small talk, as presented in Chapter 4.

Creswell (2012) states that “describing and developing themes from the data consists of answering the major research questions and forming an in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon through description and thematic development” (p. 247). In this study, the participants in Group A were invited, from the perspective of second language learners from another culture, to share their experiences (both successful and unsuccessful) and challenges, discuss opinions on possible causes for these challenges, and provide suggestions to improve the situation based on their successful and unsuccessful attempts to engage in small talk with others in English. Those in Group B were asked to share their perception of the challenges, to indicate their views on the causes, and to provide suggestions, all from the unique perspective of a native speaker and member of the target culture.

Referring to the three original research questions, data were classified into three major categories: challenges, causes, and suggestions. In the first category, challenges, ten themes were originally identified: comprehension, participation, initiative, confidence, social connections, propriety, expressions, topical knowledge, humour, and
responses, which were eventually condensed to six by merging the last four with other similar themes. For the second category, causes, three themes were identified: language barriers, cultural differences, and personal attributes. In the third category, many suggestions were provided, but five primary themes emerged and were identified: practice communicative skills, improve English language proficiency, learn social and cultural norms through observation, develop and use communicative strategies, and become active members in communities of practice.

Figure 3.2 is a mind map illustrating the themes as they relate to the three research questions.

**Figure 3.2**

*Themes for the Three Research Questions*
3.4 Chapter Summary

Qualitative research methods are used as the foundation for this study. Phenomenological inquiry has been adopted because the core questions of phenomenological research are addressed. Participants included both parties engaged in communication – Chinese students and native English-speaking Canadians. Semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires were utilized to collect data and thematic analysis applied to identify the specific challenges faced by the participants.
Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the experiences of Chinese students when making small talk with local English-speaking Canadians. The specific focus of the research is on the challenges they face, causes for these challenges, and suggestions to help overcome these challenges. Figure 4.1 is a mind map used to illustrate the overall findings of the research.

Figure 4.1

Overview of the Research Findings

Note. Mind maps are used throughout this section to illustrate the results of the research.

This mind map gives an overview of the Findings from this study. The blue boxes list the
main challenges experienced by Chinese students when making small talk; the commonly cited reasons or causes for these challenges are shown in the green boxes; the phrases in pink boxes are suggestions given by the participants for overcoming the challenges.

In the first phase of this research, ten Chinese students (Group A) were interviewed to learn about their experiences making small talk. During the interviews, Group A participants were asked questions related to their educational background and their successful and unsuccessful experiences making small talk with local English-speaking Canadians.

All interview participants admitted that when they first began their studies, they experienced different levels of difficulty engaging in small talk. Three of them, because of their excellent listening and oral English proficiency, previous experience studying or working in another English-speaking country, and out-going personalities, felt they were relatively less challenged, while the other seven experienced greater struggles when they first attended universities in Canada.

Some of them responded to the challenges by quickly developing a high level of confidence and comfort talking to local people in English, but some were still struggling. Four interviewees, after two to eight years of living and studying in Canada, felt they had totally integrated into Canadian society and now have no problems making small talk in English most of the time. The other six participants were still learning and adapting.

The analysis of the data from the interviews indicates the most challenging issues for these Chinese students were related to comprehension, participation, initiative, confidence, social connections, and propriety.
In the second phase of the research, an online questionnaire, which included four specific scenarios describing the most challenging small talk situations faced by the Group A participants, was distributed to native English-speaking instructors and classmates of Chinese students (Group B) for their comments and opinions. In addition to asking for comments on the four scenarios and suggestions to help others with social integration, the phase two questionnaire also collected information from the Group B participants about their frequency of interaction and engagement in small talk with Chinese students, what topics were discussed, whether they noticed their Chinese classmates or students had problems making small talk in English, and if they could provide specific examples of challenging situations.

There were eight Group B participants; five identified themselves as a classmate and three as both classmate and instructor to Chinese students. Among this latter group, two were PhD candidates working as instructors and one was an instructor who previously had Chinese classmates. When asked how often they communicated with Chinese students, most of them ranked the frequency as three or four out of five; they felt the Chinese students faced different levels of challenges: two of them thought their Chinese classmates were slightly challenged, four said somewhat challenged, and two believed they were extremely challenged (see Table 3.2). When talking with the Chinese students, the classmates covered various topics such as common or shared experiences, current affairs, school-related issues, and research projects; the others, responding from both perspectives, indicated that as classmates they also discussed these topics but as instructors, the main focus was on course-related issues. The major challenges they identified were related to comprehension problems resulting from low language
proficiency and a lack of cultural or background knowledge, an unwillingness to initiate a conversation, difficulties in expressing themselves, and a lack of confidence in their command of English.

In this chapter, the findings outline the commonly identified challenges experienced by the Chinese students together with possible reasons for these challenges and suggestions for peers provided by both groups of participants. As the primary findings from the interviews coincided with the findings from the questionnaires, they have been presented together. The causes of these challenges can be mainly categorized as follows: language barriers, cultural differences, and personal attributes. The suggestions include wide-ranging recommendations such as improving language proficiency, increasing exposure to a variety of social situations, observing and learning from others, and raising awareness of culturally popular issues, as well as some specific tips in response to special challenges.

4.1 Comprehension

Figure 4.2

*Comprehension: Understanding Language and Context*
One significant reason that graduate students were chosen as the study group for this research is because they are required to demonstrate their language skills before admittance to their academic programs, although high marks on proficiency tests are no guarantee that one can understand casual conversations, especially when topics are unfamiliar.

Comprehension problems, which can be related to the unfamiliar use of language, a lack of background information, and problems with cultural references, were most often cited as the source of challenges by Group A interview participants. Issues such as conversational pace, the use of slang, and unfamiliar proper names for people and places, added to the challenges encountered, all of which were compounded by the unprecedented need to wear masks and adhere to social distancing guidelines due to COVID-19.

One Group B questionnaire participant pointed out that “a Chinese student who is not a very experienced English-speaker struggles to understand my questions and statements and may laugh nervously or respond in a way that doesn’t make sense with the context of what I had said” (QP 5, Question 3). Another, QP 4, noticed that Chinese students had problems understanding conversations which included cultural references.

4.1.1 Unfamiliar Use of Language

Most Chinese graduate students, educated from kindergarten to the undergraduate level in China, primarily learn English from textbooks in a non-English language environment, and as such, their accumulated vocabulary may not be adequate to cover some specific areas of daily life. Polysemy, a common phenomenon in English, is another
major problem; for these students, the mastery of one meaning of the word does not always help them grasp the other meanings.

According to the Chinese students interviewed for this study, unfamiliar accents were another common problem; several participants mentioned that it seemed local Canadians could understand people with different accents, but they found it very difficult.

When asked about their main challenge making small talk with local Canadians, IP 5 replied:

I would say language barrier…including vocabulary and accents. I learned some meanings of some words, but in some cases, they have some other meanings that I don’t know. So, vocabulary is definitely one and accents [is another]. I have classmates from England, Scotland, I cannot understand them very well (IP 5, lines 552-556).

IP 5 was not the only one bothered by accents. IP 6 also had trouble understanding a former roommate who spoke with a strong French accent. The roommate was a fun character and liked telling jokes, but most of the time IP 6 could not understand very well, and noted “we could still function as friends, just maybe not that close” (IP 6, lines 317-318) because “we could [only] communicate in a simple way” (IP 6, lines 313-314).

IP 9 also mentioned the problem of not having sufficient vocabulary. Once when chatting with a supervisor many unfamiliar words were used and as a result, IP 9 could only guess the general meaning of what was said:

Sometimes she uses some words or expressions that I have never heard of or learned of, so very often I cannot understand them. Today we talked about fixing the roof. She used many words for the structure of the house. I could not understand them very well. When you are unable to understand what people say, you don’t know how to respond to them (IP 9, lines 251-257).
This example also shows that vocabulary, even in a second or new language, can be a function of lifestyle or life experiences. Most Chinese living in urban areas reside in apartments and do not know much about building or household maintenance, while many in Canada live in single family dwellings and taking care of their house and property is part of daily life. Therefore, what may appear to Canadians as a casual and common topic for everyday discussion would be something only discussed among professionals in China; as a result, Chinese people would most certainly not be familiar with the English vocabulary related to housing structures and home maintenance.

4.1.2 Lack of Background Information

One factor that hinders comprehension among Chinese students during casual conversation is a lack of familiarity with background information. Small talk can be about anything in people's lives, but because these students come from a different country, with a different culture, and may have lived a very different lifestyle, it is likely that many subjects which are considered common knowledge for Canadians would be completely foreign for someone from China.

Several participants said they had problems understanding others because they lacked the requisite background knowledge. When classmates were talking about movies, TV series, or other shows, IP 3 could only get a rough idea of the nature of the discussion by managing to follow some key words:

After class when we were just walking downstairs…they were talking about the upcoming movies, popular TV series or comedies, shows, or some popular superstars…What I only know is that they are talking in English, but don’t know what they are talking about (IP 3, lines 117-125).
IP 7 also described a situation when understanding one aspect of a conversation with their supervisor was difficult. The discussion was about children going back to school and the supervisor related it to Labour Day:

She would ask me a lot of things, like “Do your kids go to school?” I said “Yes. They went to school. It is the first day for school.” Then she said, “School starts earlier in your place. Usually, school starts after Labour Day.” I don’t know why she mentioned Labour Day. I can understand Labour Day. In China we have Labour Day, too. It is on May 1st. I was so confused, but I did not ask (IP 7, lines 535-540).

IP 7 was unaware that Labour Day in Canada comes on the first Monday in September and typically flags the start of a new school year. Understanding the full meaning of this conversation was difficult without this background knowledge.

Two participants, IP 4 and IP 8 also mentioned the challenges they had with proper names for places, people, or for some historical events in Canada. They found that these names were not easy to pronounce or remember, but they were vital for understanding the meanings of conversations, which caused them great anxiety.

4.1.3 Cultural Divide

When talking about problems which interfered with their ability to engage in casual conversation, several participants referred to issues related to culture. Some expressions such as idioms, slang, proverbs, and jokes have cultural references that limit or eliminate the possibility of comprehension by individuals who do not know these references.

Humour is a prime example of this phenomenon; it is generally recognized that humour does not translate well. When friends were talking and suddenly started to laugh, not knowing what was funny made IP 10 feel excluded and embarrassed:

Sometimes when chatting with them, they suddenly start to laugh at something. This is indeed a cultural factor. For example, they have some proverbs, slang, and jokes
that are particularly related to their culture in North America. As a Chinese, I cannot resonate with them…and sometimes it’s quite embarrassing (IP 10, lines 408-412).

Slang and expressions with cultural references were also problematic for IP 5, who did not like making small talk with people because “they may talk about some cultural cases that if you did not grow up here, you could not understand at all” (IP 5, lines 159-160). IP 3 was also similarly confused, “In small talk, there are often some idioms or some phrases. I know each of the words, but when they are together, I don’t know what they mean” (IP 3, lines 345-347).

This problem was not only noticed by the interview participants but also by two questionnaire participants. QP 8 noted the difficulties these students had relating to persons and cultural activities:

I notice that there is a problem for Chinese students to relate to a number of the topics we might discuss on an everyday basis, they cannot relate to many of the personalities (public figures, movie actors, musicians, etc.) we grew up knowing in our everyday life; also many of the cultural activities we follow like hockey and Canadian football or baseball are not familiar to them (QP 8, Question 3).

QP 3, an experienced language teacher who was more aware of the problem with language and cultural references, noticed the difficulties faced by a Chinese student who was engaged in small talk with some Canadian classmates:

As the Canadian speakers were making small talk, I could tell that some of the slang used and references might not be clear to the Chinese graduate student. I am an experienced language teacher, so I am somewhat aware of language and references that might be challenging for a Chinese graduate student. I tried to clarify if the Chinese graduate student understood the discussion and offered a rephrased summary when that student said they hadn’t understood the small talk. Up until that
point, the Chinese graduate student hadn’t expressed that they didn’t understand something, and I don’t think the other students knew either (QP 3, Question 3).

Humour usually has cultural connotations or references, which makes it even harder for Chinese students to understand. When teaching Chinese students, QP 8 “often said things with humorous intent but mostly the students did not respond as Canadian students might have, it is not surprising that humour often does not cross cultures” (QP 8, Question 6).

In one situation, IP 7 could not understand a comment by an English-speaking security officer at the airport and was worried about their passport until later realizing the officer had actually been making a joke about the logo on one bag.

IP 5 revealed that at the beginning of their relationship, her boyfriend, who had been in Canada for many years, often shared funny online stories or videos, but this was a burden because the humour was hard to understand, and IP 5 was hesitant to ask for an explanation:

At the beginning of our relationship, he liked to share some interesting stories or talk shows from Twitter, but for me, it’s like “What are they talking about? I don’t understand. Should I laugh now? Should I smile? Should I ask him?” It’s very awkward because I cannot understand…when I became more comfortable with talking to him, I asked directly. I would say, “I don’t understand. Why should I laugh? Can you explain it?” And he explained, and this definitely helped a lot (IP 5, lines 290-297).

An inability to understand some jokes was embarrassing for IP 10 as well, who also wondered whether to ask for an explanation:

Most of the time, it’s best to ask directly, “What was your punch line just now? I didn’t get it.” But it’s not fun to do it every time. You ruin their jokes. This is difficult to decide whether I should ask or not. Because of cultural differences,
sometimes even if they explain it to you, you still can’t get it, you still don’t understand it or you still don’t feel it is funny. It’s very embarrassing (IP 10, lines 421-426).

However, IP 6 chose not to ask when unable to understand jokes told by a roommate who spoke with a strong French accent:

I have trouble understanding her, and she is cracking jokes. She thinks she is very humourous…I know she is being funny there, and how can I ask her to repeat her jokes again and again. I also don’t have the patience to do that; I also feel I will ruin her enjoyment. So, I don’t do that. Actually, I don’t respond, or I just respond like “Ha-ha” (IP 6, lines 302-309).

As these quotes from the interviews illustrate, many Chinese students would not ask for clarification even if they did not understand the meaning of the interaction. IP 7 was confused by the mention of Labour Day but did not ask. At the beginning of their relationship IP 5 felt embarrassed to seek explanations, but later asked and learned a lot when they became more comfortable talking to each other. IP 10 thought to ask but did not want to ruin the joke and worried that even an explanation may not have helped with understanding the humour, while IP 6 did not want to disappoint the roommate and lacked the patience to ask for clarification or explanation. Other participants mentioned they would not ask for an explanation when they failed to understand; as IP 3 said, “I also don’t want to waste people’s time to keep asking them to explain again” (IP 3, lines 102-103).

The reasons for not asking for help were varied. Some did not want to interrupt the flow of the conversation or did not feel it was sufficiently important to intercede; sometimes, it was because they felt embarrassed, especially if the other person was not a close friend; they may not have wanted to disappoint the person who told the joke; or, in
some situations, they just did not bother. No matter what the reasons were, if the problems were not made known, the opportunity to learn something new was missed. Meanwhile, the other parties to the conversations, unaware that there were problems, may have found themselves waiting for an expected response. This mismatch of information may be a source of further misunderstanding between the two parties.

4.1.4 Summary and Suggestions

The comprehension issues revealed in the analysis of the interviews and questionnaires were primarily caused by a lack of language proficiency, unfamiliarity with common or background knowledge, and inadequate understanding or knowledge about cultural references. Comprehension is the first step in communication; problems with understanding damaged the confidence of the Chinese students and tended to discourage them from attempting to make small talk with their Canadian counterparts.

As noted above, the Chinese students did not often ask for explanations or clarification when they did not understand. This is not conducive to learning and developing the skills required to engage in small talk, which in turn will have a negative impact on social integration. The suggestions from participants to help rectify these problems included asking more questions and increasing exposure to a wide variety of social situations and activities.

Ask for Assistance. If one is having problems with understanding certain words, expressions, or topics, the first step is to learn their meanings, otherwise this will always be an obstacle. As suggested by IP 2, if a student does not understand what other people are saying, they should seek help and not worry about asking for assistance:

I don’t worry about asking wrong questions. I think that will be something a lot of people would worry about. “Will this question sound stupid? People will laugh at
me.” I think you should not worry too much about asking dumb questions, that is another strategy…Don’t feel embarrassed if you ask dumb questions (IP 2, lines 502-506).

While publicly asking for an explanation might be too daunting for some individuals, QP 3 suggested that one can “discretely ask someone who they trust or know well to talk about it later on” (QP 3, Question 6). This suggestion was related to a personal experience: once, after being away from Canada for many years and unable to understand why other students laughed at a comment made by a classmate, QP 3 asked about the specific cultural reference in the comment and was directed to an online advertisement. After watching the advertisement, “the humour of the comment, delivery, and reference much more clearly” became apparent (QP 3, Question 6).

As noted earlier, once IP 5 was more comfortable asking her boyfriend questions, it was possible to learn a lot about the cultural references of the shared stories. IP 3 also addressed the importance of asking for explanations or clarification. Previously, when some idioms or key words were unclear, IP 3 “would pretend that [she] understood with a fake smile” (IP 3, line 348), but now felt more comfortable asking questions and seeking explanations. “For some topics, if you are not getting the meaning of the topic, or the key words, you may just lose the whole small talk” (IP 3, lines 350-352). This change is “a big success…because previously [she] was super nervous and felt embarrassed to ask people to stop to explain to [her]. But right now, [she is] braver” (IP 3, lines 354-356).

It is common for Chinese students to have problems understanding casual conversations in English, native speakers also have similar problems, so there is no need to be afraid to seek clarification. As noted by IP 2, “the new generation of international student has access to a lot of resources, like YouTube, social media. If there is something
they don’t understand, they can always search [for] it on the internet” (IP 2, lines 636-638).

Social Exposure. Another suggestion was to increase exposure to a wide variety of social activities and resources. The reason Chinese students were not familiar with certain words or expressions is that they have not seen or heard them before. Increasing their exposure to English resources in Canadian society will help them learn and become familiar with words and expressions used in daily life as well as the cultural connotations which form the basis of these expressions.

IP 5 would watch a movie every week to help improve listening skills, and IP 9 listened to the radio every day. IP 1 and IP 2 got information from social media to keep themselves up to date about what was happening in their community. There were also other methods to help those who have comprehension problems, but these two strategies were the most cited by the participants.

4.2 Participation

Figure 4.3

Participation: The Act of Joining or Taking Part in a Group Conversation
Eight of the ten Group A participants indicated they had experienced problems joining a casual conversation with a group of people, making it one of the challenges most cited. While there are many possible reasons for this problem, three common explanations emerged. In some situations, participants were unable to take part because they lacked the necessary background information or context of the conversation, which was usually a product of similar or shared experiences. At other times, although they understood the topic and wanted to join in, it took time to organize their ideas and when they finally felt ready to contribute, the conversation had already moved in another direction. Finally, on those occasions when they did have something ready to share, they did not know when to join in.

In this section, the participation problem will be examined from these three perspectives, the lack of background information or context, the time needed to organize ideas, and the inability to decide when to join a conversation.

4.2.1 Lack of Context

Unless they are the ones to initiate the conversation, or if the discussion is about Chinese related issues, a lack of background information or topical familiarity means that most Chinese students find themselves unable to take part in many casual conversations.

After studying and living in Canada for eight years and developing a level of comfort and confidence when making small talk with local people, IP 1 still found that “a lot of things they say, [she was] not familiar with, something they mentioned [she has] never heard of, [as a result, she] cannot be a part of that conversation” (IP 1, lines 122-124). IP 4 also admitted that “whenever the talk is background-based, [she] feel[s] it is hard to jump into it” (IP 4, lines 334-335).
Among the participants who acknowledged that they had problems participating in conversations with a group of people, IP 8 noted several reasons with the first being a lack of knowledge about context:

First of all, I am not familiar with the things they are talking about, for example, if they are talking about their kid’s kindergartens, schools, I have no idea what the school’s names are here, I don’t know where the schools are, I don’t know how big the schools are, I don’t have that kind of knowledge to engage in the conversation (IP 8, lines 207-210).

One time when a classmate mentioned going to the “boiler room” on the weekend, IP 8 was very confused until recognizing that Boiler Room was the name of a local rock-climbing club:

They said, “I went to the boiler room.” And you have no idea what they are talking about because you are still trying to understand “Oh, boiler? What is that?”…you don’t have the context knowledge to comprehend their conversation quickly enough to engage in their conversations. By the time you understand the Boiler Room is actually a place for rock climbing, they have already changed to another topic (IP 8, lines 214-220).

In this case, the participant eventually realized the meaning of the unfamiliar key phrase and could then understand the meaning of the conversation. However, in many other cases, such as the ones mentioned in the earlier section on Comprehension, most students were unable to understand the meaning or context of those unfamiliar words or expressions. As topics quickly changed and the conversation moved on, they usually did not have the opportunity to recognize and understand the terms or information they missed, which was the primary reason they did not participate.
4.2.2 At a Loss for Words

As English conversations are usually unfamiliar territory for most Chinese students, they are rarely able to respond or react spontaneously during many casual social interactions. Time will be needed, depending on the context of the conversation, to prepare a suitable comment in their non-native language before they feel able to join the discussion.

As noted by IP 8, “you just don’t have that set of language [skills] to engage in a conversation” (IP 8, line 158); non-native speakers need time to organize ideas in English:

I always do a lot of mental work in my brain to have the correct sentence ready in my brain before I talk with anyone. It takes time of course, and then you finally got that perfect sentence, everyone has already moved to the next topic. So, I missed a lot of opportunities [for] engaging in their conversations (IP 8, lines 149-153).

IP 3 needed time to interpret the conversation to Chinese first, and “when I tried to organize my expressions in my mind, they have already jumped to other topics” (IP 3, lines 82-83). IP 6 made a similar comment:

This happens to a lot of international students because their language is slow. While local people talk about things, they are still thinking about the last topic. Topics are moving on very quickly and they lose the timing. They cannot jump in because it is a different topic now (IP 6, lines 583-586).

Another potential problem was that native speakers may not have recognized this silence as an indication of language struggles among the Chinese students; as IP 8 noted, “they probably think you maybe don’t want to engage in discussion, maybe you are more like a cold person, rather than a normal, easy-going, out-going person” (IP 8, lines 154-156).
4.2.3 Taking Your Turn

Although knowing what to say was always a major challenge, knowing when to say it might be even more difficult. Even if they were confident with what they wanted to say and that it was still relevant, knowing when to “break-in” to the conversation was an ongoing problem, but perhaps not only for the Chinese participants. All the Group B questionnaire respondents admitted they too had similar experiences as native speakers, but QP 5 wrote, “I do notice that this is more often the case for Chinese students when I am in breakout rooms with them” (QP 5, Question 7).

Most interview participants felt it was easier to have one-on-one conversations than group discussions. IP 7 described an experience of having small talk online in a breakout room when attending an activity organized by the university. “I chatted with another student in a breakout room there and the talk was really smooth and interesting. Then a third student showed up and joined the talk. I found I cannot talk anymore” (IP 7, lines 493-495). The reason was in one-to-one conversations, “we each have some time to talk” (IP 7, lines 498-499), but in a group, “I don’t know when a good time is to talk…I don’t want to interrupt when they are talking but it seems they never really stop talking” (IP 7, lines 501-503).

Not knowing when to join in was mentioned as a problem by almost all interview participants. Nine of them admitted that they were not sure about the best time to join a conversation and very often they could not get a word in and had to let the topic pass. Being unable to share their ideas did not bother them, but they were afraid that other people who could not recognize or understand the problem would interpret their behaviour as stemming from unfriendliness or being unwilling to talk. IP 5 was upset
when a professor took marks away for not participating in class discussions. This participant worked hard in the course, was attentive in class, tried to comprehend what other students had to say and organize proper responses, but found there was no suitable opportunity to get a word in; “I was just being polite to wait for everyone to finish their talking and then this discussion was over, and I did not have the chance to participate” (IP 5, lines 462-463).

In the first four weeks of school life in Canada, IP 3 had similar problems deciding when to talk, and as a result, would only talk when others asked directly for an opinion.

When asked whether they had the same problems joining a conversation in Chinese, no participants thought this was an issue. IP 8 called this sense of knowing the right time to take part in a conversation as “intuition” (IP 8, line 235) and IP 7 had no problem jumping in a conversation in Chinese because one can tell whether people had finished talking “from their tone, meaning, or length of pause” (IP 7, lines 553-554), but was not so confident about the suitable time to join a conversation in English:

I have problems even if I have something to say. I am waiting for a silence. If there isn’t any silence, I would not say anything. I think I have tried several times to jump in…[when] they have finished one sentence, but I don’t know whether they have finished their talking or not. It is really difficult for me to jump in a discussion (IP 7, lines 545-550).

IP 1 asserted that this problem was caused by cultural differences because in Chinese culture people are told to wait until other people have finished talking. Several other participants agreed with this opinion. IP 6 claimed that “you don’t find it socially acceptable to interrupt others” (IP 6, lines 588-589) while IP 5 had a similar assessment:

I think in China, or in Asian culture, people will wait until others have finished talking. People won’t interrupt in Asian culture. In their culture that interruption is
very impolite behavior. But here, if you just wait for everyone to finish talking, you
don’t have the chance to talk (IP 5, lines 456-460).

For the Chinese students, it was not culturally acceptable to interrupt others in a
caration, but it was also not very easy for them to recognize when others have
finished speaking or concluded their train of thought. In contrast, four out of the eight
Group B questionnaire participants pointed out that jumping into a conversation was
acceptable in casual communication. QP 5 noted that “oftentimes, native English
speakers will jump in mid-sentence and interrupt each other to ask questions or add
commentary” (QP 5, Question 7), and also observed “I do notice that the Chinese
students tend to wait for long breaks to add their commentary” (QP 5, Question 7).
Sometimes this wait is understood as a sign of not wanting to participate in the
conversation rather than a common and polite practice from another culture.

4.2.4 Summary and Suggestions

The problems most often cited which hamper conversational participation were the
lack of familiarity with the topics being discussed, and, when this was not an issue, the
time needed for the Chinese students to organize their ideas in English and then find an
appropriate time to join the ongoing conversation. These three difficulties can ultimately
be traced back to issues with comprehension and expression caused by language barriers
and cultural differences related to interrupting or turn-taking.

Several suggestions were provided by both interview and questionnaire participants.
Two interview participants suggested strategies designed to help join a conversation, and
three questionnaire participants mentioned alternative practices to follow when Chinese
students have problems participating.
**Signal Your Intention.** Recognizing the problem and from personal observation, IP 2 noticed that many native speakers joined an ongoing conversation by giving some small or subtle hints:

Sometimes you want to jump in, you sort of make some noise in your throat. You say “uh” and then stop, people will notice. They will notice that you are trying to say something, but you are also trying to be considerate. You are not trying to interrupt them. You kind of make a gentle, subtle noise in a very natural way and people notice that. When they finish their little chat, they will get back to you and give you the opportunity to jump in (IP 2, lines 510-515).

If this approach did not succeed, another suggestion was to take advantage of gaps in the discussion:

…when you see people have the conversation, we see there are gaps, right? You can just jump in, you can say “Oh, wait, hold on a second, excuse me, I did not mean to interrupt you, but your topic is super interesting to me, can I ask what you mean by da da da?” You can just politely interrupt people, but also you show that you are so interested in their topics (IP 2, lines 522-526).

Another interview participant, IP 5, shared a different approach, but this suggestion was designed to delay the conversation to give students time to organize their thoughts. In this strategy, some fixed comments or interjections were prepared, and during a gap in the discussion these comments would be used to show interest and engagement, but this opportunity was also used to formulate appropriate thoughts and expressions in English:

…if you find the topic interesting while you are talking, you can say “Oh, in terms of your idea, I have [the] totally same idea with you”…When you are saying this, you have a few seconds to organize your idea. Actually, this sentence which helps you jump in, gives you time to organize your idea (IP 5, lines 487-491).
Circle Back on the Conversation. Three questionnaire participants indicated that if they had something to say they could steer the discussion back to an earlier topic if it was appropriate. QP 1 stated, “Sometimes I go back to a point we discussed before when there is a gap in conversations” (QP 1, Question 7), and QP 2 added, “Sometimes I would speak up to bring the conversation back to what I wanted to say (if I thought it was still relevant)” (QP 2, Question 7).

Similar sentiments were expressed by QP 4:

I think in the context of [E]ducation, everyone is friendly so after they changed topics, you could jump in and say “Wait, I am slow, but I want to try my English.” People would think it was funny and want to hear you (QP 4, Question 7).

If the students feel they had something to say and missed the opportunity to join in, they should develop the confidence to steer the conversation back to an earlier topic, but they need to judge whether doing this is appropriate.

Learn From Your Mistakes. One of the reasons the Chinese students gave for the long delays in organizing their ideas was that they felt the need to find a perfect way to express themselves. QP 3 felt this problem may be caused by “concern about breaking the flow of the conversation and also maybe about making a mistake” (QP 3, Question 7), and advised “treat[ing] casual conversation as a low-stakes opportunity to practice small talk” (QP 3, Question 7). As second language learners, Chinese students should expect to make mistakes, because “Even as a native English speaker I sometimes have bad small talk timing, or make a bad joke, or interrupt others” (QP 3, Question 7). This participant made an analogy between practising small talk and learning to dance – “If you want to learn to dance, you had better expect to step on a few toes in the process and to have the favour returned” (QP 3, Question 7).
4.3 Initiative

Figure 4.4

*Initiative: Taking the Lead to Start a Conversation*

Members of both the interview and questionnaire research groups agreed that Chinese students hesitated to make the first move when starting small talk in English. During the interviews, six Group A participants indicated they would seldom initiate a casual conversation if they did not have to, choosing silence instead while waiting for others to get things started. Although they were happy to make an effort to join a conversation initiated by others, they were also very cautious about introducing new topics, and especially concerned about their suitability.

IP 7, who had classes online, said, “I seldom greet people here, unless they greet me. Even in the Zoom class, I am the passive one. I would not initiate a conversation. I just respond to them” (IP 7, lines 510-511). This phenomenon was also noted by one of the questionnaire participants, QP 2, who stated Chinese classmates “rarely are the first to engage. It’s up to me to initiate the small talk. This shows me that the barrier to speaking with native speakers must be very high for most” (QP 2, Question 3).
In addition to problems starting conversations, the Chinese students were also hesitant to introduce new topics. Their concern primarily centred on suitability; were the topics appropriate, were they of interest to others, or would a new topic be seen as an interruption or intrusion on the conversation?

Several interview participants also referred to problems with initiative when wanting to make new friends. When invited to a party or given an opportunity to interact with local people in English, IP 9 would often avoid these events, citing various reasons such as a lack of confidence in English proficiency, unfamiliarity with common and popular topics, and their relatively shy and introverted personality.

In this study, initiative refers to the challenge faced by the Chinese students when starting a new conversation, introducing topics for discussion, or making an initial effort to meet new friends. As noted by the participants, the primary factors affecting their willingness to initiate small talk were usually tied to problems with unfamiliar topics, cultural differences, and a hesitancy to talk with strangers.

4.3.1 Safe Topics

“Having nothing to say” or “not knowing what to say”, the inability to find a suitable or appropriate topic, was the most common explanation the Chinese students gave for choosing not to start a conversation.

The reason IP 7 gave for not initiating a conversation when meeting people in the lobby of their apartment was not “know[ing] what to say” (IP 7, line 333), and went on to explain that this included not knowing appropriate topics to discuss or suitable English language expressions to use in these situations. IP 8 had similar experiences when completing a master’s degree program two years ago. Although meeting with the same
classmates every day, it was “…still [a] struggle trying to find a topic to start a conversation. So that was really, really, really hard” (IP 8, lines 142-143).

The problem with topics was also evident in their stated reluctance to introduce a new one during an ongoing conversation. IP 7 and IP 9 experienced similar awkward situations when making small talk with colleagues and neighbours. Every time IP 7 met a neighbour in the hallway or while waiting for an elevator in their apartment building, the only topic of conversation was the weather. When talking with colleagues, IP 9 had a similar experience; although they were all quite competent in English, they did not know “the deep-seated cultural issues very well” (IP 9, line 126). Therefore, they could only talk about superficial topics like weather:

I don’t know how to start a topic; I haven’t found the way yet. I am not very clear about it. Because every time I talk to people, I talk about the weather; how the weather is today, how the weather was yesterday, how the weather will be tomorrow. Really, I am always talking about weather; it is really hard (IP 9, lines 120-124).

Even when they had something to say, there were concerns about the acceptability of potential topics. IP 1, in the first years of study in Canada, was concerned about whether some topics were “appropriate for small talk with [local Canadians]” (IP 1, lines 352-353). Introducing boring topics worried IP 9, and IP 6 noted it would be awkward if you started a topic, and no one responded.

Finding a suitable topic was not only a problem for Chinese students, but their classmates were also careful to limit the talk to safe and common topics. IP 1 described small talk with classmates at the beginning of their studies as “awkward” (IP 1, line 199), with very limited content, “What’s your name? Where are you from” (IP 1, lines 200-201)? The others in the class did not know them, only that they were from another
culture, “They don’t want to say something to offend me” (IP 1, lines 202-203) and then “the conversation would just stop” (IP 1, line 203).

4.3.2 Cultural Differences

Cultural differences influence small talk in many ways. Beliefs about interpersonal relationships and about taking the lead also affect the way people interact with each other.

IP 10, who majored in cultural studies and had more opportunity to observe and contemplate cultural differences between China and western countries, compared the cultural beliefs about taking the initiative to do something and claimed that this was encouraged and rewarded in the west while in China it could be targeted and punished. As a result, most Chinese students tend not to take the initiative in making small talk:

In the western environment, the parents will teach their kids at a very early age… about the importance of leadership…In western universities and schools, you have to participate actively, and you have to talk frequently to earn credits for your class participation. So, I think it’s the environment that talking, speaking up and taking the lead are encouraged and also are rewarded… Their culture teaches them to take the lead. In China, it is quite opposite. I still remember there is a slang [saying] “枪打出头鸟” (shoot the bird which takes the lead). For instance, my parents often reminded me, “Don’t speak up easily; otherwise, you would get yourself into trouble.” If you are the first one among a group of people to say something, you might be more likely to get targeted and punished. Taking the initiative to do things will lead to something bad. I think this is a kind of mentality ingrained in our minds ever since we were kids (IP 10, lines 74-75, 78-86, 103-106).

IP 10 believed the western and Chinese cultural environments influence the way people talk and interact with each other. The Chinese environment tends to lead students not to take the initiative in unfamiliar settings, especially among a group of people or in a
Similar sentiments were stated by IP 1, “In China, I don’t want to be that person to speak out, and I don’t want to be the person to be different, I want to be the same as all my other peers…Here in Canada, you need to be different. People appreciate that you are different” (IP 1, lines 440-443).

Another participant, IP 2, also mentioned the issue of maintaining silence while sharing the same space. Chinese people usually do not talk to strangers, so it is perfectly acceptable for two Chinese people to share the same space in silence. However, the impression is that Canadians will usually try to break the silence:

I think in Chinese culture, it’s okay for strangers if they don’t talk to each other. That silence in the same space is okay. People can tolerate that. But I think in North America, including the US and Canada, if you are in the same space with another individual, if there is a silence, that silence is unbearable, it is just awkward. People want to break that silence (IP 2, lines 49-54).

Therefore, when an individual from a culture in which silence is the usual and acceptable practice is immersed in another where small talk, even among strangers, is more common, along with other cultural differences and language barriers, it can be expected they will face many social challenges.

4.3.3 Don’t Talk to Strangers

In practice, small talk may take place with close friends, occasional and new acquaintances, and complete strangers, therefore the interview participants were asked about their experiences making small talk with different groups of people. When asked whether they would initiate small talk with strangers, only two of them replied in the affirmative. Two participants admitted they would not initiate small talk with acquaintances either; IP 9 said “talking with an acquaintance who I don’t know very well
is strange to me” (IP 9, line 186), and IP 6 would wait to see if the other person would start the conversation. Two other participants, IP 1 and IP 8, stated that they would not engage in small talk with their friends because there was no need to do so.

The reasons not to initiate small talk with strangers were related to security issues, cultural differences, and personal attributes. For example, IP 1 said “I am from Beijing. It is a big city, and we all know strangers are dangerous” (IP 1, lines 103-104), and IP 7 agreed, “in China, I know whether it is safe…but here I don’t know” (IP 7, lines 245-246). IP 5 was told before coming to Canada that people here were very friendly, and strangers would greet each other; as a result, this interviewee was initially happy to randomly greet other people on the street but stopped the practice after being twice asked for money by strangers.

In addition, there were other personal reasons not to engage with strangers. For example, when asked about making small talk with strangers, IP 8 replied “No. Strangers, I don’t care about them” (IP 8, line 187), and IP 9 tried to avoid talking to strangers because “[She] didn’t know what to talk about...[she] also felt a little shy [and] didn’t speak English very well and was afraid of being looked down upon by others” (IP 9, line 147-148).

4.3.4 Summary and Suggestions

Although there were many times the Group A participants would have liked to make small talk with others, they were regularly challenged by their inability to initiate the conversation. Whether the cause was a personal reluctance to start a discussion or trouble with finding a suitable topic, the problem often left them feeling isolated from their classmates and neighbours and hindered their ability to meet and get to know new
friends. The interviews also revealed that while most Chinese students were hesitant to talk with strangers, they would start a conversation with acquaintances and friends if they could find a satisfactory way to get things going.

Both interview and questionnaire participants provided suggestions to help with initiating small talk. Several proposed that a good way to start a conversation was by asking questions, and wherever possible, take some time to become familiar with common and popular topics and other culturally important issues.

**Start With a Question.** This was suggested by interview participants IP 1 and IP 2, and questionnaire participants QP 2, QP 4 and QP 5. IP 2 shared an experience making small talk with a classmate who brought a service dog to class. After using questions to get the discussion started, they were able to have a good conversation, and eventually became friends:

I just asked her “This is such a nice dog. What is your dog’s name? How old is your dog?…How often do you walk your dog?…What kind of breed is this?… And also, I asked her how she got a service dog license for her dog…Even if you don’t know much about dogs, you can still go there and ask some very simple questions (IP 2, lines 317-321, 326-327).

In-depth topical knowledge is not always needed to start small talk, asking a question is always a good way to get things rolling, and in most cases, people will respond positively to a show of interest in a subject that may be obviously unfamiliar to an individual from a different background.

One part of the Group B questionnaire described a scenario in which a Chinese student only ever managed to discuss the winter weather with a neighbour when they ran into each other in the hallway of their apartment building. All Group B participants
acknowledged that they had similar experiences and most of them admitted that with some neighbours they did not have much to say and were happy to keep the relationship very superficial. Four members of this group also stressed that having nothing to say or not feeling like talking should not be a problem. If one wanted to start a conversation with a neighbour, though, asking a question could be a good start.

QP 5 suggested that in the situation described above, one should “ask what they are up to that day, which [academic] program they are in, what they do for a living, or whether they enjoy winter” (QP 5, Question 4). QP 4 also advised trying to find something in common and ask questions such as “What brought you to live in the building? Are you going to (the name of the university)? I’m looking forward to going to the [E]ducation potluck tomorrow. Are you in [E]ducation as well?…Where do you like to buy groceries? I see you look like you are going out for a walk. Where is your favourite place to go?” (QP 4, Question 4). Similarly, QP 2 stated, “I would make an observation about them (maybe their clothes, their apparent expression, what they are carrying) and ask a question, or make a compliment” (QP 2, Question 4).

**Join the Club.** The famous saying “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” suggests that newcomers should adapt themselves to the customs and habits of the places they visit, adopting the behaviour of those around them.

When asked about the usual topics for small talk in China and in Canada, the interview participants gave very different answers. In response to the problem with being unfamiliar with popular subjects in Canada, several interview participants suggested that Chinese students should develop a hobby related to or at least become familiar with
something local people are interested in. IP 2 suggested all international students should get to know more about the things local Canadians like to discuss:

One of the things the international students should do is to expand your repertoire of interest, you need to know a little bit about everything. You need to get to know a little bit about baseball, sports, pets, like dogs, cats…Get to know about some food, some music, movies, TV shows, something people talk about on [a] daily basis (IP 2, lines 301-305).

IP 9 suggested learning about popular culture, music, movies, TV shows and books, so when Chinese students talked with local Canadians, they could have some shared knowledge. IP 1 thought they should read local newspapers or watch local news to know what was happening in the community. Topics such as sports, pets, music, popular movies, and TV shows, are all common topics for small talk.

4.4 Confidence

Figure 4.5

*Confidence: A Feeling or Belief That One Can Do Something Well*

Some participants revealed that making small talk in English caused them to feel “nervous”, “afraid”, “fear”, “worried” and “uncomfortable”, sentiments that clearly indicate a lack of confidence in their ability to interact with others in their non-native language. The analysis indicated these feelings could be caused by language barriers,
either real or perceived, concerns about topical knowledge, or personal attributes. For example, some were not comfortable making small talk because they were self-conscious about linguistic expressions; some worried that they could not adequately manage the topics being discussed; and others felt nervous when making small talk because they were shy and rarely engaged in conversation with strangers or even casual acquaintances, especially in another language. One questionnaire participant, QP 4, also noticed this problem, pointing out, “a challenge might be that they were not confident in the conversation and apologized a lot” (QP 4, Question 3).

Only two interview participants always felt confident and comfortable making small talk with locals, whereas the others readily admitted they were not confident when they first started their studies in Canada. Although all members of this latter group noted they were making progress and gaining more confidence as language proficiency improved and they had more experience communicating in English, some were still nervous and sometimes even tried to avoid these interactions.

4.4.1 Language Barriers

Although these graduate students could be expected to have the necessary language skills for making small talk, language proficiency was the dominant factor affecting their confidence levels when given the opportunity to interact with members of the local community. One reason for this was the low personal perception of their language skills, and another possible reason, as first proposed by IP 8, was that some of them had very high language ego, which refers to the concept that one lacks confidence when using a non-native language to communicate (see p. 149 for more information on language ego).
Low personal perception of language levels was common; although their English skills were more than adequate, many worried about accents, grammar, or word choices. IP 1 described having these feelings early on:

When I first came here, my confidence level was very low, because I was worried that I was going to be the one that is different, I was going to be the one whose English was not 100 percent okay, I was going to be the one who spoke with a strong accent. I wasn’t confident by all means (IP 1, lines 461-464).

Even after graduating in Canada with a Bachelor of Education, then working as a primary school teacher, and pursuing a Master’s in Education, IP 1 was not “100 percent confident in [her] English…but still, constantly, I am thinking ‘Is my accent too strong? Can my students understand me? Am I saying it right?’” (IP 1, lines 75-78).

Several other participants also mentioned in their interviews that their English was “not so good” (IP 9, line 303), “poor” (IP 3, line 179), or “not as good” (IP 1, line 352). IP 10, as the only Chinese student in a class of mostly native English-speaking Canadians, lacked the confidence to use English when surrounded by native speakers, “At the beginning, there was indeed such a sense of inferiority. I also felt that I didn’t express anything too well. When you listen to others, you will reflect on yourself and question yourself, ‘Are you speaking English?’” (IP 10, lines 174-177). Another concern was being understood; “I am [also] worried that if people can’t understand me, I feel more inferior, and I don’t want to talk” (IP 10, lines 185-186). IP 8 had considerable problems with small talk in the first year of studies in Canada because “[she] was not so confident in speaking English, so [she] of course had a lot of problems in even having the easiest, the most common interactions, like daily greetings with them” (IP 8, lines 138-140).
One of the direct results of low confidence levels in language proficiency was that these students would avoid conversations in English. After finishing an undergraduate education in China, IP 5 had a difficult first year in Canada at the start of a language preparation program due to a lack of confidence, and recalled, “sometimes I went to Tim Horton’s, I just wrote down what I wanted and showed it to them, or I typed on my phone and showed them…so, I barely talked, let alone small talk” (IP 5, lines 265-267).

Following several years of studying in Canada, and after completing one master’s degree and working towards another, a lack of confidence continued to be an issue:

Even now I am still afraid of ordering food in a restaurant…I always ask my husband to do that job. My husband said to me, “Hey, your English is good enough to order food in restaurants”, but I am still afraid of that. Sometimes I feel that I cannot understand them and they also have a problem understanding me (IP 5, lines 538-539, 544-547).

In a similar way, IP 6 tried to avoid talking with cashiers when shopping at grocery stores, “[when] facing a local cashier…who knows what they are going to say. What if I don’t understand? I would just worry about that embarrassment, grab things and go away” (IP 6, lines 272-275).

QP 4 pointed out that one challenge for Chinese students might be a lack of confidence and described the following experience:

Once when I met a student, she was nervous talking to me and I felt she wanted to shy away from the conversation because she felt her language wasn’t good enough. I understand how hard it is in another language, so I encouraged her to stay and chat with me and that, actually, her English was good (QP 4, Question 3).

QP 2 made a similar observation, “even if I’m keen on speaking more with them, they seem eager to terminate the conversation because either they can’t quite follow what
I’m saying, or they are embarrassed about their voice/accent/language ability” (QP 2, Question 3).

Lack of confidence in language proficiency was also demonstrated by ongoing self-correction when speaking in English. For IP 5, this became automatic when talking with professors and classmates, for example, “Oh, sorry, I mean I have, not has” (IP 5, lines 337-338). This happened so often that one professor tried to provide reassurance, “We can understand…[what] you are saying. You don’t have to feel sorry or apologize for such little grammatical mistakes” (IP 5, lines 340-341).

In addition to self-correction, many participants would later reflect on or have second thoughts about what they said earlier. After talking to others in English, IP 5 would often look back on the conversation, “In this case, I should have used ‘has’ not ‘had’. In this case, I should have used ‘were’ not ‘was’” (IP 5, lines 334-335). IP 7 also engaged in self-reflection after almost every interaction, especially when communication with others was unsuccessful.

As mentioned above, IP 8 referred to the concept of language ego, and self-identified as a learner with high language ego:

…people have different language egos. Those with lower language ego, they are not afraid of making mistakes. They just say it even though sometimes they use gestures; they ask for help. Whereas, for me, and people like me, we don’t want to do that, we don’t feel comfortable showing others that we are weak in this language. You don’t want to make mistakes (IP 8, lines 166-170).

As an example, IP 8 shared an experience from the first year in Canada. During a conversation this participant repeated a classmate’s comment by starting “She thinks…”
and went on to complete the statement; when another classmate repeated the words “She thinks” several times in an unusual or questioning tone, self-doubt started to creep in:

[The other classmate] didn’t say much, but I don’t understand [why he repeated those words]. I felt very uncomfortable because I thought I said something wrong…I was worried. “Did I make a mistake? should I say, ‘she thought’? Is ‘thinks’ the right form in that case? Or should it be ‘thought’?”…it has been in my mind for a long time…I felt awkward back then. I did not speak after that, I just kept thinking (IP 8, lines 427-433).

Although the statement structure used was both acceptable and understandable, a lack of confidence created doubt about the proper use of English expressions. After telling this story, IP 8 added, “there are other cases that I had second thoughts about the words I used in my sentences, because I am not sure if I have used the correct word” (IP 8, lines 434-435).

To sum up, a lack of confidence in their capacity to engage in small talk, generally caused by language barriers, meant that some participants had ongoing doubts about the proper use of English expressions. This caused constant reflection, attempts to correct perceived errors, and in many situations, efforts to avoid interactions in English whenever possible.

4.4.2 Topical Knowledge

Another factor which influenced confidence levels among Chinese students when making small talk in English was a lack of topical knowledge. While some were not sure about common subjects to discuss, there was also apprehension about which topics were appropriate, and concerns about how to respond when a conversation was totally unfamiliar.
Not knowing what to say or not knowing safe or appropriate topics was a great concern for interview participants and this negatively influenced their confidence and comfort levels when making small talk. When asked to identify any problems starting a casual conversation, IP 1 responded, “right now I don’t think it is hard for me, but before it definitely was, because I wasn’t confident. My English was not as good, and I worried whether this topic is appropriate for small talk with [local Canadians]” (IP 1, lines 351-353). When asked the same question, IP 7 replied, “I am nervous about talking. The more I think about what I should say, the more nervous I become” (IP 7, lines 59-60), and “I don’t want to start a conversation because I have problems starting a conversation” (IP 7, lines 523-524).

When first coming to Canada, IP 9 was bothered by the same problem; “At that time, I could not even open my mouth to talk…Even if I wanted to chat with people, I did not know what topics I should talk about” (IP 9, lines 84-88). Although starting a conversation was less challenging now, the selection of topics was still limited, and it was common to quickly run out of things to say:

I feel that I am always having awkward conversations with people. I can only manage a couple of rounds of exchanges about each topic, and then I feel I cannot carry on…I don’t know what else I can say, and how I can keep the talk going (IP 9, lines 90-93).

Thinking of something to talk about with colleagues at work was a heavy burden, “Every day I have to think very hard about what to talk about today. It is difficult for me” (IP 9, lines 334-335).

As mentioned above, IP 6 would refrain from talking to cashiers in the grocery store because of worries about comprehension, “When I am facing local people, I fear that I
don’t understand their expressions, I fear that they may throw some topics that I am not familiar with, so I don’t have the confidence to say anything” (IP 6, lines 265-268).

However, when visiting a convenience store managed by immigrants, there was no problem talking to the cashiers because of the belief that these individuals, also with limited language proficiency, would not be likely to introduce topics that could be challenging. IP 6 said, “I feel very comfortable starting a conversation [with immigrant cashiers]. It is all about the confidence” (IP 6, lines 271-272). When feeling “more familiar with topics” (IP 6, line 481), confidence levels are boosted, and IP 6 would be “comfortable making conversations” (IP 6, line 326) in these circumstances.

Knowing the topics and dynamics of casual conversations in Chinese can give the participants more confidence to jump in during a group discussion. IP 7 was confident joining a conversation in Chinese because it was easy to know when others have finished speaking. In a group discussion in Chinese, IP 8 could quickly pick up what other people were talking about and add a few more words but had no confidence attempting this in English because the topics were generally not as familiar.

Being unfamiliar with topical knowledge exerted extra pressure on these students, making them more nervous, uncertain, and uncomfortable with small talk in English.

4.4.3 Personal Attributes

In this study, linguistic and cultural factors have been identified as primary causes for challenges in making small talk. Personality, recognized as an equally important factor, has not been fully explored because it belongs to another field of study which is too broad to be covered here comprehensively. However, personal attributes were one of
the three most cited reasons for the challenges encountered by participants, therefore, this factor is also briefly included in this section.

From the interviews, it was apparent that those who identified themselves as “outgoing” (IP 4, line 173), “easygoing” (IP 10, line 64), a “people person” (IP 2, line 450), and a “chatterbox” (IP 10, line 249), were generally more confident and less challenged when engaging in social interactions; those who described themselves as “shy” (IP 9, line 400), “cold” (IP 8, line 536), and “introverted” (IP 3, line 405; and IP 5, line 96) were less confident and encountered more incidents that caused them trouble.

After studying and living in Canada for different periods of time, all participants felt they were making progress and gaining greater confidence as their language proficiency improved and they were more exposed to social activities and had more experience communicating in the Canadian community.

Three participants behaved consistently in their social interactions whether they were in China or in Canada. IP 1, IP 2, and IP 4 claimed they had similar levels of social interaction in their daily life in either country and were all confident and comfortable making small talk with local Canadians at the time of the interview.

IP 6 felt more confident now than when younger, and anticipated being even more confident in future:

When I came to Canada, I had to do many things on my own, and I became more independent… I feel more confident in general. So, when you are more confident, you are not that shy, and you are comfortable making conversations with people around you… I think this confidence will grow more and more in the future… I can only have more exposure to things around me (IP 6, lines 323-327, 482-484).
Four participants, IP 3, IP 5, IP 8, and IP 10 said they were learning and making progress and felt much more confident than when they first came to Canada.

IP 7 and IP 9 indicated they still struggled with confidence, making small talk left them feeling awkward and embarrassed, and they sometimes tried to avoid social interactions. When invited by a friend to a party with both Canadian and Chinese guests, IP 9 worried about the potential for embarrassment if unable to interact successfully with others and turned down the invitation. IP 7 always went to online classes and activities right on time to avoid uncomfortable opportunities for social interaction:

Because it really made me very embarrassed. I don’t know what to say when other people are talking around [me]…I cannot open up a topic. When they are talking about something, I don’t know how to participate in their discussion, and I don’t know when the appropriate time is and how to cut in the conversation. So, I always feel embarrassed (IP 7, lines 89-95).

This lack of confidence, combined with other problems related to participation, initiative, and propriety, made small talk a great challenge. This participant added, “I don’t even want to participate in any extracurricular activities because of…this psychological state” (IP 7, lines 97-98). The reason for this anxiety was overconcern about the judgment of others, and IP 7 often felt embarrassed when reflecting on perceived errors in earlier conversations. IP 9 also expressed feeling a similar psychological burden when interacting socially with local Canadians:

Sometimes I also felt a little shy. Also, I didn’t speak English very well and was afraid of being looked down upon by others…I have this very heavy psychological burden. With all this burden in mind, I did not actively take this step [to talk to locals] (IP 9, line 147-153).
4.4.4 Summary and Suggestions

Although their English proficiency was more than adequate to allow them to engage in social interactions at various levels, an enduring lack of confidence aroused significant levels of anxiety when opportunities for small talk in English presented themselves; perhaps they could not understand, be understood, or find a suitable way to respond. Another problem was they were not familiar with some of the topics being discussed, so they felt stress either because they could not fully understand what was going on or because they felt excluded from the conversation. Furthermore, personal attributes played an important role in determining individual confidence levels. Some were more self-conscious about the judgement of others, a burden which caused them to avoid social interactions whenever possible.

Members of both the interview and questionnaire participant groups provided suggestions to help increase confidence levels among Chinese students when making small talk with their Canadian peers and other community members. In response to the language barrier issue, the common suggestion was to improve language proficiency, including both listening and speaking skills.

Promote Your Proficiency. As one of the participants who was very confident and comfortable making small talk with locals, IP 2 claimed to be well prepared before coming to Canada in terms of language proficiency and cultural awareness; “your English language proficiency will give you a lot of confidence. You know how to talk, you know how to speak, this will give you a lot of confidence” (IP 2, lines 247-249).

Questionnaire participants also emphasized the importance of spoken English proficiency. As QP 2 noted:
Seriously, spoken English proficiency is the Key. All of the other things that programs/people profess to help - understanding Canadian culture, interests, fighting discrimination, dealing with anxiety, etc... are MUCH more effective when you have the basic foundation of being confident and competent in verbally expressing yourself in the target language (QP 2, Question 9).

Change Your Mindset. There are many ways of thinking that should be modified to allow Chinese students to be more confident. First, do not be afraid of being different. At the beginning of this section, IP 1 mentioned that when first starting classes, being different from the majority of classmates led to a lack of confidence. “When I first started here, I always feel people judged me, like they are judging my English, they are judging my appearance, judging the way I talk” (IP 1, lines 429-431). However, after spending more time among these classmates and others in the community, it became apparent that it was acceptable to be different, and that most Canadians do not judge others:

…most Canadians are very open-minded to a new culture…So, we realize that being different is actually not a fault…Here in Canada, you need to be different. People appreciate that you are different…No one will judge you if you are different. And it is a good thing to be different. It is boring that everyone is the same (IP 1, lines 431-445).

Second, you do not have to speak perfect English. IP 8 suggested that Chinese students should not feel embarrassed if they made mistakes:

More mistakes you make, the better…if you make those mistakes during a conversation, it is much better than if you make these mistakes during an exam or during the study of this language, because you have the genuine speaking environment for you to make mistakes (IP 8, lines 583-586).

IP 8 also felt that these mistakes contributed to the evolution of English and gave the following example, “… in the United States, the African Americans are developing their
unique way of speaking English. They don’t say ‘What’s up?’, they say ‘What up?’. They have all those ways of making their version of English” (IP 8, lines 588-590). Chinese students should have their own version of English, “Don’t feel awkward about our mistakes, feeling inferior, feeling that we are not as good as the other non-native speakers…We can make our Chinese version of English more accepted by others” (IP 8, lines 591-595).

Third, being quiet is not a problem; speak only when you want to. IP 2 likes talking, but also said this did not necessarily mean talking a lot. “You have to understand that it is not about [whether] you talk a lot. The more is not necessarily better” (IP 2, lines 98-99). When IP 2 did not want to talk, or was not interested, or felt it was not a good time for talking, there was no problem being quiet.

When responding to the scenarios presented in the questionnaire, QP 2, as a native English speaker, indicated there were also many occasions when there was nothing to say or no desire to join a conversation, and stated “The difference is I don’t feel anxiety about not speaking with them – I’m at ease with not needing/wanting to communicate any further” (QP 2, Question 4). Another questionnaire participant, QP 8 shared a similar experience and added:

Having nothing to talk about is because you do not know the person well to know any topics that you might have in common; …My suggestion is not to worry, this is a common situation, if you can think of something to say try to do that, but if not, it doesn’t matter (QP 8, Question 4).
4.5 Social Connections

Figure 4.6

*Social Connections: A Feeling of Being Close and Connected to Others*

Social connections are important for personal emotional wellness and they are recognized as one of the core human needs and form the basis for interpersonal relationships. Small talk can be considered the icebreaker or starting point for people to get to know each other and serves to open the door for further social connection. However, when describing their experiences using small talk to make social connections with local Canadians, many members of *Group A* said it was not easy.

When asked whether they have made any meaningful connections with locals, two of them indicated they now have families with Canadian partners and three reported they have made good friends; of this latter group, one has developed a relationship with a neighbour and another has become close to a mentor from university, but these were the only real friendships the two had formed. The other members of *Group A* were not as successful in making social connections. Two participants said their only new friends were other international students, and three indicated they have not made any friends during their time in Canada and almost did not socialize at all.
IP 4 had the feeling that in Canada, small talk was the starting point for friendship or closer connections, but usually these interactions were superficial and did not lead to closer relationships. IP 5 had no social interactions with other people outside their family, and said, “I don’t know if I abandoned social or social abandoned me. It is just…not in my world” (IP 5, lines 194-195). IP 8 signed up for the mentor-mentee program at university when first enrolling, and still had biweekly online meetings with the mentor. If not for the mentor, this participant, who lived alone and had completed all the required academic coursework, would have had no social interactions at all. Two other participants, IP 7 and IP 9, both noted they did not have many opportunities to meet, talk, or socialize with others in Canada.

The interview participants identified the following three issues as key challenges they faced when trying to develop social connections.

First, they did not have frequent contact with their peers. Students usually only meet with their classmates once a week for class or on a few other occasions for certain events, and there is no reason for them to interact with strangers or casual acquaintances very often.

Second, outside of their course work, they generally lacked a basis for mutual interests with local students, nor did they share much common ground with other members of their communities. Therefore, communication tended to remain superficial, and some participants reported only discussing the weather whenever they meet with others.

Third, Chinese students often felt confused about the nature of interpersonal relationships in a new culture. They realized there were differences between cultural
norms in China and in Canada, but they found it difficult to pinpoint a definitive rule to follow when trying to make connections with people. Therefore, especially in their early years in Canada, they found themselves learning by observing and testing.

4.5.1 Lack of Contact

To make certain that their challenges with social interactions were not solely caused by personal attributes, all interview participants were asked to compare the frequency of making small talk in both China and Canada, where a rank of one is very seldom and ten is very often. Three of them said it was the same or similar; for example, IP 4, who likes talking and could talk to anyone, rated the frequency as eight out of ten for both countries, and IP 1 and IP 2, who did not give an exact rate, said the frequency in both languages and places was similar. Six participants gave much lower scores for social interaction in English; for example, both IP 7 and IP 9 rated eight for small talk in China and only two for Canada. IP 6, being at different ages and stages of life in each location, said it was not fair to compare.

When asked about the reasons for the differences in small talk frequency between the two countries, the most common response was that they did not have steady contact with local people in Canada. As IP 9 noted, “To be honest, I don’t have many opportunities to meet local people other than two colleagues in my office” (IP 9, lines 235-236). IP 7 had all courses online and did not attend other activities or events organized by the university, and, during the more serious stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, did not venture outdoors unnecessarily for several months; having no contact with others, it was impossible to make friends in Canada.

I have very limited opportunities to socialize with local people. I don’t know many local people. I don’t see many people here…[and] seldom have deep conversations
with local people here. If you don’t talk to people, how can you make friends? You don’t study together, you don’t work together, you don’t have conversations, how can you make friends? (IP 7, lines 215-216, 224-226).

A similar explanation was offered by IP 10, “in Canada, I am not familiar with the place and the people, and there are fewer Canadians in terms of population, so you have fewer opportunities to chat” (IP 10, lines 398-400). All the best friendships were with international students because their social circle did not provide opportunities for frequent contact with local Canadians. IP 8 also found it difficult to develop closer connections with peers, “you don’t get a chance to stay with them, have a cup of coffee…and then just talk casually about their life. So, you miss that kind of opportunity [to] build closer relationships with them” (IP 8, lines 124-127).

IP 3 shared a similar opinion on the lack of small talk in Canada and the difficulty with making friends among classmates:

For the classmates, the time we are together is short…We may only approach to each other less than thirty minutes each time. Every week, only thirty minutes, it is not that easy to have small talk and build friendship, especially between international and domestic students (IP 3, lines 328-332).

In contrast, there were always more opportunities to engage in casual communication in China, as noted by IP 8:

Although I am not that outgoing, because we all live in a big dormitory, you just…see your peers naturally. It is not like when you finish class, everyone is gone…which is the case in Canada. But in China, you finish your class, you go back to your dorms. You live together, you eat together, and you do everything together, so it is impossible for you to have no small talk with them (IP 8, lines 272-277).

Comparing school life in Chinese and Canadian universities, IP 3 said:
Compared to now, at that time [in a Chinese university] we lived together, went to [the] canteen together, went to class together and we are together almost 75% time of a day. But here in Canada, we are living outside of the university. We don’t cook and eat together, and we have fewer courses, and people are more mature, and there is [sic] cultural background differences, which make us have a little bit [of] distance (IP 3, lines 266-271).

IP 6 thought it was hard not only for Chinese students, but also international students and even local students to find friends in the Canadian university community because the school environment did not create many opportunities for students to make connections. In Chinese universities, students tend to associate with their classmates for many years, and there is time and opportunity to develop common experiences and mutual understanding. In Canada, students usually disperse after class, back to their families, off to work, or elsewhere, and there are limited chances to socialize with classmates.

4.5.2 Lack of Common Ground

People usually become friends or build closer relationships because they have something in common or share similar interests or experiences. IP 2 believed that “common interests or common experiences” (IP 2, lines 297-298) were essential to develop connections with others. However, Chinese students sometimes struggled to develop common ground with people they met in Canada.

When studying in the undergraduate program, IP 1 felt socially awkward and found it hard to make social connections:

…I just came to Canada; I didn’t know anyone here; I didn’t have a family here; no friends; my English was not as good as now. Most friends back then were from China. I found it was very difficult for me to make connections with the Canadian community…because we don’t have the same culture, it is hard to make close connections (IP 1, lines 69-72, 95).
Although IP 4 was very outgoing and could talk to almost anyone, there were also problems making small talk with people who did not “share any common topics” (IP 4, line 175), “You need to have the shared ground or shared point to start the conversation” (IP 4, lines 176-177). Although small talk with local people in the community was going well, IP 4 found it difficult to build “concrete relationships” (IP 4, line 449) with others because they did not have much in common.

IP 8 found there were limited opportunities to get to know classmates and build common ground with them, “They have a life, they have jobs, they have a very big part of life outside their classroom experience. What I have in common with them is only the classroom” (IP 8, lines 119-121). What they all shared was only a very small portion of their daily activities, so there was a very slim possibility to build connections.

Another difference between Chinese and Canadian universities was described by IP 3 who said, “in China, we are all full-time students, and we are at the similar age, we have more similar feelings and don’t have [a] generation gap” (IP 3, lines 412-414). But in Canada, “some classmates are thirty or twenty years older than me, and some of them are doing this part time” (IP 3, lines 417-418). In addition to the age difference, many of them already knew other classmates from previous courses, “they have already built friendships or connections with some other classmates. It is reasonable that people tend to talk to their friends but not strangers” (IP 3, lines 419-421). Similarly, IP 4 also agreed that a similar background was important to make closer connections, “If at the very beginning everyone in this group is from the similar background, it is easier for everyone…It will be easier for them to get into that close relationship” (IP 4, lines 249-252).
4.5.3 Puzzling Social Practice

Many of the Group A participants have been in Canada for a long time and their English was more than adequate to make casual conversations, but they still did not feel a connection with Canadian society. IP 1 had some friends who have lived in Canada for more than ten years and were fluent in English yet were still not integrated in their Canadian communities. IP 9 also knew people who lived in a concentrated Chinese community so they could avoid interaction with local Canadians. Many of the study participants said they were willing and wanted to make social connections in their communities but were not sure how to accomplish this goal in Canada.

All participants admitted that Canadians were friendly, but this friendliness had not helped the Chinese students develop relationships with others. As IP 6 said, “They may say local students are very friendly. When [they] talk to some people, they have so much to say, so much to share, but eventually they don’t end up making friends” (IP 6, lines 160-162). IP 10 also shared a similar opinion, noting that local Canadians were mostly very friendly, even to strangers, “but this does not mean that they want to know you in depth and make friends with you” (IP 10, lines 340-341); “You can only become general acquaintances. Canadians are famously nice and friendly, and they don’t like conflicts with others, especially in small talk…Canadians [hold] themselves aloof” (IP 10, lines 348-352). They were friendly but distant; great conversations with Canadian peers were possible, but after the conversation was over, they had no further contact.

Although claiming to be an outgoing and easygoing person who could talk to anyone, in the first year in Canada, the only local friend IP 4 made was a neighbour who shared a common fence. When in China, after a good discussion with others, they usually
exchanged contact information, and perhaps later would meet for meals or share invitations to visit each other when they became better acquainted. IP 4 had this to say about small talk and social interactions in Canada:

…after I have the small talk and then I go back home, and then never get the chance to meet that person again. So, the small talk does not necessarily turn into a long-term relationship…the difference here is you never get into a close relationship. You talk, what’s next? Are we going to barbeque together? Are we going to have a picnic together? I think that is the difference between foreigner-local and local-local who share more things in common (IP 4, lines 199-201, 282-285).

Most participants agreed that small talk was the “starting point” (IP 4, line 287) which “opens doors for a possibility that you may potentially develop some sort of deep relationship” (IP 2, lines 382-383), but they were not sure what comes next. Very often, after they finished a very pleasant conversation, they may never see that person again. Or, in the other extreme, they may see someone very often, but only talk about the weather. Neither situation leads them to a real relationship.

### 4.5.4 Summary and Suggestions

The Chinese students interviewed for this study recognized that their primary challenge making social connections originated from a lack of frequent contact with their Canadian peers. Compared with the situation in Chinese universities, where many students studied together on a daily basis for several years, they found this intermittent interaction made it even more difficult to build on shared experiences and to develop mutual interests and understanding, or to learn common social practices for making friends.
Both interview and questionnaire participants gave very detailed and practical suggestions designed to try and help solve these problems. These included evaluating the situation, following up on a familiar topic, and being patient and gentle with yourself.

**Evaluate the Situation.** It is impossible to make friends with everyone, and there is no need to talk in every situation. That was why IP 2 regularly used the word “evaluate” during the interview, and provided this advice:

…you need to evaluate the situation. If that person does not really want to have a conversation, just…talk a little bit. But if that person is still interested, asking you tons of questions…and you think that person is interested, I think you can keep talking, keep the conversation going (IP 2, lines 400-404).

If the conversation went well, and one wanted to build a friendship with this person, IP 2 also gave some suggestions about follow-up invitations:

[You can say] “I really like to talk to you, maybe we can have another conversation”; “Maybe we can take a walk together some day on campus or do something together.” Or maybe that person loves Chinese food, [you can say,] “Oh, I love cooking. I cook fantastic Chinese food. How about this, I cook something, and I invite you over for some authentic Chinese food?” (IP 2, lines 404-408).

If the person was interested you would have the opportunity to get to know more about each other, “you will get connected through food, through conversations, and develop a deeper relationship” (IP 2, lines 411-412).

Both IP 1 and IP 2 indicated they would evaluate the situation to decide whether they should initiate small talk with others based on body language, facial expressions, and tones. IP 2 outlined some of the factors to consider when evaluating the situation, “the bigger factors, like culture in that setting, and the culture of that organization or
university…how much you know about the person, people’s expectations and facial expressions” (IP 2, lines 202-205).

In the questionnaire, one scenario described a situation where a narrator only talked about the weather for several months with a neighbour and felt unable to make a closer connection. All respondents noted they had similar experiences, and some admitted wanting to keep the conversations superficial and not make deeper connections, while recognizing their neighbours likely felt the same way. Therefore, there was a need to evaluate the likelihood of a closer connection based on the behaviour of the other individual.

Follow the Familiar. Small talk in Canada usually starts with greetings and a quick exchange on the weather or the health or well-being of the speakers. How does one move from general and limited topics, such as these, to something which may lead to a more in-depth conversation? QP 1 suggested that it should be helpful to follow-up on something you may know about this person, perhaps from a previous encounter, which would give you a more meaningful topic to discuss:

One thing that helps small talk with neighbours is remembering one thing about a person that you can continue to follow up on. For an example, ask about their family and then you can follow up on something specific - like if you find out that your neighbour just became an aunt, you can continue to follow up by asking more specific questions about how their sister and niece are doing when you see them (QP 1, Question 4).

QP 1 also provided a specific example for moving from the entry level topic of weather to the follow-up issue, “it’s baby’s first winter - how is your niece transitioning to the colder weather” (QP 1, Question 4)?
IP 1, IP 6, and IP 9 also referred to the same strategy. For example, IP 1 asked a co-worker about one child’s hockey game and IP 9 asked about a colleague’s party the past weekend. The key was to progress from general topics to something more specific. During this time, one needs to evaluate whether the other side is comfortable with these topics by observing their reactions and responses to determine their level of mutual interest.

**Be Patient with Yourself.** During the interviews, participants who felt comfortable and confident making small talk were questioned on the length of time they needed to become comfortable or relatively more comfortable engaging in this activity. The answer varied; IP 2 and IP 4, who both had previous experience studying and working in the US, felt it took them little time but agreed there were some problems in the beginning. Most other participants said it could take a long time depending on language proficiency, personality, and their willingness to integrate into a new culture.

As IP 2 mentioned, “if you want to develop a deeper connection with another individual, it takes time and effort. It’s a commitment. It is not something like you have some kind of small talk you get to know that person” (IP 2, lines 373-375). The message was that Chinese students should be more patient with this learning process. When things did not work out as expected, “be more gentle to yourself” (IP 2, line 615), and do not hold a negative view about yourself. IP 2 added, “sometimes we are very harsh to ourselves. We always think we have to do this. If we cannot do it, we feel we are stupid. If you talk to yourself in that negative way, you may never make friends” (IP 2, lines 615-617).
IP 3 suggested that Chinese students need to “be patient…sometimes you cannot be too ambitious in this problem. Maybe you just need time to expose yourself to different circumstances, to more small talk, and to more Canadian culture…So, leave it to time” (IP 3, lines 470-474).

A similar sentiment was offered by QP 1:

Although their cultural and language difficulties impact Chinese and other international students, I think it’s also important to know that even native English speakers struggle with small talk and making those social connections. Being social takes a lot of practice and time. When things get challenging try and remember that you are not alone in that awkward feeling and uncertainty. Take things one step at a time (QP 1, Question 8).

4.6 Propriety

Figure 4.7

Propriety: The Suitability or Appropriateness of Words or Behaviour

Coming from another culture, Chinese students are very cognizant of cultural differences, which heightens their concern about the appropriateness of what they say and makes them cautious about their behaviour when interacting with others. However, many have only been exposed to foreign cultural norms or taboos through books or online social media, so they are generally uncertain what is appropriate in specific situations.
This is especially true when the situation is new, and the fear of failure or embarrassment reinforces psychological barriers which interfere with social interaction.

This can make small talk challenging because “different people may have different comfort levels with privacy…[and] different cultures also have different social rules about how personal we can get with our questions” (QP 3, Question 5). In addition, the personalities of those in the conversation matter because they “will produce different ‘chemical’ reactions if they are combined together” (IP 10, lines 370-371). These factors also complicate the issue.

In terms of propriety, the main challenges were related to the cross-cultural awareness of these students. They have learned or know some of the taboos or rules which govern social interactions in their new environment, so they remind themselves to be careful when connecting with others. As they learn more about cultural differences and social customs, they felt greater pressure to choose appropriate topics for discussion or when deciding how to respond to others.

In this section, challenges related to the issue of propriety will be examined from two perspectives, proper topics and proper responses.

4.6.1 Proper Topics

Several interview participants noted they were familiar with many of the cultural differences before they came to Canada. As a result, they often felt they had to think twice about the suitability of certain comments or topics when engaged in conversation with local people. In China, IP 7 taught a course related to intercultural communication and this helped with understanding many of the cultural differences and taboos in English-speaking countries:
I gave my students lots of examples from the book about intercultural barriers. I can still remember a lot of things. When I am thinking of something to say, I will always refer to what I learned to think whether it is appropriate to talk about a topic. I think there is a cultural barrier, and I am a little alert about that (IP 7, lines 402-406).

The topics in Chinese small talk can be very personal, almost “anything and everything” (IP 1, line 118). When Chinese students were talking to local Canadians in English, they felt the need to be very careful not to say anything that could be offensive or a violation of privacy. IP 5 compared topics for small talk in China and Canada, and concluded that in Chinese small talk, people talked more about personal issues:

When people meet each other for the first time, they always ask “How old are you? Which university did you graduate from? Are you the only child?” Some questions are very easily prompted like this (IP 5, lines 68-70).

Similarly, IP 1 compared topics for small talk, and claimed that in China it was culturally acceptable to ask about personal issues like income or marriage, which was not the case in Canada:

I don’t find people here talk about their personal life in the small talk. It’s definitely not as personal as in China, because they don’t want to be nosy, even though they really want to know your private life, they won’t ask. But in China it is culturally accepted to ask how much they earn, why she or he is single, but in Canada, these are not talked about (IP 1, lines 146-149).

The words “appropriate” and “suitable” appeared with very high frequency in the transcript from the interview with IP 7. In Chinese, conversations with colleagues or friends about trivial personal matters, including complaints about husbands and children, were quite acceptable, but in Canada, care is taken to avoid topics about family or personal life:
I even don’t dare to ask [about topics related to family]. I don’t know whether it is appropriate to talk about family here in Canada…I don’t want to open the conversation about this topic (IP 7, lines 302-306).

The reason for this concern was a general awareness of cultural differences and social rules in English-speaking countries, many of which were learned from books and online:

I was not raised in this culture, I am not familiar with it, or I have little connection or associations to local people here. With limited experience associating with local people here, I even don’t know whether it is right or wrong to say certain things (IP 7, lines 579-582).

As a result, all casual communication remains superficial; only the weather was discussed with a neighbour when they met, even after many months, “I don’t want the conversation to go too deep to make others feel that I am probing into their personal affairs. So, I only have superficial talks, like ‘it is so cold’” (IP 7, lines 424-426).

Another participant, IP 9, also only discussed the weather with office colleagues. In China, when seeking to make friends, a topic of possible common interest would be introduced in an attempt to engage others, but this would not be done in Canada because there are many taboos in cross-cultural communication:

For example, [in China] if you see someone in beautiful clothes, you can say, “Wow! this is really beautiful. You look great in this dress. Where did you buy it? When did you go shopping?” Then we have a topic to talk about. But here, I am not sure whether it is okay to talk about others’ clothes or not, because I heard there were many taboos in small talk…With these taboos in mind, I cannot say “You look great today!” to others. I am worried this would be offensive or make others uncomfortable (IP 9, lines 112-118).
On occasion, what they have learned contradicted what they have seen, which added to the confusion. For example, IP 9 was unsure whether family was a suitable topic for small talk because Canadians generally consider this a private topic. However, when chatting with a supervisor, the conversation was all “about her family, including her children’s love affairs, and their jobs. She talks about these family-related issues herself, so it seems that this is not a taboo topic” (IP 9, 130-132).

IP 3 would keep small talk with professors at a superficial level, or strictly limit it to academic issues, because of uncertainty about suitable topics:

I am always confused about the depth [of conversation] or the [level of] privacy I should have with the professor. Because I really don’t want to be disrespectful, and I don’t want to offend them, but I cannot have a ruler to see if this topic or this way of talking will make them uncomfortable or not…So, I will try to stay above the safety line, talking very superficial stuff (IP 3, lines 316-323).

The differences in cultural backgrounds also affected the willingness of local students to engage with their Chinese classmates. According to IP 1 and IP 3, since many local Canadian students did not know much about Chinese cultural norms or customs, they would often only exchange names, briefly ask about the home country, or talk about the weather, for fear of causing offence or discomfort.

4.6.2 Proper Responses

Having limited exposure to real-life interactions in their new environments, many participants were not equipped with basic expressions to use when responding to others. Given the opportunity to decide whether to initiate a conversation, they could prepare their opening statement in advance, or simply choose to be quiet. The more difficult situation was when others initiated a conversation, and they were challenged to respond.
Unable to anticipate what the other person may say, they were also unable to prepare a response, and yet felt compelled to try for fear of being rude.

Chinese students mainly learn English from school textbooks, and the structure of the language they learn is relatively formal. Due to a lack of exposure to real life communications, many memorize expressions from their texts to use as spontaneous answers. One example is Li Lei and Han Meimei’s classic greeting exchange from the English textbook\(^3\) used by almost all the interview participants while at school in China. It goes like this, “How are you?” “I am fine. Thank you. And you?” There is nothing wrong with this dialogue, and it was used by all the Group A participants, along with other basic textbook conversations, when they first used English outside China, until they observed other people using different greetings and responses. This might explain why one classmate of IP 5 said that all the Chinese students used the same form of greeting.

Although IP 2 had no current problems with small talk, when first studying outside of China, there were some challenges, “I can do some sort of textbook conversation…it is like ‘Hi, how are you?’ ‘Fine, thank you’…that’s how people talk in a textbook. You kind of memorize that and you go with it” (IP 2, lines 264-266).

When they observed and learned more casual ways to exchange greetings from others, they began to modify their responses. IP 7 said it took a long time to change from the typical textbook response to a more casual format:

I always use that formula from [the] textbook. It took me a long time to change from “I am fine. Thank you, and you?” to “Good. How are you?” Now this has become

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\(^3\) In a widely used English textbook for primary school students in China, Li Lei and Han Meimei were the names of the characters who introduced many of the basic conversations.
very natural. But if there is no fixed expression for certain situations, I cannot think of anything to say (IP 7, lines 514-518).

During the process of changing the manner of speaking, there were many struggles. In the first year in Canada, IP 8 was even “struggling to find the right answer to ‘How are you?’” (IP 8, lines 386-387).

Sometimes, the standard expression did not fit a specific situation. IP 7 felt embarrassed when unable to find a suitable response for people who said “excuse me” as they made their way past:

One time I was in a bookstore. I was in the way of someone. This person said, “Excuse me.” I didn’t know how to respond to that. I just moved a little bit, saying nothing. I really felt embarrassed…I learned from my textbook, the answer to “Excuse me” should be “Yes?” You know, what we learned from schools in China is not practical (IP 7, lines 385-391).

IP 2 also gave an example:

If people ask you a question, which you have never seen before in a textbook, you would think “What’s that?” For example, people may ask “What’s up?” you may wonder what is “What’s up”? “What is up in the air”? That is the first time I heard “What’s up?” In our middle school or high school textbook, we don’t say, “What’s up?” We say, “Hi, how are you?” “Fine, thank you. And you?” That is a typical conversation you will have (IP 2, lines 266-271).

In another situation, not knowing what to say caused both IP 7 and the other person to feel embarrassed:

Yesterday, I was in the elevator [going] from 3rd floor to 1st floor. When the door opened and in came a person, I thought it was 1st floor, so I went out, but I found it was 2nd floor. I went back to the elevator. That person said to me, “Oh, how lazy I am! Why would someone use elevator from 2nd floor?” I did not even know how to respond. Maybe I nodded because I did not have anything to say. It was an
embarrassing moment both for me and for him. He may expect me to say something, but I don’t know what to say (IP 7, lines 103-110).

IP 7 understood what the person said, and also knew it was a lighthearted comment, but had no idea how to answer, “I think whatever I say would not be appropriate, no matter [if] I say he is lazy or not lazy, whether he should use the elevator or not” (IP 7, lines 113-115). When there was no formula or fixed pattern for guidance it could lead to a challenging exchange.

4.6.3 Summary and Suggestions

Using appropriate and suitable language was a major concern for interview participants because judging propriety is usually based on longer-term experiences in similar situations. Without this experience, individuals felt stress and were inclined to make mistakes, which affected their willingness to engage in small talk. The major problems related to propriety were related to finding proper topics to discuss and generating proper responses.

Suggestions focused on improving skills by observing and learning and being tactical by letting others guide the conversation.

Observe Others. Observation was a solution suggested by most interview participants. IP 1 advocated that if one was not sure what was appropriate to discuss, they can observe “how other people carry on a small talk” (IP 1, lines 234-235) and learn from them. People learn from being more exposed to social activities and being mindful of the actions of others, so next time, in similar situations, they would know what to do.

IP 2 also emphasized the importance of observation, and explained that when observing, it was also important to be thinking, evaluating, and learning:
…observation is so important…When I interact with others, I would see how people respond to me, and also I like to observe how other people interact with each other. So, I am always an observer and I think and I evaluate. So that is my mindset, I evaluate and also learn (IP 2, lines 449-453).

IP 2 extended the importance of this skill to all international students, even in their own culture and language:

…for international students, I think they should learn how to be more attentive or observative…just pay attention to what’s going on and how people talk to each other, how they interact. That is a very important thing…it’s the same thing in China…If you don’t observe [and] evaluate…I don’t think you can be good at communicating with people…even though it is the same language (IP 2, lines 468-474).

IP 7 shared many stories about learning to respond to certain expressions. For example, when someone was observed saying “excuse me” to another individual, it was clear that “some people would say ‘Sorry’” (IP 7, line 389) when moving aside; now, armed with a suitable response, similar situations no longer cause discomfort. In the same way, “You too. Thank you” (IP 7, line 376) was found to be a fitting response to cashiers or bus drivers when they said, “Have a nice day”. IP 7 also learned it was not uncommon in Canada to begin emails with a casual social comment, whereas these niceties were often neglected in the past. The key was “…when you come across a situation that you don’t know how to respond, after that you should think about it” (IP 7, lines 589-590) and “you observe what other people do and what they say” (IP 7, line 588) in the same situation.

IP 6 also agreed that before one developed a certain level of comfort and confidence in casual conversations, they “get to observe” (IP 6, line 905) how other people behave
and respond, and IP 8 made a similar comment, “You see how other people answer those questions…and then you learn” (IP 8, lines 523-524).

**Be Tactical.** As mentioned in the beginning of this section, different people have different levels of comfort with privacy, so there is no rule that fits everyone or for every occasion. If you are not sure, you can let the other side guide or lead the conversation. It is generally safer to follow-up on the topics raised by the other party.

When colleagues talked about their personal lives, IP 9 was confused because Canadians are understood to be careful about their privacy. IP 1 also noticed that people usually would not ask about personal issues but sometimes would raise the topic of their own personal life, “It all depends on how close you are with that person” (IP 1, line 158). When the other party discusses their personal life, it is their choice and perhaps they feel comfortable talking with you. In this case, personal issues can also be a proper topic for small talk.

One scenario in the questionnaire was modified based on follow-up communications with IP 7. This scenario was about an individual who thought of a long list of questions to ask an acquaintance who discussed making plans to visit with a brother but was worried they might be too personal. After giving it more thought, the only response that came to mind was “okay”, a less than suitable reply.

The *Group B* questionnaire participants suggested being tactical when one is not sure whether something is appropriate to say. QP 1 agreed that it can be challenging when you have questions or comments which could be interpreted as blunt, rude, or being nosy, and explained that while bringing up something that the other person did not want to talk
about would be nosy, following up with questions about an issue that someone brought up to you was not:

…if your friend has been stressed and gained weight it can feel invasive if you bring up their weight gain, but it would be appropriate to raise your concern by asking how they are doing emotionally without discussing their weight. However, if your friend brings up their weight themselves it’s okay to follow up about their experiences of weight gain in that specific moment by letting them guide the conversation (QP 1, Question 5).

QP 2 and QP 3 both agreed that this depends on the person you are talking to. If they are protective about sharing family information, you should not press them, but if they started a topic about their personal life, it was okay to talk about it. QP 2 added, “they should pay more attention to who is leading the conversation and focus on more reflective listening skills” (QP 2, Question 5). A strategy outlined by QP 3 would be “to ask an initial ‘safe’ question or comment to offer the other person an opportunity to elaborate” (QP 3, Question 5). Based on how the other side responds, “either ask further questions and engage in this discussion, or…change the subject” (QP 3, Question 5).

QP 4 and QP 5 would both continue to discuss the topic and they also suggested if one was worried about what is appropriate, they could say something like “I realize that might be too personal. I just want you to know that I’m curious…I am sorry if that was too personal, I am glad that you will get to see your brother. I love my brother” (QP 4, Question 5); or “please don’t feel the need to answer if you’re not comfortable but I’m curious about…and want to know more” (QP 5, Question 5).

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a number of findings from this research. The challenges faced by the Chinese students interviewed were mainly related to comprehension, participation,
initiative, confidence, social connections, and propriety. There were many direct or indirect causes for these challenges, but in most cases, they were the result of problems tied to language proficiency, cultural differences, and personal attributes.

All participants provided suggestions intended to help future Chinese students, and others, to overcome these challenges. There were some strategies to improve skills for making small talk, and ideas for using small talk in appropriate ways to help develop social connections with members of the community. Asking questions can be a solution when one fails to understand what others say but can also be an effective way to initiate a conversation. Spending more time in social situations, observing how people interact with each other, and following and learning from real-life conversations can provide the necessary confidence to inspire participation, while improving language proficiency is also imperative. Finally, do the best you can but do not worry about perfection, when things do not work out, be patient and strive to learn from your mistakes.
Chapter 5

Discussion, Limitations, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The number of Chinese graduate students in Canadian universities has been steadily increasing over the past two decades. Their social and academic integration plays a vital role in determining whether these students can achieve academic and personal success. Small talk has been widely recognized as an important part of social integration; therefore, the focus of this research is on the experiences of Chinese graduate students when engaging in small talk with local Canadians in their universities and broader social communities. To be specific, the purpose is to study the challenges faced by these students when making small talk with local Canadians, explore the potential causes for these challenges, and identify solutions or suggestions to help future and current students adapt to their new environment.

This qualitative research project used interviews and questionnaires to collect data from both Chinese students and Canadian classmates and instructors. In the first stage, ten students were interviewed and asked to discuss their experiences making small talk with local Canadians, with an emphasis on challenges, causes, and suggestions. In the second stage, eight Canadian participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire which included questions asking for their perspectives on four scenarios developed from a sample of challenging experiences described by the interview participants. This group was also invited to comment on personal observations or experiences related to small talk with Chinese students.

The interview transcripts and questionnaire responses revealed six primary and common factors which consistently created challenges: comprehension, participation,
initiative, confidence, social connections, and propriety. The sources of these challenges could all be traced back to three principal causes: inadequate language proficiency (especially listening comprehension and oral expression), insufficient cultural knowledge (unfamiliarity with background information, cultural references, topical knowledge, and social norms), and personal attributes (problems with confidence, anxiety, shyness, and the willingness to make social connections).

This chapter will discuss the main findings of the study, explain how they relate and contribute to existing theories and practice, and identify limitations in the research design and execution. A number of recommendations for students, instructors, and administrators, along with several suggestions for further research will also be offered, followed by the conclusion to this study.

5.1 Results in Connection with the Theoretical Framework

The research by Celce-Murcia (2008) indicates communicative competence is influenced by discourse competence, linguistic competence, formulaic competence, interactional competence, sociocultural competence, and strategic competence (see Figure 1.1). The findings from this study show that all six factors had an impact on the small talk of Group A members.

First, the interviews revealed that many had problems starting, conducting, and closing a conversation; they were also hesitant to join in, issues which indicate a lack of discourse and interactional competence. Second, both linguistic and formulaic competence are related to the ability to use a language to understand and be understood, major challenges cited by the interview participants. Third, sociocultural competence was also a significant problem; many members of Group A were hindered by a lack of
background or contextual information, uncertainty about appropriate expressions and responses, and unfamiliarity with culturally popular topics. Finally, when their attempts at making small talk were unsuccessful and interactions broke down, most were not certain how to proceed. For example, many noted they were unable to sustain a conversation, or when comprehension was a challenge, they did not ask for help; problems related to a lack of strategic competence.

In addition to the six factors discussed above, this study also found that success at small talk can also be affected by the personal attributes or characteristics of the speakers; the study participants specifically noted issues such as age, personality, length of residence in the host country, and language ego. These results coincide with those proposed by Bachman and Palmer (2010) who indicated that gender, age, native language, cultural background, background knowledge, and field independence were influential personal factors.

As was suggested by Agar (2006), the actual use of a language by any individual did not only involve grammar and vocabulary, but also included background knowledge and local information. When second language learners transition from their source languaculture to the target languaculture, they often encounter difficulties and challenges which Agar (2006) called rich points. By using these rich points as a focus for learning, for example, really engaging with those individuals who are the source of rich points, listening to how they explain and observing how they use the language, a second language learner can improve their communication skills in the new languaculture. The participants in this study encountered many rich points as they made the transition to Canadian languaculture. One example is the way instructors are addressed. Some said
they immediately noted Canadian students and instructors often related on a first name basis, and after their initial surprise, quickly adapted. Another example is the attitude to greetings; one participant felt challenged by standard greetings like “How are you?” when passing someone on the street because by the time the usual response was given, the other person had already passed by. They felt it was rude not to answer but turning back to shout “I am fine. Thank you. What about you?” as the person walked away also seemed inappropriate. Over time, they have conquered this rich point, and learned that “How are you?” is just a greeting casually used to show friendliness and even a simple wave or nod in response is sufficient. The outcome is they are now more relaxed and prepared with many possible responses depending on the situation. As they observe and learn local behaviour in various situations, informed by rich points, they are making progress.

If the rich points are not addressed, the transition process will be hindered, and problems or deficiencies may develop (Agar, 2006). For one participant in this study, not knowing what to say in casual conversation, and to prevent possible embarrassment, means avoiding workshops or other sessions they would otherwise like to attend.

Wenger (1998) noted that “learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon” and suggested one should “place learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world” (p. 3). The participation of the learners is seen as the process of becoming active members in “the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities” (p. 4) and these social communities are communities of practice. Montgomery and McDowell (2009) stated that the social groups formed by international students resembled communities of practice as both have shared
aims and interests. This study also found that many challenges related to cultural differences and use of language in real-life situations can be resolved by ongoing exposure to social interaction, and both interview and questionnaire participants suggested or implied that Chinese students can improve their ability to make small talk by participating in communities of practice.

Many interview participants experienced feelings of isolation or exclusion while attending university in Canada, which was harmful for their well-being and had a negative impact on academic progress. Participation in communities of practice was suggested as a way to increase the sense of belonging and inclusion. Several participants gave examples of friends who joined religious groups, sports organizations, and writing clubs, or took part in other leisure activities such as hiking and dancing. These groups function as communities of practice because the members meet, either regularly or irregularly, to engage in similar interests or goals. In these groups, those who are newcomers get two kinds of help from the old-timers, they learn skills related to the chosen activity, and they benefit from the opportunity to engage in personal interaction. Questionnaire participants also advised that those who did not know how to interact socially with locals, especially those who could not find suitable topics to discuss, can join structured groups in which members have more common ground. These structured groups, in a sense, are also communities of practice. Therefore, the results of this research suggest that Chinese students who find themselves challenged by casual social interaction with locals should turn to communities of practice as a viable solution.

In summary, the findings from this study show that the six components in the communicative competence model outlined by Celce-Murcia (2008) are influencing
factors when Chinese students try to engage in small talk. In addition, the results suggest that personal attributes and individual characteristics also have a significant impact. The differences between two languacultures, or the rich points (Agar, 1994), can provide direction for subsequent learning, but if not properly addressed they become additional problems negatively influencing the learning process. To improve competence in making small talk, one strong recommendation is to participate in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where international students can enhance both their constructive and conversational skills.

5.2 Overall Discussion of the Findings

To study the experience of Chinese graduate students when making small talk with local Canadians, the following research questions have been used:

1. What are the main challenges Chinese graduate students face when making small talk with other individuals in Canada? (challenges)

2. What are some of the linguistic, cultural, and other factors that contribute to these challenges? (causes)

3. How can they overcome these challenges to increase interaction and engagement with others in their academic and social communities? (suggestions)

During the interviews with Chinese graduate students, when participants were asked about the challenges they faced making small talk in Canada, most respondents combined the challenges with their causes. Many indicated that language proficiency, cultural differences, and their personalities presented the greatest obstacles, but when asked to identify the causes of these problems, many gave the same answers; according to them, language, culture, and personality are both a problem and a cause. In this study, the
results point to six major challenges based on common examples of situations or experiences when participants had problems interacting with Canadians, however, language barriers, cultural differences, and personal attributes were the issues most often mentioned when discussing the underlying causes of these problems.

5.2.1 Challenges

In order to develop a more balanced and comprehensive picture of their experiences making small talk, the interview participants were asked to describe their successful and unsuccessful encounters with locals when they first began their studies in Canada and to try to compare those earlier periods with their current situation.

The interviews reveal that as newcomers, all participants experienced challenges making social connections with people in the local community. This is consistent with existing research describing the experiences of immigrants to English-speaking countries (Cui, 2015; Yates & Major, 2015), international students (Zhou & Zhang, 2014), and Chinese students in Canada (Zhang & Beck, 2014).

In Chapter Four, a number of challenges faced by these Chinese students were presented. However, it should be acknowledged that at the time of the interviews, all participants could be classified into three distinct categories based on the severity of their problems. First, four participants said their transition period when starting their graduate programs was very short and effortless, and they felt there were no current problems with small talk. Second, another four claimed that although they were making progress and could manage most current situations when social interactions took place, they were not very confident when trying to make connections with native English speakers and are still finding their way. Third, the remaining two participants admitted to facing ongoing
current challenges in their daily lives, and some situations make them uneasy and embarrassed. As a result, they try to avoid making social connections with locals, which often leads them to feel isolated and lonely.

In contrast to situations described in much of the literature (e.g., Jiao, 2006; Zhang & Beck, 2014; Zhang & Zhou, 2010) which point out that Chinese international students in Canada have faced serious challenges in terms of social interaction, the four participants who felt it was not difficult to interact socially with local Canadians quickly became comfortable and confident when making small talk with people in the host community. These four had certain personal characteristics in common: first, their English language proficiency was high; second, they managed to make close friends with local Canadians; third, three of the four had previous experience studying in the United States and Canada before they enrolled in their current graduate programs and they said they were outgoing and liked talking with people.

Heng (2020) referred to personal experiences when studying in the UK and the US to demonstrate the evolution that Chinese international students would go through. When pursuing an undergraduate education in the UK, the author had to make a great effort to adjust to linguistic, cultural, and learning differences. However, when in the US for graduate studies, this previous experience had prepared the author for the social and academic expectations of the new environment. Based on the results of a longitudinal study of Chinese undergraduate students conducted in a US college, Heng (2018) observed that Chinese international students were able to gain language fluency and develop friendships with their American peers after one or two years of enrolment. Other research has also showed that the challenges faced by international students decrease over
time (e.g., Quan et al., 2016; Wu, 2015). Therefore, it is understandable that some participants did not have problems with small talk at the time of the interviews although they did experience many challenges when they first started studying outside of China.

When asked to provide an estimate of the time it took to become confident and comfortable when making small talk in English, most interview participants could not give a definite number. While some said they were still learning, others described it in terms of a continuum ranging from feeling extremely challenged to slightly challenged to not challenged and then to comfortable and confident. The transition was gradual and subconscious. The four participants who had no current problems making small talk were in their second, third, sixth, and ninth years living in Canada. Other participants, who have been here from one to seven years, said they were still learning and, in some cases, struggling. As a result, a conclusive answer to this question cannot be drawn from this study.

For those who had challenges, their major causes were all rooted in problems with language, culture, and personal characteristics. Most of the suggestions are provided as methods to improve communicative competence, including promoting language proficiency, accumulating formulaic expressions, using communicative strategies or tactics, increasing exposure to cultural and social events and knowledge, and learning through practice. Another suggestion offered by members of Group A was participation in various communities of practice, which they referred to as “finding groups with similar interests such as associations and clubs (IP 9, lines 452-453)” or “joining diverse learning communities (IP 5, line 581)” where students from different backgrounds can learn together.
5.2.2 Causes

5.2.2.1 Language Barriers

According to Celce-Murcia (2008), the six factors influencing communicative competence are discourse competence, linguistic competence, formulaic competence, interactional competence, sociocultural competence, and strategic competence. When describing the communicative competence model, Celce-Murcia (2008) noted that discourse competence was at the centre where language resources met with sociocultural rules and interactional intent to produce linguistically suitable and socially appropriate utterances. At this point, language resources include both linguistic competence and formulaic competence.

Linguistic Competence. As was stated in the Introduction, the Chinese students were selected as the study cohort because they were expected to have adequate linguistic proficiency in English; however, the interviews and questionnaires both highlighted language barriers as their most prominent problem. This is consistent with previous studies which claimed that language barriers engendered timidity, fear, and isolation among international students (Banjong, 2015) and were the major challenge for Chinese students in English-speaking countries (Jiao, 2006; Xing et al., 2020; Zhang & Beck, 2014; Zhang & Zhou, 2010).

In this study, identified issues such as difficulty understanding what others are talking about (comprehension), the long time needed to comprehend a conversation and organize ideas for expression (participation), and the inability to know how to respond properly (propriety), are all related to substandard language skills. These issues in turn
influence the determination to make small talk (confidence), the willingness to start a conversation (initiative), and the enthusiasm to engage with others (social connections).

Language issues were most prominent for the two Chinese students who were initially enrolled in language preparation programs. One of them, who felt during the first year in Canada their English skills were not good enough to deal with the basics of daily life, such as banking, ordering food at restaurants, shopping for internet services, or complaining to the landlord about heat, let alone to make small talk, became depressed and instead of talking often typed the words on their phone to order food at a restaurant. Another participant recalled being barely able to talk to people in English due to low levels of language proficiency and a lack of confidence when first starting a language program in Canada. These stories are consistent with the study by Yeh and Inose (2003) which indicates that low levels of language proficiency led to acculturation distress and more severe problems with cultural adjustment.

One questionnaire participant also affirmed that language, especially spoken English, is the key for Chinese students when engaging in small talk and other social interactions in Canada. This individual was able to form closer relationships with Chinese speakers who could communicate well because it took less time and effort to understand and accommodate them, which is consistent with comments from interview participants who felt that language proficiency influenced their ability to make friends with locals.

Most research indicates that poor language proficiency has a negative impact on cultural and social adjustment among non-native speakers (e.g., Banjong, 2015; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Xing et al., 2020). However, a study by Molinsky and Perunovic (2008) noted that low language proficiency may function as “training wheels” (p. 288)
for non-native speakers during their period of cultural adjustment. They showed videos of culturally appropriate and inappropriate behaviour by non-native speakers with low and high English-speaking fluency to American university students and found those with poor English were rated less negatively than those who were more fluent. This suggests that for non-native speakers with lower language proficiency there was more tolerance and empathy among the locals, which provided a good opportunity to quickly learn acceptable social norms while the training wheels continued to provide support.

In this study, some participants made similar arguments when they suggested that Chinese students should be brave and actively engage in casual conversations with locals even if they felt their English language skills were substandard. Several of them noted that friends with very low language proficiency could still make small talk with local people who seemed to have no problem understanding them. With this effort, they found their English and communicative skills both improved quickly. It was also noted that other friends, who were considered very fluent in English but were not willing to step out of their comfort zone to try and make connections with people from other cultures, still felt challenged when making small talk with locals.

To sum up, this study supports the idea that language proficiency is one of the most important factors impacting the ability of Chinese students to make small talk and interact socially in Canada, and it plays a significant role in determining the level and speed of their social integration; however, personal attributes also have a direct influence on the significance of this factor.

Formulaic Competence. Some participants stated they actively tried to avoid interacting with locals because they worried about responding appropriately during casual
conversation and were concerned a simple smile or nod would be regarded as rude or unfriendly, but others suggested the solution was to develop some formulae or patterns to guide their behaviour.

Hunston (2002) noted that patterns for lexical and grammatical collocations are important for language learning and teaching because control over patterns can facilitate both accuracy and fluency in oral communication. This is also true with patterns for *adjacency pairs* – paired utterances regarded as fundamental units of conversation, in which “question-answer, greeting-greeting, offer-acceptance, apology-minimization, etc., are prototypical” (Levinson, 1983, p. 303).

For Chinese students, it is helpful to be consciously aware of the patterns used in their routine interactions with others. If patterns have been learned in a certain context, a series of words or utterances can be produced with less mental effort and far greater confidence. The example given by IP 7 about responding to “Excuse me” is a good illustration. The initial feeling was anxiety and embarrassment when realizing the learned pattern response, “Yes?”, did not fit the context; however, after observing and learning the patterns used by others, this situation was resolved. Other participants also gave examples where the use of fixed or formulaic expressions in certain situations helped them communicate with more ease and confidence.

Small talk for phatic purposes is usually formalized and comes with patterns or formulae, and the language used in certain situations is highly ritualized under linguistic and social constraints (Kuiper & Flindall, 2000). Laver (1975) also maintained that the language used in small talk, especially the expressions employed in the opening and parting phases of a conversation, are highly conventional. Holmes (2000b), based on a
study of recorded small talk in New Zealand workplaces, also pointed out that ritualistic or routine small talk questions would frequently be responded to with equally ritualistic answers. In this regard, Chinese students should not have a big problem as they have accumulated a sizeable inventory of formulae for certain social encounters. However, some interview participants confessed that when their studies first started in Canada, they could not manage a response to a simple greeting such as “How are you?” because their Chinese training did not adequately cover the various ways this greeting might be used, and they were still unable to produce spontaneous responses to some routine expressions because they have not had enough practice.

Formulaic competence can also refer to the skills required when using routine expressions or patterns of conversation. For example, two interview participants shared the patterns they follow when responding to others. First, they would make some positive comments, such as “This is very interesting!”, highlight some key points that stood out, share their own related knowledge or experiences, and finally ask some questions to encourage the speaker to share more. They developed this pattern from observation and reflection and believed that by using similar patterns as a guide, Chinese students could quickly find the words and expressions to effectively engage in a variety of conversations.

This idea can find support in the work of Celce-Murcia et al. (1993) who noted that “the ‘building blocks’ of the components of communicative competence were often conventionalized routines and chunks of language” (p. 22), thus, it was suggested that to become communicatively competent, learners should “build up an extensive repertoire of
such prefabricated structures” (p. 22) for certain situations, which can be a way to facilitate quick responses with less mental effort.

5.2.2.2 Cultural Differences

The cultural differences and barriers mentioned by participants are related to the concept of sociocultural competence as used by Celce-Murcia (2008) to refer to the pragmatic knowledge of second language learners and the appropriate way to express messages according to social and cultural contexts. Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) described three main sociocultural components that impact sociocultural competence: social contextual factors, stylistic appropriateness, and cultural factors. As the first two components tend to be influenced by the third, this section will focus only on the cultural factors that have been shown to impede social interaction between Chinese students and local Canadians.

In this study, issues related to cultural differences were found to be a major cause of the problems related to making small talk noted by interview participants and were a common factor in all the challenges identified in Chapter Four. For example, in a number of situations, a lack of background knowledge about cultural context directly led to problems with comprehension, participation, and confidence. Different cultural views on taking the lead during personal interactions made participants hesitant to initiate a casual conversation (initiative), and unfamiliarity with culturally safe and popular topics made it hard to know how to respond during some discussions (propriety). Overall, cultural uncertainties contributed significantly to many of the difficulties Chinese students encountered when trying to make friends (social connections).
All interview participants clearly recognized the existence of cultural differences and referred to them as barriers or obstacles, however, most of them were not able to give any examples of problems they encountered directly related to specific cultural issues. Based on the descriptions of their challenges, the cultural differences that caused the greatest difficulties for Chinese students when making small talk can be categorized as follows: the cultural distance between China and Canada, the different views on the nature of small talk, the problems finding topics to discuss, and the unique perspectives on interpersonal relationships.

**Cultural Distance.** Cultural distance is the degree of difference between the host country and the one the international student is from. It can often be measured by using cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede (1980, 2001). The literature reveals that wider cultural distances make it more difficult for an expatriate or sojourner to adapt to the context and orientation of an unfamiliar cultural environment (Valenzuela & Rogers, 2021).

International students who experience a wide cultural distance between home country and host country tend to have a harder time adjusting to their new environment (Sawir et al., 2008). For example, international students from Asian countries, who studied in Australia, often suffered more from the challenges presented by cultural differences compared to those from Europe (Sawir et al., 2008); Alharbi and Smith (2018) also noted that Asian students, and Chinese students in particular, who studied in six English-speaking countries, including Canada, experienced higher levels of stress and discrimination than their European peers due to the wider cultural distance in communication.
Hofstede et al. (2010) showed that Canada features a high level of individualism and a low level of power distance; China, in contrast, is on the opposite end of the scale in both dimensions. This means Canadian culture values individualism and egalitarianism, while Chinese culture places more emphasis on collectivism and subordinate-superior relationships. These cultural values influence the way people interact with each other and have an impact on their feelings about small talk, their comfort discussing personal issues, and their unique approach to interpersonal relationships.

All interview participants mentioned that Canadian culture, which many often grouped together with North American and western culture, was very different from Chinese or Asian culture, and one added that even after living here for four years they had found no Canadian friends but had made good friends with two people from other Asian countries; this was easier because they seemed to have much more in common.

**Different Views on Small Talk.** The prevalence of small talk in Canada is one of the major cultural differences noticed by all interview participants. Most of them referred to experiences exchanging greetings with strangers on the street, and some, including IP 9 are still adapting:

I do feel it is common to have small talk here, even when you are walking on the street, no matter if they know you or not, people say “Hi!” to you and would like to talk to you. I am still getting used to it. Because I don’t talk to strangers even in China, let alone in another country. I feel it is strange to talk to someone you don’t know (IP 9, lines 224-228).

IP 9 is not the only participant who mentioned this; six others also made a point of noting that local people were friendly and small talk is a common daily phenomenon. Yates and Major (2015) found their immigrant study participants were surprised by how
much small talk there was in their daily lives in Australia, another majority English-speaking country, where they regularly engaged in small talk with colleagues, customers, superiors, and other people in various situations.

One member of Group A felt that Chinese people were quite comfortable staying silent when sharing space with others, but people in North America seemed to find this unbearable so they feel the urge to engage in small talk, which may explain why it is more pervasive in Canada.

When describing the social functions of small talk, Laver (1975) stated that it is often used to alleviate the potential hostility of silence, and Malinowski (1923) also noted that “to a natural man, another man’s silence is not a reassuring factor, but on the contrary, something alarming and dangerous” (p. 314). According to them, silence is unpleasant and dangerous, and may breed hostility and tension. Therefore, when sharing space with others, whether they are total strangers, recent acquaintances, or good friends, people from certain cultures may feel a need to break the silence.

However, silence does not mean the same to the Chinese. In the book, *The Silent Majority*, Wang (2009) wrote that being silent is a lifestyle, and anyone can choose it. The author felt that many Chinese people had similar personalities; in public, they would not say a word, but in private, they could not stop talking. In other words, with people they trust, they would say anything, and with those they do not trust, or do not know, they would say nothing.

For Canadians, and perhaps for other western cultures, small talk is a common phenomenon which serves to establish or maintain social connections with strangers,
acquaintances, friends, and family. In China, however, many people choose to keep quiet unless they know and trust the other members of the potential conversation.

**Choices of Topics.** Similar to the findings of both Cui (2015), who studied Chinese immigrants working in Australia, and Holmes (2000a, 2000b), who did research on small talk at the workplace among immigrants in New Zealand, deciding on a safe topic to discuss while making small talk in Canada is among the more significant problems noted by the interview participants. When asked about topics for small talk in China, many of them said “anything and everything”, and cited examples such as course work, school life, family and job-related issues, fashion, makeup, marriage, and children. Two of them said complaining about minor problems with their husbands and children is a regular topic when talking with friends and colleagues; another two mentioned they regularly use standard openings such as “Where are you going?” and “Have you eaten?” to start a conversation and others said that asking about income, marital status, age, and other personal issues are common and acceptable topics for small talk in China. However, when asked about topics they might discuss in Canada, the answers included food, current public issues such as the pandemic and elections, holiday arrangements, weather, music, movies, TV shows, sports, pets, research progress, and other general and impersonal subjects.

When questionnaire participants were asked about topics they would cover when making small talk with Chinese classmates, the answers from students included weather, family, fashion, daily experiences, culture, common and similar life experiences, general questions about life and health, research projects, opportunities in the faculty, pets, and
school related topics; the instructors maintained a focus on course material rather than other more personal issues.

Comparing these responses, although the acceptable topics for small talk listed by Canadian participants are not as personal as those discussed among Chinese students in China, they are more personal than those suggested by the Chinese students in Canada. As an example, family seems to be a popular topic among Chinese in China and Canadians in Canada, but Chinese in Canada are less certain that it is an acceptable and welcome subject for small talk with Canadians.

In a study about the pragmatic failures of Chinese greetings in cross-cultural communication, Zhang (2014) explained that it is natural for personal topics to appear in casual conversation. Chinese culture often downplays the individual and emphasizes collective values. When reflected in casual interaction, this means Chinese people have a relatively weak sense of privacy and generally believe that individuals belong to a collective in which they care about each other, including every aspect of their lives. Hu (1987) noted that Chinese expressed politeness by showing respect to others, as well as being concerned about their health, work, and life. Asking personal questions about age, marital status, income, employment, health, family, and so on when meeting is common and accepted, and others usually do not mind exchanging these details.

In contrast, Canadian culture values individualism and egalitarianism (Hofstede et al., 2010). Individuals in society are loosely connected; they look after themselves and mind their own business; their personal privacy rights are promoted and protected. In this environment, talking about topics related to personal issues such as employment,
finances, marital status, family, political inclination, religious beliefs, and so on, should be avoided unless there is a mutual agreement to open them up for discussion.

When they were learning English, all interview participants said they were told some topics related to personal life should be avoided when talking to people from western societies. Most of them were aware that the usual topics freely discussed in China may not be appropriate for small talk in Canada, but they were not familiar with the topics that were acceptable, especially during their early years in the country. When the time came for small talk with locals, they were usually at a loss. Over time, as they have slowly learned that some personal issues could be included, the ongoing uncertainty about how much to say and how deep they could go continues to be a challenge.

**Interpersonal Relationships.** Chinese people have clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Gao, 1996) or in-group and out-group members (Hofstede, 1980), and they are treated differently (Gao, 1996; Gu, 1990). The rules which apply to insiders are not suitable for outsiders. As a result, most Chinese people “do not feel knowledgeable about dealing with outsiders” (Gao, 1996, p. 88) because their interpersonal relationships are usually with members of in-groups.

In Canada, small talk often occurs with people who do not belong to in-groups or are not insiders, which can make it more difficult for Chinese to engage in effective social interaction. One major challenge mentioned by interview participants was the problem of talking to strangers because they did not do this often in China. As previously noted by IP9, Chinese people usually do not talk to strangers, a sentiment which was echoed by seven of the ten interview participants who said they did not talk to strangers if they did not have to. Their stated reasons for this, which can all be related to their cultural
apprehension of *wairen*, include the belief that strangers might be dangerous, the feeling it was strange to talk to people they did not know, or the fact they simply had no interest in talking to these people.

All interview participants indicated that most Canadians they met were friendly, but some also noted this did not mean they necessarily wanted to be your friend. This notion is supported by some members of Group B and corresponds with findings reported by Cui (2015) in a study on Chinese immigrants in Australia. This can lead to confusion; some participants mentioned having great conversations with new acquaintances and closing with an agreement that they should get together again in future, but in the end no appointments were made, and no contact details exchanged.

In conclusion, in Canadian society, where people are more loosely connected and relatively equal in status, developing and maintaining an interpersonal relationship can often be done with a more casual approach, which tends to support the use of small talk as a tool to initiate and engage in social interaction. Meanwhile, in Chinese society, which values the interests of the collective over those of the individual, emphasizes harmony within the collective, makes distinctive boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, and which is based on a hierarchical structure, specific cultural dimensions have a direct impact on the nature of personal relationships. This influences the need for and the feelings about the use of small talk, including related issues such as topics for discussion, attitudes towards silence, and dealing with strangers.

**5.2.2.3 Personal Attributes**

Personal factors are one of the three causes most often cited by interview participants who faced challenges when making small talk. As this is a broad field which goes well
beyond the scope of this study, only those factors mentioned by the participants are discussed here.

The personal attributes which have been studied in terms of their influence on the sociocultural adaptation of international students, expatriates, and sojourners, were mainly identified as personality, gender, age, length of time in the host country, and willingness to communicate (e.g., Caligiuri, 2000; Cheng et al., 2020; Kim, 2000; Valenzuela & Rogers, 2021; Wilson, 2011; Xiao, 2020; Zeng, 2010). As gender differences are not a focus of this study, and participants did not mention gender as an issue, it will not be discussed. In addition, one participant, IP 8, who has a background in second language learning, suggested that language ego is an important factor which influences the willingness of ESL learners to use the target language. Therefore, language ego will be included as an additional personal attribute or factor under consideration.

**Personality.** The extroversion and introversion dimensions are the most researched personality traits for second or additional language speakers (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Being extroverted means the individual has the tendency to be sociable and seek the company of others (Valenzuela & Rogers, 2021). In this study, most participants who claimed that they had significant challenges interacting with others were also those who self-identified as shy or introverted, while those who were more comfortable making conversations in English all said they were outgoing or extroverted. These sentiments matched the results of other research (Caligiuri, 2000; Dewaele et al., 2008; Kim, 2000; Valenzuela & Rogers, 2021) which has revealed that openness or extroversion among second language speakers is a positive predictor for successful experiences with oral communication and sociocultural adaptation in another country. Kim (2000) stated that
there were three interrelated traits of adaptive personality, openness, strength, and positivity; a person with an adaptive personality is someone with “social ease, a sense of humor, the ability to imagine, and the perspective to understand that one’s plight may not be unique or permanent” (p. 179). Such an individual is motivated and willing to integrate into the target environment, is flexible in the face of difficulties, discomfort, anxiety, and challenges in intercultural adaptation, and always has an optimistic mental outlook to envision the hopeful side of a situation in a new environment.

**Age.** The results of research by Wilson (2011) about factors influencing the sociocultural adaptation of international students suggested that age did not have a significant influence on overall experiences. In this study, there was no emphasis on age differences, and participants were not classified according to age; however, three participants specifically mentioned age as an influence on social skills or comfort levels when making small talk.

When asked to compare experiences making small talk in China and Canada, one of the three confessed to being very shy growing up in China and as a result did not know how to make small talk; however, after completing a master’s degree in Canada, this individual felt more mature and had more confidence in their communicative skills and language proficiency. Reaching an older age meant being more open to others and more self-assured during social interactions. This idea is supported by a longitudinal study carried out by Mittelmeier (2014) which looked at campus involvement and friendship network patterns among Chinese international students in the US. The study found that younger students initially made friends mostly with fellow Chinese, but with growing
levels of maturity and confidence, they were able to step out of their comfort zones to make friends from other countries and cultural backgrounds.

Another of these three suggested that one good way to develop communicative competence is through exposure to various social situations and contexts, for example, by hanging out with a group of local peers, but also felt older students, who were usually more independent, may be less likely to feel the need for regular social interaction.

The last of these three participants considered that a younger age is a better predictor for successful sociocultural adaptation and felt it was easier to be more flexible in adapting to a new environment. These concepts are consistent with the study by Kim (2001) which shows that age is a significant factor affecting cross-cultural adaptation because it is closely related to the openness for change. Older adults are often not so open-minded and ready for the differences offered by a new environment because their communication habits and original cultural identities are relatively solidified. Younger adults have more malleable personalities and are more easily influenced by peers and their environment.

The current study on small talk reveals that age influences the experiences of participants in different ways. An older age may mean more maturity and greater confidence but can also mean fixed communication patterns and cultural identities, while a younger age, often related to shyness and inexperience, can also welcome flexibility and the potential for change.

**Length of Residence.** There has been research published proposing that time of residence in the host country is the most important factor accounting for sociocultural adjustment (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Ward & Kennedy, 1992), but other studies
indicate that it did not have a significant influence (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Wilson, 2011). In this study, one interview participant who had been in Canada for less than two years claimed to be comfortable and confident when making small talk, while another, who has been here for more than six years, was still struggling. Due to the small sample size, and individual differences in language proficiency, personality, and other factors, it is not possible to draw a conclusion whether length of stay is a significant predictor of competence, however, all participants confirmed that positive changes took place as their studies progressed.

**Language Ego.** When asked to rank the frequency of making small talk in both China and Canada, from one (*very seldom*) to ten (*very often*), three members of Group A gave a similar rank to both places while the others all assigned a higher score to their home country. Many of them explained the difference by noting that in China there were always many more people around them and many more opportunities to talk. Also, Chinese students attend school with the same group of people for several years, which provides ample opportunity for frequent contact, closer relationships, and to find common ground for small talk.

Two respondents indicated there was a sizeable frequency differential, scoring eight for small talk in China and only two for Canada; they are talkative and sociable in China, but very shy and nervous when meeting people in Canada. The reason for this variation in personal behaviour, as proposed by IP 8, may be high language ego.

The concept of language ego was first put forward by Guiora (1972) who related it to body ego; in further research language ego was characterized as “to learn a second language is to take on a new identity” (Guiora et al., 1972, p. 422). This new identity
brings a sense of fragility to language learners and a defensiveness against the learning and use of the second language (Zakarneh, 2018), and breeds a sense of inferiority when trying to learn and use a new language (Thomas, 2016). Thus, language ego is associated with increased fear of committing mistakes when speaking a new language (Ehrman, 1999) and can be a great hurdle, especially for adults, when learning a second language (Abdullah & Akhter, 2015).

The concept of language ego helps to explain why some interview participants felt more challenged making small talk in their second or additional languages, and why they tried to avoid interactions with local people. In addition, it may also help us understand why some questionnaire participants, as native speakers, did not feel bothered when they also encountered situations similar to those described in the questionnaire scenarios.

For example, five questionnaire participants revealed there were times they also had nothing more to offer when meeting neighbours than brief greetings and comments about the weather, or when they did not understand or appreciate the humour of others, or also had problems joining casual conversations. The difference for them was they did not feel anxious or worried in these situations. As native speakers in their own country, they are familiar with almost all aspects of acceptable and unacceptable social behaviour and can feel confident in what they say and do.

In contrast, when communicating in another language, there is far less confidence, and it is more likely individuals will become defensive and sensitive as they try to communicate with limited tools (Thomas, 2016). The two participants who had the great discrepancy in their small talk frequency rankings admitted they worried about making linguistic mistakes or social blunders, being unable to understand or respond to others.
properly, being misunderstood and misinterpreted, and being looked down upon because of inadequate language skills. As a result, they tried to avoid social interactions in Canada.

The personal attributes discussed here, personality, age, length of residence, and language ego, are only some of the personal factors which may affect individuals trying to function in a new language and culture. Personal traits or characteristics can have a very complex influence on the ability to make small talk and to interact and integrate within a new social environment, analyzing and interpreting this influence is beyond the scope of this study.

5.3 Limitations

This study has attempted to supplement the existing research on the social interaction and integration of Chinese international students in Canada by describing some of the challenges they face when making small talk and exploring the underlying influencing factors. In addition, some general and practical suggestions have been provided for the possible benefit of current and future international students. However, limitations related to the recruitment process and data collection and interpretation have been identified.

First, a backup recruitment method for finding Group B members was not in place when the research project was originally conceived. Snowballing was the only recruitment method proposed for identifying potential participants. Ideally, each member of Group A was to introduce and recommend this study to two classmates or instructors, which was expected to bring in more potential Group B members than needed. However, in reality there were complications: some Group A participants were in a program only for international students and had no Canadian classmates; some were the only Chinese
students in their program, so their Canadian classmates did not meet the specified requirements to take part; and some did not feel comfortable contacting classmates or instructors.

To compensate for these problems, some Group A members were asked to introduce the study to their Chinese friends, who were then asked to share with Canadian classmates and instructors; although this adjustment ultimately added three new members to the group, the extra steps added significantly to the time and effort required.

Second, it became apparent the recruitment procedure for Group B was too onerous and potentially discouraged possible participants. When designing the recruitment method, perhaps too much attention was given to netiquette and not enough consideration to convenience. The original procedure was designed as follows: first, the Group A participants or their friends introduced the study to classmates and instructors (as outlined above), asking them to contact the researcher by email if they were willing to complete a questionnaire; second, when contacted, the researcher would respond by email with a digital link to the questionnaire to be completed by willing participants. However, in practice, many potential participants felt it was too troublesome to initiate contact with the researcher, who was a stranger, so including this step severely hampered the recruitment process. Although it is imperative that the recruitment process must adhere to all practical ethical guidelines, it should also make it convenient for individuals to take part.

In response to this problem, the researcher designed a one-page invitation using Qualtrics which included an introduction to the project and concluded with the following request: “If you are willing to complete a questionnaire for this study, please insert your
email and submit.” This greatly simplified the application process, and all submissions received by the researcher were answered with a link to the questionnaire.

Third, in order to minimize the time required to complete the questionnaire, members of Group B were only asked if they were classmates or instructors of Chinese students, how often they had small talk with these students, and how challenged they thought these students were when making small talk. However, no information was collected about demographics or their experience with or exposure to Chinese or other international cultures, factors which may have had an influence on their perception of the problems. For example, QP 3, as an experienced language teacher, was more aware of language and other issues that might be challenging for a Chinese student. During interactions, this participant would try to clarify and if necessary, rephrase the conversation if problems were apparent. QP 3 also noted that unless asked, many Chinese students did not reveal their comprehension issues and other classmates were generally unaware.

As can be seen from this response, this participant with ESL teaching experience in Asian countries was able to provide a more detailed description of the problems they perceived, offer explanations, and also recognize that others did not see the problem. This indicates that previous experience and exposure to other cultures and enhanced intercultural awareness, or the lack of this background information, can influence perspective and perception.

Fourth, there is a lack of data covering the earlier experiences of the Chinese students. Although three participants were in the first year of their programs, only one was an actual newcomer, having been in Canada for only five weeks when the first interview took place; although the experiences were recent, there had not yet been many
opportunities to interact with others. Three participants were in the second year of their programs but due to COVID-19 restrictions, two were physically distant from their universities, and all interview participants had courses online with no opportunities for face-to-face communication or in-person interaction with classmates and instructors. As a result, the evidence collected from these participants, who have recently “attended” university in Canada, may not be truly representative of typical experiences for newcomers, and some unique information about their initial tribulations may not have been collected. The data from Group B participants were affected by the COVID-19 restrictions as well since Canadian students and instructors also had classes online and were required to follow social distancing guidelines which limited the opportunity for small talk with Chinese international students, so they too were unable to discuss recent experiences and interactions.

In an attempt to overcome these data limitations, all interview participants were asked to recall their initial feelings about making small talk when they first attended Canadian university. Two participants who had recently graduated from a master’s program were able to partially fill the gap in the data as their academic history consisted of in-person classes on campus. In addition, the newly landed first-year student was asked to share ongoing observations and reflections during follow-up communications which focused on changing experiences and emotions. These methods were used to supplement the data and provide a more comprehensive perspective.

Finally, although the researcher was aware of the need to maintain objectivity throughout the process of conducting the study, there is still a possibility that some interpretations are subjective. The research target group was Chinese graduate students in
Canadian universities, and the researcher is a member of this group who has also experienced challenges when engaging in casual conversations with individuals from local communities.

The role as both an insider and an outsider can be both beneficial and detrimental. Sharing the same ethnicity, language, and culture with the key informants can assist the researcher to build closer relationships which can help smooth the data collection process and facilitate an understanding of their experiences. In addition, personal experience provides the researcher with the motivation and passion to carry out this study.

At the same time, it is important to be aware that preconceived notions or biases may have a subconscious influence on the data collection, data analysis, and thesis writing process. Although the researcher attempted to remain cognizant of these possible negative influences and maintained a series of written journals during the analysis which could help monitor objectivity more closely, there is still a possibility for subjective or biased interpretations.

5.4 Recommendations

5.4.1 Recommendations for Chinese Students

Chinese students planning future studies in Canada or elsewhere, and those currently studying abroad, can learn from the experiences described in this research report. The study participants who were most confident and comfortable talking to individuals from the host country were very proficient, almost native-like, in their command of English; their successful experiences demonstrate that language proficiency is paramount. The participants who could quickly adapt to their new cultural and social environment are observant and attentive; they notice the way people behave when interacting with each
other, carefully evaluate each situation, then test and reflect on their personal behaviour in various social settings. These students are consciously and proactively learning how to communicate with people in a new linguistic and cultural environment.

**Future students.** Students who are planning to study overseas need to prepare linguistically, culturally, and mentally before their arrival. Studying in a different country and culture in a second or additional language can be daunting for anyone, but especially for those who are traveling abroad for the first time. Quan et al. (2016) examined the adjustments made by Chinese post-graduate students when studying abroad and noted that some were over-confident before departing their own country which may have caused them more problems than expected.

Several members of this study reported being overwhelmed when they first started to study in Canada because they had not fully prepared mentally to face the types of challenges they would encounter. Some felt defeated when they could only follow pieces of personal exchanges, or isolated when they could not join a casual conversation while relaxing with others. When they did not know the appropriate words to use when making small talk, they felt embarrassed and ultimately tried to avoid all unnecessary interactions with local people. Those who had previously studied abroad, either short term or long term, found it beneficial for social adaptation and adjustment during their graduate program because they knew more of what to expect and were mentally prepared.

Previous studies (e.g., Xing et al., 2020; Zhang-Wu, 2018) revealed that passing the required English language proficiency tests, such as TOEFL and IELTS, did not necessarily mean that one had the ability to communicate effectively and freely with local people, and this was confirmed by most participants in this study. From a young age,
Chinese students learn English in formal classes from standard textbooks, and this training is not likely to prepare them for the language used in casual conversations or for the variety of topics up for discussion. Therefore, when preparing for study abroad, students should practice and improve their linguistic proficiency, and especially try to focus on the use of language suitable for real social situations. Exposure to and immersion in a variety of online resources including TV shows, movies, and videos can help them gain familiarity with language use in many different real-life contexts.

Linguistic competence serves as the basis for communication but is only one of the six competences required to communicate. For example, to build connections with people from a foreign country and culture, developing sociocultural competence is very important and requires an active awareness of cultural differences and making conscious improvements in this area. As suggested by Celce-Murcia (2008), some parts of these competences can be learned through knowledge of life and literature.

Therefore, to prepare for study abroad, in Canada or elsewhere, one should practice and become proficient in the language of the host country, cultivate an awareness of cross-cultural differences, and be mentally prepared to accept that there will be many daily challenges.

**Current students.** This research revealed that some students who had been studying in Canada for several years were still struggling and continue to feel challenged by social interaction with local people. As noted in earlier chapters, language barriers, cultural differences, and personal attributes all contribute to these struggles. To improve their situation, the following suggestions are offered.
First, Chinese students should take advantage of all available resources to help them learn about local culture. A review of websites targeting international students in the universities attended by the research participants in this study reveals there are many programs, events, activities, and services available, such as mentor-mentee and buddy programs, English corner, weekly conversations, cultural awareness training, counselling services, etc. The study participants who took advantage of these resources found them beneficial. For example, one participant, who eventually became a good friend with the mentor from the mentor-mentee program at university, had a one-hour meeting every other week and learned about the history, politics, and other aspects of life in Canada.

The available resources are more than just those events or programs provided by the universities; also recommended is the use of social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, other sources such as short videos, movies, and TV shows on YouTube or Netflix, and online news sites. Frequent use of these sources can keep students up to date with culturally popular topics or current events and help familiarize them with topical knowledge and linguistic expressions to prepare them to join discussions when opportunities arise.

Second, these students should find their learning community. Celce-Murcia (2008) suggested that parts of communicative competence can be learned through knowledge of life and literature, but the best way is to learn from members of the target language group through regular interaction. Having nothing to talk about was one of the most commonly cited problems among research participants because they did not have frequent contact, shared experiences, or much common ground with their local peers. By joining groups of interest, such as associations for sports, hiking, writing, yoga, and so on, individuals can
meet others who share similar passions and find opportunities for frequent and ongoing engagement. Chinese students will be more relaxed when interacting with members of their new community if they have common ground for communication.

Third, individuals need to step out of their comfort zones. Although communicating with people from the same culture is helpful in alleviating loneliness and homesickness (e.g., Hendrickson et al., 2011), research shows that those who remain immersed in their own culture find it even more difficult to adapt to a new culture (Zhou et al., 2008). Many studies revealed that having social connections with other students from their own country of origin, from other countries, and from the host country, helped international students to adapt to their new learning environment (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Wilson, 2011). Making friends with people from the host country and having social interactions with them in casual settings is an important experience for students from a different culture (Wilson, 2011), which can help them better adapt to the local cultural environment and make them feel more socially connected (Hendrickson et al., 2011).

As noted earlier, Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) suggested there were four primary social interaction patterns for Chinese students which follows a continuum ranging from self-segregation, exclusive global mixing, inclusive global mixing, and host interaction. All the interview participants in this study could be placed in three of these categories. Some of them only socialized with people from their home culture and did not interact with other international students or students from the host community (self-segregation); others made friends only with other Chinese and international students but not with locals (exclusive global mixing), while five members of Group A actively
connected with all three groups (inclusive global mixing). According to Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013), inclusive global mixing is the most useful pattern for cultural adaptation. The results from this study also support this theory as four of these five individuals claimed they did not have any major problems making small talk with local people at the time of the interviews.

Several interview and questionnaire participants also suggested newcomers should make the effort to step out of their comfort zone and to try to make small talk with those from different cultures. This would give them more opportunities to experience other cultures, develop an understanding of social norms, and improve their communication skills.

In summary, improving language proficiency, learning more about local culture and social norms, taking advantage of the many resources available to help with social integration, and making an effort to be more outgoing and socializing with people from a variety of backgrounds, are all steps Chinese and other international students can take to enhance the quality of their personal experiences.

5.4.2 Recommendations for Canadian Classmates

If they are unaware of the difficulties faced by Chinese students, local classmates may have some misunderstandings. Heng (2020) noted that some American friends complained that Chinese students were selfish because they did not share their ideas during discussions. Ruble and Zhang (2013) identified stereotypes perpetuated by American students; although some assessments were positive, others included “bad at speaking English, only friends with other Chinese students, not well assimilated to US culture, and socially awkward” (p.
209). Misconceptions and negative generalizations are not helpful and can make it even more difficult for outsiders to fit in and adapt to a new culture.

Some interview participants described situations when they felt completely excluded from casual conversations during classroom breaks because they were not familiar with the topic of conversation, although they did not believe they were being isolated intentionally. Others stated that they often had problems understanding discussions featuring cultural idiosyncrasies, such as local slang, idioms, or even proper names, but were hesitant to interrupt with questions because they did not want to break the flow of the conversation or embarrass themselves by asking a stupid question.

Local students can have an important role to play ensuring social interactions run smoothly if they can recognize that Chinese and other international students may be quiet for a number of reasons, not necessarily because they are unfriendly or want to keep ideas to themselves. Perhaps they do not understand the conversation, or are consciously processing what has been said and are trying to formulate a suitable response, or they may be patiently waiting for a break in the discussion or another appropriate time to join in. Making the effort to include Chinese classmates in casual conversations, taking the time to provide background information, and encouraging them to express their opinions or elaborate on the Chinese perspective, will help reduce miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Several questionnaire participants noted that their Chinese classmates often shied away from or were eager to terminate conversations because they seemed to have problems or lacked the confidence to express moderately difficult ideas, but one also noted that when a Chinese student was encouraged to keep talking, this student actually had a lot to say,
and together they had a great conversation. Another indicated being more aware of the difficulties Chinese students had after completing the questionnaire and would now make a bigger effort to include them in casual conversations and tell them their perspectives made the environment much richer.

The results of this study suggest that local classmates should be made more aware of the challenges faced by international students, be more tolerant and helpful when they are seen to be struggling with the language and try to create a more inclusive environment for social interaction.

5.4.3 Recommendations for Instructors

First, course instructors can be made more aware of the potential challenges faced by individuals from other cultures as recognizing the issues and being more empathetic about possible problems are the first steps in enabling them to help those in need. Instructors can improve their intercultural awareness by attending special training sessions and increasing their interactions with international students.

Some interview participants said they did not know how to properly address their instructors, so they tried to avoid talking to them outside of class. If instructors are aware that some students may have difficulty pronouncing their names or finding a proper way to address them, they can help mitigate this problem by stating clearly how they would like to be addressed on the first day of class. It only takes a few minutes to make this clarification and it could help reduce confusion and possible embarrassment.

Second, course instructors can create a more inclusive environment for international students. The classroom is one of the few places where Chinese students and their Canadian classmates meet on a regular basis. Many participants in this study identified it
as the only place they communicated with classmates and instructors, and previous research has indicated some international students never meet their classmates out of the classroom except those from their own country of origin (Aydinol, 2013). Course instructors can provide more opportunities for students to interact and collaborate, which will help them develop shared experiences. Two interview participants in this study mentioned that some instructors designed activities for students to communicate casually at the beginning of each class. They felt these activities gave them opportunities to get to know each other and helped them build personal connections.

Third, they can organize the class to ensure all students have equal opportunity to share ideas and participate, especially if this aspect of the coursework is scored. Two participants suggested that course instructors should incorporate alternate methods to assess student participation or encourage each student to take turns sharing their ideas. In some cases, fellow students who had grown up in the domestic education system and were familiar with classroom procedure, used every opportunity to speak up regularly which made it more difficult for Chinese students, raised in a very different academic environment, to find a way to join the discussion. As noted earlier, Chinese students also may need more time to process information and organize ideas in a second language, and they will hesitate to jump in because in their culture interrupting is unacceptable. Some participants also mentioned that one-on-one conversations were less stressful because they were able to take an active part in the conversation; therefore, pair-work instead of group-work can help these students gain comfort to communicate with their peers.

In addition to the support that course instructors can provide, ESL instructors can do more to prepare students for life in Canada. ESL instructors typically have more
knowledge about language rules and place more emphasis on language accuracy, but do not pay much attention to teaching sociocultural norms and expectations related to the use of the target language (Celce-Murcia, 2008).

The language used in small talk is relatively simple compared to the academic language graduate students are reading and writing on a daily basis, as was noted by two interview participants who admitted that they were still struggling to make small talk in English. Why is this relatively simple use of language such a challenge? One reason they gave was the problem of producing spontaneous answers in specific situations. They have been learning English for more than ten years, but their lessons and textbooks did not prepare them for the practical experiences of real-life casual conversations; this aspect of social competence was mostly ignored.

To rectify this problem, as noted in *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (Council of Europe, 2018), the language user/learner should be viewed as a social agent, acting in the social world and exerting agency in the learning process. This would require a new approach to the provision of second language education and implies the need for a real paradigm shift in both course planning and teaching, with the goal of promoting learner engagement and autonomy.

The first thing ESL instructors can do is to increase their personal cultural awareness and then include culturally sensitive content and language rules in their lessons. Although a description of another culture does not directly transfer to verbal behaviour (Celce-Murcia, 2008), explicit discussions of cultural and social norms will help make the students aware of differences and limit the impact of culture shock; as noted by Tseng and Newton (2002), “to understand the similarities and differences between ones’ own
culture and host culture, is a significant step toward making the adjustment to study abroad life” (p. 592).

ESL instructors should shift the objective of instruction from a primary focus on language accuracy to include the proper use of language in real social contexts. Barraja-Rohan (2011) stated that ESL instructors need to teach conversation because it is the base for all types of oral interaction, and it also involves cultural-specific body language, prosody, and norms of interaction. Therefore, it is suggested that ESL instructors teach conversation through adjacency pairs and preferable organizations and engage students in authentic conversations in class. The teacher should also pay more attention to the meaning of the conversation instead of the accuracy of language. By practicing conversation, students will not only learn the target language, but also consciously develop a familiarity with sociocultural norms and expectations.

One study participant mentioned that ESL programs in their university were heavily focused on language proficiency, reading, writing, and academic English, and suggested that these programs should incorporate content on social integration or other social skills, including how to make small talk with locals. One possible teaching method could be to create some simulated situations and invite international and local students to act them out. These interactions can be video recorded as teaching materials and instructors can lead the students in observing social cues and expressions, explaining social and cultural norms, and discussing why some interactions are successful or unsuccessful. This process will help students recognize the subtle nuances that may make a difference in their ability to communicate effectively.
5.4.4 Recommendations for Educational Institutions

Universities, colleges, and other educational institutions must also take an active role in helping Chinese and international students adjust both academically and socially to their new learning environments.

Universities have services in place to help these students, however, several interview participants said they seldom took part in any extracurricular activities, for various reasons. Some felt that academic integration should be their priority, and as they were already overwhelmed trying to keep up with their studies, they did not want any extra distractions, while others, too nervous to take part in casual conversations, tried to avoid all unnecessary interactions in the university community. However, it was noted that if activities and services were well organized and easier to join, many would be more willing to take part. For example, several study participants said they were unaware of ongoing events and activities and a few who attended found they did not seem to be well organized or very useful. In most cases, the attendees were mainly other international students who were also looking for help.

To provide guidance and support for international students who are struggling to fit in, academic institutions should do the following:

First, do more to promote and publicize services being offered to international students and make it easier to access information about programs, events, and other available activities. In addition to posting notices on their websites, they should use email and other social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and especially apps popular among international students, like WeChat, to circulate promotional materials to ensure international students have every opportunity to be involved.
Second, they should create more opportunities for frequent contact between international students and local students. Activities and events should be designed and arranged to engage all students and not only target those from other countries. Research shows that having local friends or frequent contact with individuals from the host community helps facilitate social and cultural adjustment and increases intercultural awareness among all students (e.g., Hendrickson et al., 2011; Li et al., 2007). Many of the interview participants said they seldom saw classmates outside the classroom and did not have other occasions or reasons to interact socially. Without opportunities for contact and shared experiences, it is difficult to make friends, so organized activities that can attract students with common interests will allow them to create personal connections.

Third, a wide range of training or instructional sessions should be made available for students with different needs starting from the time they are first admitted to the time they graduate. For example, an early orientation session is beneficial for all students, but especially for international students, to make them aware of the help they can get and offices and individuals they can contact when they have problems. Participants in this study said they appreciated the orientation sessions in their universities because they helped them prepare for the new learning journey. Beyond this, over time, as the students evolve within their learning environments, their needs will change. The international student offices and other related entities should maintain close contact and arrange ongoing and evolving support to help with these changing needs.

Fourth, there should be ongoing guidance and supervision for those providing the support services offered through the universities. For example, the mentor-mentee system, also called the buddy system at some universities, where new students are paired
with peers in the second or third year of study, was very helpful, according to one participant. In this particular case, the mentor and mentee had biweekly meetings online and they eventually became good friends. The mentor provided meaningful support and was the “trusted insider” whenever the mentee had problems. This arrangement led to an ideal outcome, however, some participants said they only had one or two email exchanges and then forgot about each other. In these situations, the system is not really helping, but at least it did not cause any trouble. One “buddy” called a Chinese student at midnight with an invitation to a bar, which was more harassment than help.

Volunteers in these programs or activities do this with good intentions, but they may not be aware of the types of problems international students have and as a result do not know how they can really help. Training should be provided so that appropriate levels of support are available, and there must be regulations or guidelines about what they can and cannot do. Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2000) studied peer mentoring programs and made some suggestions to ensure better support for international students: first, the peer mentors should have adequate training to be able to understand and fulfill their roles; second, there should be a matching strategy put in place which will allow mentors and mentees to match themselves; third, an orientation session should be organized at the very beginning to introduce the program and clarify expectations; fourth, formal activities should be arranged to ensure frequent contact; and lastly, the mentors should be rewarded for their efforts (p. 641).

Finally, courses covering cross-cultural awareness and communication skills can help international students learn more about the social, political, and cultural aspects of Canada. They should include topics related to geography, history, social norms, and
promote cultural-specific social and communicative skills to help facilitate interaction between international and host country students. Many government-funded non-profit service centers for new immigrants have language and communication courses for new immigrants. Universities can work with these organizations to develop courses and training materials for international students.

**5.4.5 Recommendations for Further Research**

Although this study adds to and complements existing research on the experiences of Chinese students making small talk, there are several more areas that could be explored further.

First, a longitudinal study following Chinese (and other international) graduate students as they develop confidence and improve their skills making small talk over the course of their studies would provide a wealth of information. Cummins and Early (2015) studied conversation and academic language skills based on the concepts of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and found that second language learners needed one to two years of exposure to English to acquire the BICS and at least five years to catch up to native English-speaking peers in CALP. Their assertion was based on a study of grade-level students, which may not be the case for adult learners. In the current study, interview participants were unable to estimate a time span for personal improvement, which is understandable as most changes would have happened gradually and subconsciously; the results indicate that some who have been studying in Canada for three to five years are still struggling with BICS but are more capable with CALP.
A study which follows the same group of participants for at least two years from the time they begin their studies will give a more comprehensive picture of their experiences and progress and could help answer a number of questions and identify several relevant issues, including the following: How long does it take for Chinese students, or, by extension, international students, to develop enhanced skills and confidence in making small talk? How does this process take place, and in what way is it related to social integration? During the period under study, have they done anything that is especially beneficial? Have they had successful or unsuccessful experiences making small talk, and have any episodes stood out that either boosted or damaged their confidence? Have they made social connections and how has this been done?

A longitudinal study of this nature would be of particular interest to international students and other immigrants who are planning to live in Canada for an extended period or perhaps permanently. Although studies by the Canadian Bureau for International Education (2018) and Li and Tierney (2013) indicate that most Chinese and other international students have the intention to stay after graduation, there are still a number of students who plan to go home after receiving their education. For those who will leave after their academic program is complete, there is less need or motivation to socially integrate in Canadian society, and they may have different experiences in terms of making small talk with locals. In this study, the participants were not asked whether they planned to stay because the researcher felt they may not be comfortable answering this type of question during an interview, while they may be more willing to disclose their intentions in a large-scale anonymous survey. Including information on the intention or...
desire to stay in Canada would also provide insight into the role motivation can play in driving international students and immigrants to succeed with social integration.

Second, the current study only explores the social interactions between Chinese students and local Canadians. As noted, Chinese students also have social interactions with other international students, and this is an important part of their social life. Some participants said their only new friends in Canada were other international students. According to Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013), this is the most common social interaction model for the international student – socializing with only co-nationals and other internationals, and it is also beneficial for social and cultural adaptation in the new learning environment. To have a better understanding of the experiences of Chinese students, small talk with other international students should also be explored.

Third, this study did not exclude students who had previous overseas learning experiences in the US and Canada for language preparation or undergraduate and graduate studies before starting their current graduate programs. In this study, the participants were randomly recruited, and more than half of them had prior overseas learning experiences. Future studies could divide the research participants into two groups to examine the ongoing progress of each cohort, or a comparative analysis could be carried out to study how previous learning experiences influence the ability to make social connections in new settings.

Fourth, this study did not purposefully recruit and classify participants according to the time they have been living in Canada. It can be expected that the ability to engage in social interactions will be different in the first year or tenth year in the country. Therefore,
a stratified random sampling technique could be used to separate newcomers and relative old-timer participants so that challenges and coping strategies could be compared.

There is no universal timeline to distinguish newcomers from those who can be regarded as old-timers. There are studies on the experiences of first-year Chinese students in Canadian universities (Yan & Sendall, 2016; Zhang & Beck, 2014; Zhou & Zhang, 2014) which regard newcomers as those freshly exposed to a different culture, and which reveal a number of significant changes in their behaviour and feelings. There is also a study about the experiences of Chinese students in their later (emphasis by the author) years of study in Canada (Zang, 2007), in which the author includes those who have been studying in Canada for more than one year. However, Cheng et al. (2020) classify those who came to Canada within ten years as newcomers as far as the study of language use and communication challenges are concerned.

Finally, as another contribution, a large-scale quantitative study could be conducted to try to measure factors related to comfort and confidence when making small talk in English. These measurable factors could include demographic variables and others such as English language proficiency levels, the length of time living and studying in Canada and in other English-speaking countries, the number of close friends from their own countries of origin and from the host and other countries, the intention to stay in Canada after graduation, etc. These are all influencing factors that would likely have an impact on the progress of social integration.

5.5 Conclusion

As more Canadian universities actively recruit a growing number of international students, these educational institutions have a growing responsibility to help with social
and academic integration. The significant cultural gap between China and Canada makes it especially difficult for Chinese students to adapt to this learning environment. The speed and level of social integration is an important factor influencing the learning experiences and academic success of Chinese students. Serving as a mechanism to break-the-ice or open-the-door for conversation, small talk has a vital role in helping these students establish and maintain social bonds with others, which in turn facilitates social interaction with local Canadians and social integration into the Canadian community. Therefore, the purpose of this study has been to explore the challenges faced by Chinese students when making small talk with English-speaking individuals from Canada, to determine some of the factors causing these challenges, and put forward some suggestions for current and future students.

Through the use of interviews conducted with ten Chinese graduate students and survey questionnaires completed by eight instructors and classmates, this study has identified six major issues which contribute to their challenges:

1. comprehension - understanding language and context
2. participation - the act of joining or taking part in a group conversation
3. initiative - taking the lead to start a conversation
4. confidence - a feeling or belief that one can do something well
5. social connections - a feeling of being close and connected to others, and
6. propriety - the suitability or appropriateness of words or behaviour.

As each challenge was identified, possible causes were determined and eventually three common primary problems were found: language barriers, cultural differences, and personal attributes.
In order to help enhance their ability to make small talk and further establish and maintain social connections with local people in Canada, a number of suggestions have also been provided. Students should improve language proficiency, especially as it relates to real-life situations and communication, take advantage of the numerous resources available to facilitate learning social and cultural standards and norms, join communities of practice, and learn to use multiple communicative strategies.

Based on detailed descriptions of successful and unsuccessful experiences with small talk generously provided by a group of current Chinese students, this study has attempted to make a contribution which will be of benefit to future students and those individuals who are struggling with social integration in Canada. The results of the research may also provide guidance for Canadian students, instructors and other faculty members, and others, to help them understand some of the challenges faced by Chinese and international students, and how these challenges can impact both academic achievement and overall personal well-being.
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international students with low spoken English proficiency. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy, 17*(1), 25-47.


Appendix A
GREB Review Clearance Letter

August 31, 2021

Ms. Hui Xu
Queen’s University

Title: "GEDCU-1067-21 Small Talk: A Big Challenge for Chinese Graduate Students in Canada;" TRAQ # 6053884

Dear Ms. Xu:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GEDCU-1067-21 Small Talk: A Big Challenge for Chinese Graduate Students in Canada" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCP3 2) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405), 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/simon.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/simon.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/simon.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, GREB, at University Research Services for further review and clearance by GREB or the Chair, GREB.

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

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Professor Dean A. Tripp, PhD
Chair, General Research Ethics Board (GREB)
Departments of Psychology, Anesthesiology & Urology
Queen’s University
Appendix B

Letter of Information/Consent for Group A Participants

My name is Hui Xu, and I am an MEd student in the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University.

As part of my graduate research project entitled Small Talk: A Big Challenge for Chinese Graduate Students in Canada, I am inviting you to participate in an online interview to investigate some of the issues you have faced when making small talk with native English speakers. By “small talk”, I mean casual interaction to create and maintain a social connection, in other words, communication that does not intend to discuss any essential ideas but is just polite conversation about unimportant things.

The purpose of my study is to explore some of the challenges that Chinese international graduate students encounter when making small talk in Canada and the possible causes of these challenges in the hope that some solutions can be developed to help those who face this problem.

If you agree to take part, I will interview you about your experiences making small talk with native English speakers including your instructors and classmates in university. This interview will be one-on-one and will take place over Zoom at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will take approximately one hour and will be audio/video recorded and later transcribed.

It is possible that you will feel discomfort, embarrassment, or unhappiness when you discuss certain personal situations during this interview. If this should occur, please inform me and together we can contact Queen’s Student Wellness Services which can be accessed at https://www.queensu.ca/studentwellness/mental-health.

In addition, although the published study will not identify or quote you directly, there is a possibility that you may be identified by individuals who are familiar with you and your experiences. As a result, it may be possible to link you with potentially embarrassing situations which may result in negative consequences. Please be certain that I will take all steps possible to avoid breaching your confidentiality.

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant nor will you be paid for taking part in this study nor will there be any reimbursement for expenses.

The research will also include a survey of classmates and instructors of Chinese students. At the conclusion of our interview, I will ask if you would be willing to introduce this study to your Canadian classmates and instructors to ask if they would contact me. Please be aware that there is no obligation or expectation that you should do this, and your decision will not affect your status in the study.
Participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. You can stop your participation at any time by telling me (the researcher); ending the Zoom meeting; or, by another mechanism of withdrawal without any penalty. You may request to have your data withdrawn up until October 31, 2021, by contacting me at 20hx6@queensu.ca.

Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent permitted by applicable laws. I will do this by replacing your name with a unique ID code and will withhold any identifying information in my digital records and report, which will be stored on an encrypted hard drive on Queen’s University servers. All data which can be used to identify participants will be destroyed after five years; my supervisor will be ultimately responsible for the study data if I end my affiliation with Queen’s University.

Access to the data will only be available to my supervisor, Dr. Marie Myers and myself. The Queen's General Research Ethics Board (GREB) may request access to study data to ensure that the researcher(s) have or are meeting their ethical obligations in conducting this research. GREB is bound by confidentiality and will not disclose any personal information.

The contents of the interview will be used for my master’s thesis. The results may also be used to write research papers and/or journal articles, and/or to make presentations at conferences as a way to share the findings. As research participants, you will not receive the results directly but will be provided with information which will enable you to access the final published thesis on the Queen’s website. All information collected will be treated as confidential and your anonymity will be ensured.

If you have any ethics concerns, please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (toll free in North America) or email chair.GREB@queensu.ca. Call 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America. If non-English-speaking participants wish to contact the Chair for ethics concerns, translation assistance may be necessary, as the GREB Chair communicates in English only.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact my supervisor at myersmj@queensu.ca.

This Letter of Information provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether or not to participate in this research study.

You have not waived any legal rights by consenting to participate in this study.

By entering your name and the date below, you are verifying that you have read the Letter of Information and all of your questions have been answered.
Please insert an “X” below and enter your name and the date in the highlighted area to indicate that you consent to take part in this study.

____ Yes, you have my permission to use quotes/audio record/video record
____ No, you do not have my permission to use quotes/audio record/video record

____________________________ ____________________ _________________
Signature of Participant PRINTED NAME Date

Contact information of the participant:

____________________________ ____________________ _________________
Signature of Person Conducting PRINTED NAME & ROLE Date
the Research Project

2. Pre-Interview Verbal Consent for Group A

This script will be used in combination with the letter of information that outlines all required elements.

**Study Title:** Small Talk: A Big Challenge for Chinese Graduate Students in Canada

**Participant Study Number/ID:**

**Contact information of the participant:**

I confirm the following:

☐ I have explained all aspects of this study to the participant as outlined on the letter of information.

☐ I answered all of the participant’s questions to their satisfaction and the participant had sufficient time to consider their participation in this study.

☐ The participant was informed that they may choose to stop their participation at any time for any reason without penalty.

☐ The participant was informed that their legal rights would not be affected by consenting to participate in this study.

☐ The participant verbally agreed to participate in this study and to follow the study procedures.

☐ The participant was provided a copy of the Letter of Information for their records.

☐ The participant consented to the use of audio recording and the use of quotes.

____________________________ ____________________ _________________
Signature of the person conducting the verbal consent discussion Printed name Date
Appendix C
Letter of Information/Consent for Group B Participants

Thank you for participating in this study! This first screen is a letter of information to provide more detail about the project.

My name is Hui Xu, and I am an MEd student in the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University.

As part of my graduate research project entitled Small Talk: A Big Challenge for Chinese Graduate Students in Canada, I am investigating the barriers faced by Chinese international graduate students in making small talk with native English speakers in Canadian universities. By “small talk”, I mean casual interaction to create and maintain a social connection, in other words, communication that does not intend to discuss any essential ideas but is just polite conversation about unimportant things.

The purpose of my study is to explore some of the challenges that Chinese international graduate students encounter when making small talk in Canada and the possible causes of these challenges in the hope that some solutions can be developed to help those who face this problem.

In the first phase of my research, I interviewed some Chinese graduate students to learn about their experiences. In this phase, an online questionnaire will be used to collect information about your experiences making small talk with Chinese students, your opinions on some situations related to identified problems and challenges, and suggestions you may have regarding small talk and social integration.

The questionnaire has been developed and posted online using Qualtrics online survey software. This software is used internationally to conduct online surveys because it has multiple features that allow it to meet stringent information security requirements.

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant nor will you be paid for taking part in this study nor will there be any reimbursement for expenses.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer. You may request to have your data withdrawn up until October 31, 2021, by contacting me at 20hx6@queensu.ca.

Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent permitted by applicable laws. I will do this by replacing your name with a unique ID code and will withhold any identifying information in my digital records and report, which will be stored on an encrypted hard drive on Queen’s University servers. All data which can be used to identify participants will be destroyed after five years; my supervisor will be ultimately responsible for the study data if I end my affiliation with Queen’s University.
Please be certain that all possible steps will be taken to avoid breaching your confidentiality. The published study will not identify or quote you directly, but there is a possibility that you may be identified by individuals who are familiar with you and your experiences. As a result it may be possible to link you with potentially embarrassing comments or situations which may result in negative consequences.

Access to the data will only be available to my supervisor, Dr. Marie Myers and myself. The Queen’s General Research Ethics Board (GREB) may request access to study data to ensure that the researcher(s) have or are meeting their ethical obligations in conducting this research. GREB is bound by confidentiality and will not disclose any personal information.

The contents of the interview will be used for my master’s thesis. The results may also be used to write research papers and/or journal articles, and/or to make presentations at conferences as a way to share the findings. As research participants, you will not receive the results directly but will be provided with information which will enable you to access the final published thesis on the Queen’s website. All information collected will be treated as confidential.

If you have any ethics concerns, please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (toll free in North America) or email chair.GREB@queensu.ca. Call 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America. If non-English-speaking participants wish to contact the Chair for ethics concerns, translation assistance may be necessary, as the GREB Chair communicates in English only.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact my supervisor at myersmj@queensu.ca.

This Letter of Information provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether or not to participate in this research study.

You have not waived any legal rights by consenting to participate in this study.

There are 9 questions in total, and it may take 20 to 30 minutes to complete. At any time before you submit the questionnaire, you can close your browser to withdraw from the study.

By choosing “Yes, I have read this Letter of Information and agree to take part in this study”, you are verifying that you give informed consent to participate.

☐ Yes, I have read this Letter of Information and agree to take part in this study.

☐ No, I do not agree to take part.
Appendix D
Recruitment Poster

Is small talk a **BIG** problem?
Are you a graduate student originally from China?

你会用英语闲聊吗?
你想聊聊你的求学经历吗?
Please help me with my research by contacting me at 20hx6@queensu.ca

I think **IT** **IS**!

That's why I am doing a study to explore some of the *challenges* that Chinese students encounter when making small talk in English.

If you are a Graduate Student from China in a Canadian university, I am looking for you to help me by taking part in a Zoom meeting interview!

我是一名为女王大学的硕士研究生，学了20多年的英语，却仍然觉得用英语闲聊是很大的负担。所以我想了解您是不是也有或有过同样的感受。
Appendix E

Email to Invite Group A Participants for an Interview

Dear XXX,

My name is Hui Xu, and I am an MEd student in the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University. My research supervisor is Dr. Marie Myers.

Thank you for contacting me.

As part of my graduate research, I am conducting an interview examining the challenges faced by Chinese graduate students when making small talk with native English speakers in Canadian universities. The purpose of my study is to explore some of the challenges that these students encounter when making small talk in Canada and the possible causes of these challenges in the hope that some solutions can be developed to help those who face this problem.

I am looking for Chinese graduate students to take part in an interview about their experiences making small talk. I am sending you this email to ask if you are willing to help me with my study.

Included with this email is a link to a Letter of Information that provides further details about the study. Please read this letter carefully and if you are willing to take part in an interview, please insert your name and the date to indicate your consent.

https://queensuca-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/20hx6_queensu_ca/EYbWO_Gb4fZCoTj7EgXO4LoB8XcRrpGKBfbCtwpJv2pnZQ?e=ccZLDA

If you agree, we will schedule a meeting on Zoom for approximately one hour. I will collect information about you, your school life, and your successful and unsuccessful experiences using small talk.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Hui Xu
20hx6@queensu.ca
Appendix F

Email to Group A Participants to Recruit Group B Participants

Dear XXX,

Thank you for participating in my research project about small talk. Your help has been very meaningful and hopefully it will benefit many others in the future.

At the conclusion of our interview, you indicated that you would be willing to help me further by introducing the study and my contact information to your instructors and/or classmates who may be interested in participating.

I am seeking instructors who have taught or supervised Chinese graduate students for one semester or more in a Canadian university and classmates who are native English-speakers, have completed their previous education in Canada, and are in a class with at least three Chinese students.

There is no obligation for you to pass along this information, but if you are still willing, please paste the passage below in an email to your instructors or classmates. Please feel free to edit this passage if you wish.

Thank you for your assistance!

Sincerely,

Hui Xu

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Dear XXX,

I would like to introduce you to an interesting study being carried out by Hui Xu, an MEd student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University.

The study is called “Small Talk: A Big Challenge for Chinese Graduate Students in Canada” and its purpose is to explore some of the problems Chinese graduate students face when making small talk in this country.

The researcher is now looking for Canadian instructors and classmates of Chinese graduate students to complete a short online questionnaire asking about their experiences engaging in small talk with Chinese students.

I have not shared any of your contact information with the researcher, but if you are interested in helping with this study, please send Hui Xu an email at 20hx6@queensu.ca.

Thank you!
Appendix G

Qualtrics Invitation for Group B Participants

Thank you for your interest in my research.

My name is Hui Xu, and I am an MEd student in the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University.

As part of my graduate research, I am investigating the barriers faced by Chinese international graduate students in making small talk with native English speakers in Canadian universities.

In the first phase of my research, I interviewed some Chinese graduate students to learn about their experiences. In this phase I am sending a questionnaire to instructors and classmates of Chinese graduate students to learn more about your “small talk” experiences.

If you are willing to complete a questionnaire, please type your email in the box below. I will send you a link.

Thank you again for your help.
Appendix H
Interview Guide for Group A Participants

Preamble:
- Hello, how are you today?
- Thank you for meeting me today. In our earlier correspondence I sent you a copy of the Letter of Information and you have indicated that you read and understand it, and you have provided written consent that you are willing to take part in this interview. Do you still agree to take part in this interview?
- Thank you. I really appreciate your time and your help.
- Before we begin today, I would like to review the contents of the Letter of Information with you to be sure you have no questions.
- REVIEW LOI IN DETAIL
- Do you have any problems or concerns?
- COMPLETE THE Pre-Interview Verbal Consent for Group A
- Next, Let’s begin with some basic information about you. Is that okay?

Questions:
1. a. How long have you been in Canada?
2. a. How long have you been studying in Canadian universities?
   b. What program are you in now?
   c. Where did you receive your previous education?
3. a. How do you feel about your school life here in Canada?
   b. What makes you feel that way?
4. a. What are the differences in terms of social interactions you have in a Chinese and a Canadian university?
5. a. When you were in China, did you like making small talk with other people, such as your classmates, teachers and others?
   b. Did you have problems making small talk in China?
   c. What were the usual topics for small talk?
   d. If you rank the frequency of making small talk from one to ten, one meaning very seldom and ten meaning very often, how would you rank your frequency of making small talk in Chinese?
   e. What about in English in Canada?
6. a. Have you ever made small talk with native English speakers including your instructors and classmates in the university you are in now?
   b. What do you usually talk about?
   c. What were the situations when you made small talk with people in English?
7. a. Can you still remember the experiences of making small talk with people when you first attended university in Canada?
   b. Did you have problems then?
   c. Can you describe the differences between then and now?
   d. What do you think caused these differences?
8. a. Could you please describe some stories that you can think of when you were successful/comfortable making small talk with native English-speaking people?
   b. What was the situation?
   c. Who were you talking to?
   d. Why do you think it was successful/comfortable?
   e. Is there a time when your interaction with others was not so successful in a similar situation?
   f. If so, what did you do differently this time?

9. a. Have you had any troubling incidents when making small talk with native English-speaking people in your university?
   b. What was the situation?
   c. Who was the other person or persons?
   d. Why do you think it was troubling?
   e. What did they say?
   f. What did you say?
   g. What were you thinking?
   h. If you were given a second opportunity in the same situation, what would you say?

10. a. Do you have problems with greetings in English? How do you greet people now? How do you respond to people’s greetings? Where did you learn this way of greeting? Are you comfortable doing it this way? How would you greet people in Chinese? Are there any differences?
   b. Do you have problems starting a conversation with others in English when you would like to? What are the common topics you will talk about? What are the differences between the topics when starting a conversation in Chinese and in English?
   c. Do you have problems taking the floor in a conversation when talking in English? What about in Chinese?
   d. Do you have problems closing a conversation when talking in English? What about in Chinese?

11. a. What do you think were the causes of these troubling incidents?
   b. Are there any other possible causes?
   c. Which is the most important cause?

12. a. What strategies do you think can help those who have problems making small talk with native English speakers, especially with instructors and classmates in university?

**Closing:**
Do you have anything else that you would like to share?

Finally, as noted in the Letter if Information, an additional part of my research will include a survey of classmates and instructors of Chinese students. Would you be willing to introduce this study to your Canadian classmates and instructors and ask if they would contact me? You are not obliged to do so, but if you would like to, I will send you an email with more information that you could share with them.

I think this is all that I want to ask at this time. Thank you so much for your time.
Appendix I

Questionnaire for *Group B Participants*

Thank you for participating in this study! This first screen is a letter of information to provide more detail about the project.

My name is Hui Xu, and I am an MEd student in the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University. As part of my graduate research project entitled *Small Talk: A Big Challenge for Chinese Graduate Students in Canada*, I am investigating the barriers faced by Chinese international graduate students in making small talk with native English speakers in Canadian universities. By “small talk”, I mean casual interaction to create and maintain a social connection, in other words, communication that does not intend to discuss any essential ideas but is just polite conversation about unimportant things.

The purpose of my study is to explore some of the challenges that Chinese international graduate students encounter when making small talk in Canada and the possible causes of these challenges in the hope that some solutions can be developed to help those who face this problem.

In the first phase of my research, I interviewed some Chinese graduate students to learn about their experiences. In this phase, an online questionnaire will be used to collect information about your experiences making small talk with Chinese students, your opinions on some situations related to identified problems and challenges, and suggestions you may have regarding small talk and social integration.

The questionnaire has been developed and posted online using Qualtrics online survey software. This software is used internationally to conduct online surveys because it has multiple features that allow it to meet stringent information security requirements.

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant nor will you be paid for taking part in this study nor will there be any reimbursement for expenses.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer. You may request to have your data withdrawn up until October 31, 2021, by contacting me at 20hx6@queensu.ca.

Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent permitted by applicable laws. I will do this by replacing your name with a unique ID code and will withhold any identifying information in my digital records and report, which will be stored on an encrypted hard drive on Queen’s University servers.

Please be certain that all possible steps will be taken to avoid breaching your confidentiality. The published study will not identify or quote you directly, but there is a possibility that you may be identified by individuals who are familiar with you and your
experiences. As a result, it may be possible to link you with potentially embarrassing comments or situations which may result in negative consequences.

All data which can be used to identify participants will be destroyed after five years; my supervisor will be ultimately responsible for the study data if I end my affiliation with Queen’s University. Access to the data will only be available to my supervisor, Dr. Marie Myers and myself. The Queen’s General Research Ethics Board (GREB) may request access to study data to ensure that the researcher(s) have or are meeting their ethical obligations in conducting this research. GREB is bound by confidentiality and will not disclose any personal information.

The contents of the interview will be used for my master’s thesis. The results may also be used to write research papers and/or journal articles, and/or to make presentations at conferences as a way to share the findings. As research participants, you will not receive the results directly but will be provided with information which will enable you to access the final published thesis on the Queen’s website.

All information collected will be treated as confidential. If you have any ethics concerns, please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (toll free in North America) or email Chair.GREB@queensu.ca. Call 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America. If non-English-speaking participants wish to contact the Chair for ethics concerns, translation assistance may be necessary, as the GREB Chair communicates in English only.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact my supervisor at myersmj@queensu.ca. This Letter of Information provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether or not to participate in this research study.

You have not waived any legal rights by consenting to participate in this study.

There are 9 questions in total, and it may take 20 to 30 minutes to complete. At any time before you submit the questionnaire, you can close your browser to withdraw from the study.

By choosing “Yes, I have read this Letter of Information and agree to take part in this study”, you are verifying that you give informed consent to participate.

Do you agree to participate?
☐ Yes, I have read this Letter of Information and agree to take part in this study.
☐ No, I do not agree to take part.

1. You are or were a(n) _______ of Chinese graduate students.
   □ Instructor □ Classmate □ Both
2. How often do you engage in small talk with Chinese graduate students?
Please rank from 1 (never) to 5 (very often).

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

If you have ever engaged in small talk with Chinese graduate students, when do you talk with them and what do you talk about?

3. How challenging do you think it is for Chinese graduate students to make small talk with native English speakers?
☐ Not challenging ☐ Slightly challenging ☐ Somewhat challenging ☐ Extremely challenging

If possible, please provide an example of a situation that illustrates this level of challenge. (This might be an experience that you had or observed).

**The following are some situations related to problems and challenges when making small talk in English. Please describe your thoughts when reading them.**

4. Scenario One

I live in an apartment building. For several months last winter, I would often meet a neighbour in the hallway and elevator. Every time when we meet, we would greet each other by saying “Hi! How are you?” “I am good. Thanks. How are you?” Then we usually say, “It is really cold today.” “Yeah, really cold.” Then we don’t have anything else to say, and the elevator has not come yet. I just stand there wearing that smile, trying to avoid eye-contact, and hoping the elevator can come quickly.

**Having nothing to talk about** and **feeling it is hard to develop closer connections** with people is my biggest problem.

As a native speaker of English in Canada, have you ever been in a similar situation? If yes, please describe.

What would you do under similar circumstances?

What specific issues do you think cause the problems highlighted in **bold**?

Do you have any suggestions for the narrator in this scenario?

5. Scenario Two

One time I was invited to a get-together. I was talking to a friend of a friend. I have talked to her a couple of times, but we have not had any personal conversations. During our talk, she suddenly said “I am going to visit my brother in Edmonton next week.” I
thought about what to say, something like “Oh, I didn’t know you have a brother. Does he live in Edmonton? How will you go there? Why are you going to visit him? Is there any special occasion? Don’t you have classes next week?” and so on. But then I wondered if it is okay to ask these questions. Will these questions be too personal? Will she think I am nosy? Then after thinking about it more, I said “OK” to my friend, which I knew it was not much of a reply but at that moment it was the best I could manage.

I am always worried whether it is appropriate to say something.

Have you ever been in a similar situation? If yes, please describe. Under similar circumstances how would you respond to the friend? What specific issues do you think cause the problems highlighted in bold? Do you have any suggestions for the narrator in this scenario?

6. Scenario Three

One time I was in the room when some other people were watching a comedy called Corner Gas. They kept bursting into laughter, but I didn’t find it funny at all. I understood what was said in the show, but I just didn’t understand what the others were laughing about. I tried to get my friends to explain to me, but still, I didn’t feel it that funny. Sometimes my friends tell a joke or some witty puns, I just don’t get it.

I don’t think I lack a sense of humour, but I cannot get their humour, and sometimes even if I do get their humour, I don’t know how to respond.

Have you ever been in a similar situation? If yes, please describe. Under similar circumstances how would you respond to the friend? What specific issues do you think cause the problems highlighted in bold? Do you have any suggestions for the narrator in this scenario?

7. Scenario Four

We had Zoom class last year. Every time after discussing the questions the professor provided in a breakout room, my classmates would have some casual conversation. Sometimes I did not have a clue what they were talking about, especially when they mentioned names of a place or person, so I just sat there watching and smiling, which I think is totally fine.

Sometimes I did understand and then did this mental work in my mind thinking what I could say. I tried to find some perfect way to express my idea and when I was finally prepared, they have moved to another topic.

Sometimes I did have something ready to share, but I did not know when the best time was to jump in without being rude.

I feel it is especially hard for me to join in a casual conversation with a group of people.

Have you ever been in a similar situation? If yes, please describe. Under similar circumstances how would you engage in small talk?
What specific issues do you think cause the problems highlighted in bold? Do you have any suggestions for the narrator in this scenario?

8. What strategies could you suggest in order to help Chinese graduate students feel comfortable and natural when making small talk with native English-speaking Canadians?

9. What other suggestions would you give to help these students with their social integration at a Canadian university?

10. Is there anything else that you would like to add related to this topic?

This is the end of the survey. Please click the arrow to submit the questionnaire.