

EXPLORING THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF CHINESE  
GRADUATE STUDENTS AT MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

By

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## **Abstract**

A considerable number of Chinese international students enter Canada to pursue higher education every year. However, their less than adequate education in communicative competence domestically causes challenges in intercultural communication even for those students who study abroad by pursuing their Master's or doctoral degree. A great number of studies about Chinese students and their experiences in English speaking countries have been done in recent years. However, little research has provided a holistic picture of what Chinese students think about their own communicative competence, how they improve it consciously as well as what they think of the social and academic support offered by their universities. Therefore, this phenomenological ethnographic qualitative research project intends to fill this research gap. The results show that participants in this study perceived more challenges in terms of pragmatic competence and fluency. The strategies they used and the support provided by Memorial University and the province for improving their communicative competence were described. Pedagogical implications for ESL teachers and further support that should be provided by MUN are also addressed.

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## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

Having studied as an international graduate student in Canada for about two years, I can still recall those feelings I had in the first a few months when I had to start a new life in Canada. Besides running errands such as opening a bank account, buying food in the grocery store and paying tuition fees, I also needed to figure out how exactly the “study process” would unfold and what exactly I needed to do to complete my program. All of these things would have been done easily in my home country and with the help of my parents. Before I arrived in this city, I thought I could handle all these things with my “English ability”, after all, I had learned this language for more than ten years and I even majored in English teaching in college and learned British and American culture systematically for four years. I was eager and excited to prove to my parents and friends that I was capable of living in this country by myself. However, I ended up doing most of these things with the instruction of my roommate who had studied at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) for half a year.

On the second day after I arrived here, I had to meet an English-speaking account manager as had been scheduled by my study-abroad agency, to activate my bank account and get my Guaranteed Investment Certificate (GIC) money back. My roommate had classes on that morning, so I had to do it on my own. Everything went well although I could only clearly hear and understand half of what she said to me until she gave me a card and said, “You can only use this card temporarily, the ‘cheap’



(chip) and credit card will be mailed to your address in two weeks”. I did not understand why I could not use the card she gave me, why they are mailing a “cheap” card to me, what is and why on earth I needed this “credit card”. I started feeling more nervous and embarrassed when I asked those questions over and over again. Finally, she went out and found one of her Chinese colleague to translate for me.

A few days later, I went to the grocery store by myself. I was utterly stuck and blushed immediately when the cashier asked “Debit or credit?” when it was my turn to pay. Petrified for a few seconds, I asked for the total amount again, paid in cash, and left in a rush.

The above two scenarios were examples of me experiencing the second stage of cultural adaption – “culture shock”, which is described by Harry Triandis (1994):

Culture shock occurs when people interact with members of a very different culture and experience a loss of control. This happens when they cannot understand the behavior of the people from the other culture. Then they feel confused and develop both physical (e.g., asthma, headaches) and psychological (e.g., depression) symptoms (p. 31).

I was chagrined and discouraged for being so useless and having difficulty accomplishing even just daily tasks in English. However, as time went by, I realized that some of my fumbling performances in conversations could not be solely explained by “culture shock”; my lack of cross-cultural communication skills also prevented me from performing natural and productive communications with native

speakers. One supportive example I can recall is that when I first went to a career tea talk hosted by the International Office at MUN, I did not have the courage to talk to any employers even though I had observed other students doing this for a long time. I also noticed several groups of Chinese students in this tea talk, standing in the corners of the room, whispering to each other with awkward expressions just like me. The lack of English interpersonal skills had prevented us from having natural conversations in an academic context. These experiences are documented in the literature and are referred to as Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC).

Now I am grateful that I have successfully passed the “culture shock” period, and the period of being so ignorant of the real-life conversation in a foreign country. On the other hand, I am still reminded from time to time of the period when I constantly saw my Chinese peers in similar situations in their daily life and the academic context. Creswell (2012) claimed, “Researchers have a personal history that situates them as inquirers” (p. 51). As an ESL learner and a future ESL teacher, I resonate with what my Chinese peers have been through with their insufficient intercultural communicative competence. At the same time, I feel obligated to work towards changing this situation for all my Chinese peers so that they can focus on their studies and lead an easier life in Canada. Therefore, I am interested in exploring Chinese international students’ perceptions of their communicative competence and what has contributed to their current competence, in order to offer practical suggestions for Canadian universities and ESL teachers in China, so that they can support and instruct

Chinese ESL learners and prospective international students appropriately.

In this chapter, I first discuss the increasing number of Chinese international students and the benefit they could bring to the host countries. Then I reference the research around the world which explores the challenges international students encounter while studying in a foreign country. Next, I briefly introduce the important role university support plays in international students' adjustment to host countries. Last, I describe the research problem based on current research, and raise research questions for my study. The purpose of presenting the population of Chinese international students and the challenges they face at the beginning of my thesis is to show the importance of Chinese international students to the development of Canadian economy and culture, and to explain the importance of improving Chinese international students' ICC and the significance of supporting their life in Canada.

### **1.1 Increasing Population of International Students and Their Contribution to Education and Economy**

Since the turn of the century, studying abroad has become a common practice to pursue higher education, gain intercultural understanding, and cultivate the global mind. In 2016, there were over 4.8 million international students, up from 2 million in 2000. By 2025, this number is expected to hit 8 million (UNESCO, 2018). According to the 2015 Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad, between 1978 and 2013, the total population of Chinese students studying abroad was

only approximately 3,058,600, but in 2013 alone, 413,900 Chinese students studied abroad, and the majority of them chose to pursue degrees in higher education. In English-speaking host countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the US, and Canada, Chinese international students make up between one quarter and one third of the international student body (Wang & Miao, 2015), with Canada ranking fourth among those destination countries receiving foreign student enrolment.

Post-secondary education in English-speaking countries appeals to Chinese students from Mainland China. Not only are these host countries well known for their high quality of education, but their immigration policies also make English-speaking countries attractive (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). For instance, in January 2014, the Canadian federal government released a plan called Canada's International Education Strategy (Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, 2014). The main purpose is to attract more international students, and double the number of international students and academic researchers to more than 450,000 by 2022.

The desire to increase opportunities for overseas students in higher education is motivated by numerous factors, with the most obvious one being economic. International student enrolments in Canada are "viewed as an important, even essential source of revenue by post-secondary institutions" (Lee & Wesche, 2000, p. 638). Indeed, international students play a critical role in Canadian economic

prosperity. They spend more than eight billion Canadian dollars annually in Canada. With regard to Newfoundland, it is estimated that each international student contributes from ten thousand to twenty thousand annually to the local economy through house rental, food, clothing, and entertainment. In addition, international students attract visitors from their home countries, such as their parents who frequently come to visit during their children's studies (Department of Human Resources, Labor and Employment, 2005).

In addition to substantial economic benefits, international students also offer many social and cultural benefits, enriching Canadian society with their own cultures. They constitute "an ideal source of prospective skilled labor, since they are comparatively well prepared for the Canadian labor market than other categories of newcomers considering their Canadian educational credentials, proficiency in English or French, and familiarity with Canadian culture" (Que, 2015, p. 4).

## **1.2 International students facing challenges**

International students, leaving their home country to learn in a country that may have different languages, culture and beliefs from their own, have to experience challenges during their study overseas. Studies have documented that international students face more challenges on and off the campus than their domestic counterparts (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Zheng & Berry, 1991). Based on the results of several studies she performed with Chinese students in the UK, Gu (2011) listed three major

domains where students face challenges: academic, social, and cultural.

While certain levels of IELTS and TOEFL are required before students go abroad, studies have shown that these tests are insufficient measurements of students' ability to cope with problems both academically and socially in the new cultural environment (Holmes, 2010). International students still experience certain degree of *acculturate stress*. According to Gill (2007), undergoing intercultural adaptation is an inevitable experience for international students, and Chinese international students often find themselves experiencing a sense of loss in English speaking countries (Beres & Woloshyn, 2017; Belford, 2017; Young, 2017; Gill, 2007; Gu, 2011; Windle, Hamilton, Zeng, & Yang, 2008), which is attributed to insufficient preparation and less understanding of English cultures (Gill, 2007). Moreover, Chinese students are reported to experience more stress in an English-speaking country due to the huge cultural differences between Eastern and Western cultures (Beres & Woloshyn, 2017). Besides, the traditional test-oriented English teaching methods that were prevalent before the beginning of the Millennium resulted in generations of “mute” and intercultural incompetent Chinese ESL learners (Zhang, 2008, Zhao, 2009).

### **1.3 Importance of University Support for International Students' Intercultural Adaption**

International students who are confronting numerous challenges in host countries need to adapt to the new culture and new educational and social environment, the

process of which has been suggested in many studies as difficult and stressful (Choi, 1997; Mori, 2000; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Yang & Clum, 1994). Fortunately, experts reported that social support has positive effects on psychological adjustment and buffering effects on the impact of life stresses (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Leavy, 1983), because the strong social ties that the students develop with other international students can make their personal adjustments easier (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998).

Lee, Koeske, and Sales (2004) further showed that social support could moderate and buffer the symptoms caused by stress. The data from their research showed that compared to students reporting low levels of social support, students with high levels of social support were significantly less likely to report symptoms of acculturative stress.

#### **1.4 Research Problem**

Statistics from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China shows that the number of Chinese overseas students increased dramatically from 400,000 to 550,000 in the last five years (2013; 2017). However, being less educated on intercultural communicative competence domestically caused Chinese students' insufficient abilities in intercultural communication (Wang, 2012). This insufficiency could directly affect their satisfaction and increase acculturative stress while studying and living in an English-speaking country (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998).

A great number of studies about Chinese students and their experiences in English

speaking countries have been done in recent years (Beres & Woloshyn, 2017; Chen & Lewis, 2011; Gu, 2011; Zhao, 2013; Yakunina & Weigold, 2011). Most of the Chinese researchers discussed the difficulties directly from three aspects: language, culture and mental health (Beres & Woloshyn, 2017; Gu, 2011; Zhao, 2013). Several studies provided ideas about what teachers in China should do to help students improve their intercultural abilities (Gill, 2007; Xue, 2014; Zhao, 2013).

However, few studies focus specifically on Chinese graduate students' own perspectives of their English communicative competence when they study in an English-speaking country. Little research has provided a holistic picture of what Chinese students think of their communicative competence, how they improve it consciously as well as with the social and academic support offered by their universities. Therefore, this research project intends to fill this research gap by investigating the experience and the reasons for Chinese graduate students' difficulties in intercultural communicative competence, and draws pedagogical implications for both Canadian and Chinese ESL teachers.

The research addressed the following questions:

1. How do Chinese graduate students perceive their communicative competence in both academic and social contexts?
2. What do they believe has contributed to their current communication competence?



3. What strategies have they applied to improve their English speaking in general?

4. What do they think the university could do to help them improve their communicative competence, and promote social adjustment and academic adaption?

As the largest university on the eastern coast of Canada, Memorial University is well known for its excellence in many areas with accomplished faculty and modern research resources, which attract an increasingly large number of Chinese students to enrich their learning experiences. It can be speculated that there will be more Chinese students coming to study in the future. Under these circumstances, it is important to help them adapt to the new learning environment. Therefore, this study describes Chinese graduate students' perspectives on their communicative competence and the conversational difficulties they experience, and provides university authorities as well as Chinese ESL teachers with a better understanding of the needs of Chinese students, so that they can take effective measures to support ESL learners.

The result of this study will be of interest to international students, in particular, Chinese graduate students, and the International Office and support center of Memorial University. It will also inform English-as-second/foreign-language (ESL/EFL) teaching in Canada and other countries (particularly in China).

This thesis is composed of six parts. In Chapter 2, I will review the literature that includes the theoretical framework—Communicative Competence and Intercultural Communicative Competence, challenges of international students, language learning

strategies and social support programs. In Chapter 3, the methodology will be presented in detail. Chapter 4 will represent the findings from the individual interviews and the focus group discussion. The following in-depth discussion and implications will be provided in Chapter 5. In the last chapter, I will conclude the study, present its limitations, and offer recommendations for further research.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

Although considerable studies have been done regarding Chinese students studying in an English-speaking country, they focus either on the challenges Chinese students are facing, or specifically on single one category of Chinese international students' communicative competences. Few studies have reviewed the whole picture of students' perspectives, performances and expectations concerning their communicative competence, and reflected on the connection between these three aspects. In addition, the educational reasons why Chinese students could generally have difficulties to communicate with native speakers have not been thoroughly explored. However, the existing literature is of great value by providing an overview and laying the basis for my research.

This chapter contains five parts. First, I introduce the theoretical framework that underlies my analysis in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. The second part illustrate the challenges Chinese students face while studying abroad. Then the strategies for language learning are introduced, followed by the social support that has been offered to international students for their social adjustment and academic achievement. The final part summarizes the reviewed literature.

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

Data analysis in the study relies deeply on the theories that underpin it. Those

theories are also needed to shed light on the discussion part of this thesis. Therefore, the theoretical framework is established to assist in understanding two main concepts of this study: communicative competence and intercultural communicative competence. The definitions and the history of their development are introduced and elucidated.

### **2.1.1. Communicative Competence**

Language is usually defined as a system of conventional spoken, manual, or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves (Brown & Fraser, 1963; Bloom, 1973; Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). When we are using language to communicate with other people, we need to choose the most appropriate form for that particular situation. This means that what we say is more or less decided by who we are, where we are, to whom we are talking and what kind of relationship we have with the person involved in the conversation, which reflects the social nature of language.

Vygotsky (1962) made endeavors to explore the social functions of language by his definition of “the meaning of a word” – “It is a dynamic, fluid, complex whole, which has several zones of unequal stability.... The dictionary meaning of a word is no more than a stone in the edifice of sense” (p. 146). What Vygotsky means is that the meaning of a word is not as fixed as it is defined and explained in a dictionary; rather, it should be unstable, flexible, and variable with changes of situations and social

contexts.

A similar and more mature concept of communicative competence was then coined by Hymes (1972) in his seminal book, the term “communicative competence” was in contrast to Chomsky’s term linguistic competence, which is understood as the tacit knowledge of language structure and the ability to use this knowledge to understand and produce language. For Chomsky, competence simply means knowledge of the language system, in other words, grammatical knowledge. However, real language use involves far more than knowledge and ability for grammaticality. In Hymes’s (1979) words, there are “rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless” (p. 15), which simply means, besides grammatical rules, language use is governed by rules of use, which ensures that the desired or intended functions are performed and the language use is appropriate to the context. In other words, communicative competence entails knowing not only the language code or the form of language, but also what to say to whom and how to say it appropriately in any given situation, that is “when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner” (Hymes, 1972, p. 277).

This term of communicative competence and sociolinguistic concept then became fundamental to the development of communicative language teaching and was widely taken up in language teaching circles. Later, based on Hymes’s concept, Canale and Swain (1980) developed their conception of communicative competence to include

three communicative aspects: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence, which was expanded to four by Canale (1983) three years later to include one more aspect – discourse competence.

To further elaborate on how to teach and learn communicative skills, in 2000, Hedge discussed five main components of communicative competence, namely, linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse, competence, strategic competence, and fluency. Hedge's (2000) classification of the components of communicative competence is used as the theoretical framework of my research. The following discussion is based on Hedge (2000, p.46-55).

***Linguistic competence*** Linguistic competence “is concerned with knowledge of the language itself, its form and meaning” (Hedge, 2000, p. 46). More specifically, it involves spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure, and semantics. Hedge emphasizes that linguistic competence is an integral part of communication competence, and it is wrong to think that communicative language teaching does not aim for a high standard of linguistic correctness.

***Pragmatic competence*** Pragmatic competence is concerned with the appropriate use of the language in the social context. That is to say, the choice of the vocabulary and structure depends on the setting, the relative status of the speakers, and their relationships. In Hymes's words, to know “when to speak, when not, what to talk

about with whom, when, where and in what manner” (1972, p. 277)

***Discourse competence*** Discourse competence refers to one’s ability to create coherent written text or conversation and the ability to understand them (Canale & Swain, 1980). In other words, it is one’s ability to express or to understand a topic logically and coherently by effectively employing or comprehending the cohesive markers used in the discourse such as “by the same token”, “to put it in other words”, “first; second; at last”, and also the reference words such as “it”, “they”, “that”, et cetera in the context. It is these cohesive words which hold meaning together in a sensible way. Discourse competence, according to Hedge, also includes one’s ability to initiate, develop, enter, interrupt, check, or confirm in a conversation.

***Strategic competence*** Strategic competence is similar to communication strategies. It refers to strategies one employs when there is communication breakdown due to lack of resources. One can compensate for this by searching for other means of expression, such as using a similar phrase, using gestures, or using a longer explanation. For example, if you forget how to say “knife”, you can use gestures to show what you mean or to explain it by saying that it is a tool one can use to cut things. In this way, they can keep the conversation going and possibly get input from the other end.

***Fluency*** The last component is termed as fluency, which means one’s ability to “link units of speech together with facility and without strain or inappropriate

slowness or undue hesitation” (Hedge, 2000, p. 54). Research suggests that teaching learners lexical phrases or chunks of language, also termed as “prefabricated language”, “can help learners produce the language more fluently” because they can be easily retrieved from memory (Hedge, 2000, p. 55). Lewis (2002, p.121) also states that “fluency is achieved largely by combining chunks, reducing processing difficulty”. Some examples of these chunks are “as far as I am concerned”, “to make a long story short”, “to be on the safe side”, “I agree with this, but...”, “take things for granted”, “generally speaking” etc.

### **2.1.2. Intercultural Communicative Competence**

In second language teaching, since the role of culture has been underscored for several decades as an indispensable component of successful communication, it is not surprising that intercultural communicative competence is inherently linked with the notion of communicative competence. As Fantini (2008) pointed out, “acceptance by others is more often strained by offending behaviors than incorrect grammar” (p. 21). It is by understanding the cultural dimension of language that one avoids becoming a “fluent fool” (Bennett, 1997).

Then, what is intercultural communicative competence? Reaching some form of consensus on the definition of intercultural competence has engaged researchers for decades. ICC has been conceptualized in a variety of ways depending on the scholars’ theoretical orientations and perceptions of what counts as competence (Song, 2008, p.



82), and it has been extensively researched in the area of communication for over half a century (Deardorff, 2006). The definition of ICC that is well accepted in the area of communicative competence is intended as the “ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2006, p.247-248) and comprises both effective and appropriate behavior and utterance (Deardorff, 2011; Spitzberg, 1989; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

Specifically, according to Spitzberg (1989), “competence in communicating can be viewed as an evaluative impression of communication quality. Quality, in this instance, is referenced by the criteria of appropriateness and effectiveness.” (p. 249-250). According to Wang (2012), effectiveness indicates the competence of achieving objectives through intercultural communication, and appropriateness refers to the competence to choose the most appropriate communication in a specific social environment or occasion.

In order to achieve the requirements of effectiveness and appropriateness, the three dimensions – knowledge, skills, and attitudes are proposed in accordance with Byram’s (1997) models, and summarized by Cruza (2013) as:

knowledge/*savoir* refers to our awareness of history, culture, and other sociocultural aspects of the community. This type of knowledge enables language users to observe differences between the country of origin and the target language community as well as disparities in social relations and their impact on

the shape of interpersonal communication.

know-how/*savoir-faire* can be described as “skills of comparison, of interpreting and relating” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 12). *Savoir-faire* involves the ability to use the *savoirs* to compare one’s own and the interlocutor’s cultures to predict the roots of potential misunderstandings and find possible solutions before a culture clash occurs. It also refers to the ability to implement the knowledge of cross-cultural differences, social norms and conventional requirements in successful communication. Being aware of such differences, an interculturally-oriented speaker should be able to act as a mediator between L1 and L2 cultures.

being/*savoir-etre* underlines the role of attitudes towards other cultures in successful communication. A truly intercultural speaker has a well-developed sense of curiosity and openness towards other cultures, is willing to suspend judgmental evaluations of other people and readily accepts the fact that cultures are different and governed by diverse norms. The development of such positive attitudes depends on the ability to evaluate critically one’s own cultural background and see its culture in relation to that of the other cultural groups. The awareness of such cross-cultural differences should ideally evoke a feeling of empathy and positive attitudes towards other cultures, which, ultimately, may enable an individual to integrate with other communities. (Cruza, 2013, p. 123)

As conceptualized, attitude towards the target culture is the fundamental point to develop intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997).

## **2.2 Challenges Chinese Students Face during Studying Abroad**

With the globalization of the world, more and more students choose to study abroad to pursue higher education. China, as a country having the largest population

of the world, has sent an enormous number of students to many countries (Wang & Miao, 2015), among which the English-speaking countries such as America, the UK, Australia and Canada are the most popular destination countries (UNESCO, 2018). However, due to the huge difference in language and culture between Chinese students' home country and target countries, these students experience many aspects of challenges, which are intensively reported by many researchers in the past few decades (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Beres & Woloshyn, 2017; Chen & Lewis, 2011; Flannery & Wieman, 1989; Gu, 2012; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Jung et al., 2007; Smith & Khwaja, 2011; Spencer-Rogers & McGovern, 2002; Williams & Johnson, 2011; Yakunina & Weigold, 2011; Zhao, 2013). Sun and Chen (1999) identified three dimensions of difficulties that Chinese students encounter in the USA: language ability, cultural awareness, and academic achievement. Gu (2011) also reach a similar conclusion that there are three dominant aspects of challenges including culture shock, language barrier and mental stress.

Among these categories, the English language barrier is identified as a major problem for some international students (Church, 1982; Ying, 1996). Research shows that international students' academic achievement and cultural adaption are significantly related to target language proficiency (Flannery & Wieman, 1989). As a significant theory and an indispensable aspect of language proficiency (Spolsky, 1989), international students' communicative competence also contributes to their satisfaction and psychological well-being of living in an exotic environment (Oberg,

1960).

Although some researchers suggested that it is problematic to treat Chinese international students as a homogenous group (Gu, 2011; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Gu & Maley, 2008), Chinese international students have common difficulties in using the English language, which are distinct from what their counterparts from other countries experience. To most Chinese students, language difficulty is more than simply the challenge of mastering a new language; the entrenched English pragmatic inadequacy of Asians prohibits them from participating in classroom discussion and intercultural communication (Austin, 1998; Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2000). In addition, due to the characteristics of test-oriented English education in China, most Chinese students show insufficient English communicative competence and experience challenges when they study overseas (Zeng, 2006; Zhao, 2009).

Zhang and Brunton's (2007) study indicated that 56% of Chinese students encounter difficulties in speaking English during their study in New Zealand, and these difficulties caused mental stress. As one Chinese international student in Yan and Berliner's study (2011) described, the unsuccessful communication with domestic students and thus staying in the comfort zone to interact mostly with Chinese peers was a cycle of stress and frustration. Speaking Chinese generated the feelings of guilt and having no close domestic friends painfully remind them of their incompetence again. Zhang and Brunton continued to argue that the degree of stress with language

difficulties also negatively affected Chinese students' academic goals and achievement.

### **2.3 Research on Language Learning Strategies**

Those international students who suffer from their English insufficiency and intercultural incompetency can consciously apply appropriate learning strategies to improve their English and thus alleviate acculturate stress. To employ strategies suitable for them to learn English, they need the knowledge of how to learn.

“Learning how to learn” has been regarded as a critical and necessary component of the language learning process, from which the idea of learner training and strategy instruction has emerged (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Hurd & Lewis, 2008; Weaver & Cohen, 1997). Strategies are the tools for active, self-directed involvement in learning that is essential for developing communicative ability (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden & Rubin, 1987). The Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) divided language learning strategies into direct strategies (memory, cognitive and compensation strategies) and indirect strategies (metacognitive, affective and social strategies). Direct strategies consist of “strategies that directly involve the target language” and “require mental processing of the language” (Oxford, 1990, p.37). Indirect strategies provide “indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy and other means” (Oxford, 1990, p.151). Effective and

appropriate learning strategies can help learners promote both their language knowledge and communication skills.

Many researchers have conducted studies to investigate the importance and influence of learning strategies on language learning. Green and Oxford (1995) believed that “more proficient language learners use more learning strategies and more types of strategies than less proficient language learners” (p.285). Language learning strategies not only help learners become competent in learning and using a language, they also increase learners’ self-directed learning (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). Hong-Nam and Leavell’s (2006) research also showed that all language learners used learning strategies consciously or unconsciously, and the strategies they employ differ from one another. Furthermore, competent language learners applied more purposeful language learning strategies than their less competent counterparts.

There are some studies investigating students’ learning strategies specifically in an EFL context, and some of the findings shed light on concerns in relation to strategies for improving communicative competence. Tuncer (2009) conducted a study to examine the different choices of using language learning strategies between monolingual and bilingual language learners. The participants were 246 (162 Females/84 Males) monolingual and bilingual students studying English as a foreign language at Mersin University ELT department. The results of the study showed that bilinguals were more likely to employ cognitive and meta-cognitive

strategies than monolingual learners. Further, the use rates of learning strategies of learners of different genders were different, with female learners being more successful and positive in using language learning strategies than male learners.

Purdie and Oliver (1999) conducted research investigating bilingual learners' language learning strategies. The participants were 58 bilingual primary school-aged children. They came from three main cultural groups: Asian, European and Arabic-speaking Middle Eastern. The study found that cognitive strategies such as taking notes and repeating were used most frequently while the least frequently used strategies were social strategies such as cooperating. The finding also showed that participants from the same cultural group preferred certain strategies to others, which suggested that cultural and educational experience could affect students' choice of using particular language strategies.

A similar study (Yılmaz, 2010) was conducted at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University in Turkey. One hundred and forty participants in the department of English Language Teaching participated in this study. The results suggested that students who majored in English preferred employing compensation strategies rather than using affective strategies. It also showed the important influence of cultural and educational background on students' preference to learning strategies; for example, the educational experience of Turkish students lead them to prefer some strategies (e.g., compensation and partly meta-cognitive strategies) over others. Further, gender and language

proficiency also had some influences on their strategy use. However, more research was needed in terms of gender influence, as there was a huge gender imbalance in Yılmaz's study.

Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) examined the overall language learning strategies of 55 ESL students with differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds enrolled in a university's pre-admission language-learning institute, and the relationship between language learning strategies and L2 proficiency. The results showed that students had the awareness of using learning strategies; meta-cognitive strategies were the most preferred strategy while the affective and memory strategies were the least preferred. Moreover, female students tended to employ affective and social strategies more often than male students did. In the meantime, the study found a curvilinear relationship between strategy use and English proficiency, revealing that students at the intermediate level applied more strategies than students at the beginning or advanced levels and strategic language learners progressed faster than less strategic ones.

From the studies above, it can be summarized that:

1. Different educational backgrounds and cultural backgrounds affect language learners' use of language learning strategies.
2. Gender differences exist in employing learning strategies in language learning.
3. More proficient language learners use language-learning strategies less frequently than less proficient language learners do.



4. Language learners are likely to employ meta-cognitive and compensation strategies the most and affective strategies the least.
5. Social strategies are helpful to develop learners' language proficiency and improve their intercultural communication.

## **2.4 Social Support**

Overseas students, as language learners, not only use strategies to improve their language skills, they also need support from their family and friends to alleviate loneliness and stress and support from the host country or university to assist in their language improvement and intercultural adaptation.

Kashima and Loh (2006) suggested that personal ties with international, co-national, and local students significantly influenced acculturation. Lee, Koeske, and Sales (2004) further proved that social support moderated and buffered the physical symptoms caused by stress. Therefore, social support plays an influential role in international students' sojourning life in a foreign country.

As international students, who leave their home country and stay in a country which sometimes has a completely different community from their own countries, the primary goal is studying. They spend much more time at the school campus than any other places. Therefore, universities have the responsibility to provide support to help students deal with various problems and difficulties in order to alleviate the psychological stress they suffer during their sojourn and academic study. Although the

literature is limited representing programs designed to meet the specific needs of international students for improving their intercultural communicative competence, there are some studies concerning university programs offered to international students generally in assisting in their social adjustment and academic achievement.

#### **2.4.1 Support for social adjustment**

Four studies in relation to peer support programs were conducted which were helpful to understand the social adjustment of international students. One initiative (Shigaki & Smith, 1997) matched eight pairs of international and host graduate students at the New York University to facilitate adjustment of international students and positively influence the quality of the educational experience of students attending this university. The participants chosen majored in education, and in most cases enrolled in the same program, to make it convenient for cultural sharing. Participants' diaries disclosed positive outcomes including increased cultural understanding and knowledge, bonding friendship, helpful support on personal issues, progress in English language communication skills of international students, and sharing of academic information and knowledge.

In the second program, international students and designated local volunteer students were paired and attended various campus activities together (Abe, Talbot & Geelhoed, 1998). The program aimed to help international students navigate the new culture and familiarize them with the new environment. The results showed that

international student participants gained higher scores on a social adjustment measure than non-participants, but no evidence showed that they also scored higher on academic achievement. The limitations of this study included self-selection of participants and relatively small sample size, with 28 program participants and 32 control group students.

The third study was designed to offer school support for international students. Smith, Chin, Inman, and Findling (1999) used outreach support groups to help those international students who might be in need of counseling but were reluctant to search for counseling service; however, the main purpose of the study was to examine the efficacy of cross-cultural counseling strategies, so the actual adaption of international students and the effects on international students were not measured.

There was another program which paired international students with graduate students majoring in counseling in anticipation of aiding social adaption for international students (Jacob & Greggo, 2001). Participants' adjustment problems were identified through focus groups. The focus groups also invited program administrators to address concerns, refine the program and make recommendations for counselor training. However, this study's original purpose was to explore counseling competencies of graduate counseling students. Therefore, like Smith et al.'s (1999) study, the adjustment progress of international students was not specifically measured. The effect of counseling on international students was not discussed; instead,

international students provided feedback on their needs in terms of activities that they believe to be helpful for social networking.

Other studies make recommendations in the areas of mental health services and cross-cultural training for students (Mori, 2000; Lacina, 2002). Sarkodie-Mensah's study (1998) showed the helpfulness of orientation, introduction of library use, and accent reduction suggestions provided to international students. International students in Canada regarded orientation and homestay as helpful to social adjustment and intensive English programs as an essential element to confidence building and language acquisition (Lee & Wesche, 2000).

#### **2.4.2 Support for Academic Achievement**

In addition to programs designed for international students' social adaptation, there are also some universities that have established support services to assist international students in their academic studies. These include English for Academic Purpose (EAP) courses, one-on-one tutoring, and workshops that focus on specific academic content and skills. The efficacy of these interventions was examined to determine their effects on international students' academic achievement.

Studies suggested that EAP courses such as *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* could affect English skills, academic performance and retention. Evidence from Kaspar's study (1997) showed that content-based ESL instruction resulted in improved proficiency in English language skills. One hundred and fifty-two ESL

students of Kingsborough Community College participated in this study, with 73 enrolled in an ESL content-based reading and writing course and 79 in the non-content-based control group. The results suggested that the experimental group gained better scores on a writing test and the course examination at the end of a semester. Students in the intervention group were also reported to have higher passing rates and better grades in their course paper writing, and better graduation rates than students in a control group. Both groups were instructed by using the same teaching methods, but the content-based course required readings from five academic disciplines while the course readings required in the control group were unrelated in content. In another study at the same college, ESL students enrolled in learning communities that consisted of content courses and language support courses (Mlynarczyk & Babbitt, 2002). Students attended the classes as a cohort and had tutors. The authors reported that participants had higher passing rates in their ESL courses, did well in the academic courses, and had better than average GPAs and retention. However, neither of these two studies has specifically addressed whether the participants were international students.

An Australian study used both content learning and extra learning support classes for international students, to solve the problems identified by the instructors of a management course (Beasley & Pearson, 1999). The classes focused on academic reading and writing, critical analysis and examination strategies. Grades of those who were identified to attend the extra support classes and those who elected to attend

were compared with grades of those who were identified to attend but chose not to attend. The former group consistently had higher grades and sometimes dramatically so. The overall course failure rate decreased from 13 to 1.5 percent over a six-year period. A different approach to improving students' English skills involved the collaboration of content and ESL instructors (Snow & Kamhi-Stein, 1997). The content teachers modified their courses to build students' language skills and the ESL instructors provided content-based academic language instruction assisted by peer leaders. Participants' grades were equivalent to or higher than the grades of students who enrolled in the content courses alone.

Two studies reported on peer tutoring programs. One of them was a four-year-long pilot program which paired international students with trained native students who were enrolled in the same academic course and met as study partners twice a week (Blakely, 1995). Native students helped international students with academic English skills. After the study, both study partners achieved higher grades than the overall class average; participating international students had higher GPAs than their non-participating counterparts. The one-semester retention rate for international participants nearly doubled the overall retention rate of the university. In a similar study at a Canadian university, two first-year Economics native students were equally designated to work with a total 16 international students in the same major as "lecture buddies" (Mendelsohn, 2002). The native students met weekly with their partners to review lecture notes and summaries, and clarify information. The

study shed light on challenges international students faced and identified helpful strategies; however, it neither included the data with regard to program assessment nor link participation to academic achievement.

## **2.5 Summary**

In sum, with the increasing number of international students and especially Chinese students, challenges they face have been addressed by researchers for over decades, including aspects of language barrier, academic success and cultural adaption, among which the language barrier has a huge influence on the development of the other two aspects of challenges. Studying and living in a foreign country, international students have to use strategies to improve their communicative competence in the host language so that they can adapt to the new country not only academically but also socially. Support that has been provided by universities in different countries was reviewed. It was reported to be helpful to international students' social adjustment and academic achievements. However, little research has provided a holistic picture of how Chinese students improve their ICC consciously as well as with the social and academic support offered by their universities. Therefore, this research project intends to fill this research gap by investigating the experience of and the reasons for Chinese graduate students' difficulties in communicative competence, and draw pedagogical implications for both Canadian and Chinese ESL teachers.

In the next chapter, I will elaborate on the methodology I used in this research.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

In this chapter, I first explain the rationale for using a phenomenological ethnographic research design to explore Chinese graduate students' communicative competence. Then, I present the methods I used for data collection in this qualitative study, and thereafter, I explain the process of data analysis. At the end of this chapter, trustworthiness and the researcher's role in this study are discussed.

### **3.1 A Qualitative Phenomenological Ethnographic Research Design**

Creswell (2015) defined qualitative research as the best way “to address a research problem in which you do not know the variables and need to explore” (p.17). In order to meet the objectives of investigating the experience and the reasons for Chinese graduate students' difficulties in communicative competence, and from which pedagogical implications will be drawn, I conducted a phenomenological ethnographic study. The participants are all Chinese students who were currently studying in graduate programs at the Memorial University of Newfoundland.

“Phenomenological research involves trying to understand the essence of a phenomenon by examining the views of people who have experienced that phenomenon.” (O'Toole & Beckett, 2010, p. 6). The central phenomenon in this study is that Chinese international students have the tendency to experience many communication difficulties on account of their insufficiency in communicative skills.



Thus, the exploration of perceptions of their own communicative competence, and their experience and expectations on the ways to improve it, will help Canadian universities as well as ESL teachers in China acquire an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon, from which teachers could work out appropriate pedagogies to develop Chinese ESL learner's English communicative competence.

According to McMillan (2016), ethnography is “an in-depth, comprehensive description and interpretation of cultural patterns and meanings within that culture or social group or system” (p. 312). The chosen participants have a shared first language, similar cultural values and beliefs, and have all come to the same university in Canada, using their second language to communicate with the locals on and off the campus. This approach allows for collecting qualitative data and understanding the culture-sharing behaviors. More specifically in this study, it allows for collecting rich data regarding participants' own perceptions, interpretations and expectation of their English communicative competence, and understanding their culture-sharing English learning experiences. Furthermore, from the research findings, the pedagogical implications are drawn for those ESL teachers both in Canada and in China.

### **3.2 Sampling**

To explore a phenomenon in a thorough manner, “the qualitative researcher purposefully or intentionally selects individuals and sites” (Creswell, 2009, p.206). The researchers need to choose participants and places from which the most helpful

information for the research case is gleaned. Therefore, this research employs the purposeful sampling method to recruit participants who meet the requirements of 1) speaking Chinese as their first language; and 2) currently studying in graduate programs at MUN. I am the person who has been through the recruitment process.

The site of this study is Memorial University, which has a large population of international students. As of 2018, there were over 3,200 international students at Memorial, comprising 17 percent of the student population (<https://www.mun.ca/international/>). According to the Centre for Institutional Analysis and Planning (CIAP) at MUN, in 2015, 2312 international students from all over the world registered in undergraduate and graduate programs, among which the number of Chinese students ranked the highest (575) compared to the number of students from other countries. The high number of Chinese international students makes the sampling process easier.

For selecting individual participants, I applied two main strategies: maximal variation, and snowball sampling.

**Maximal variation** is defined as a “strategy in which the researcher samples cases or individuals that differ on some characteristic or trait” (Creswell, 2015, p. 206). As different Chinese international students majoring in different fields may present different levels of and attitudes towards communicative competence, in the process of recruitment, I attempted to balance the numbers of male and female participants.

**Snowball sampling** was also adopted to locate “a few key participants who easily meet the criteria” the researcher has established for participation in the study (Merriam, 2009, p. 79). According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011), this method of sampling relies on participants’ existing social networks. In the recruitment process of my study, one participant invited one of her acquaintances to contact me; both of them met the requirements to participate.

The recruitment took place online. First, I applied for a new account in WeChat (a Chinese popular social media app) instead of using my personal account in order to maintain my professionalism and objectivity as a researcher. Then as a Chinese international student studying in MUN, I asked the group administrator’ consent to enter into the group chat called “MUN Chinese Youth Association”, and posted an English advertisement (Appendix A) in this group where any group member can post any harmless information relevant to academic studying and social networking. I also used the help of the International Office (IO) at MUN to ask the associate counselor to send this recruitment advertisement via their weekly newsletter to all registered international graduate students at MUN. It was noted in the advertisement that participation is completely voluntary. As indicated in the advertisement, interested students could contact me directly by email or telephone.

The ideal number of prospective participants ranged from 4 to 6. As is often happens, the response rate was fairly low, and after the advertisement and IO email

being sent at the end of March, I had only received two responses. I kept posting the advertisement in the WeChat group; meanwhile, I requested the IO to send my advertisement a few more times in the following two weeks. At the same time, I asked those two prospective participants to help me invite their friends who might be interested in participating in this study, and I myself started to recruit interviewees among my acquaintances whom I knew from classes or other social events. Finally, in the first week of April, I selected 5 participants in total according to their major and in considering the balance of the genders. Mutually suitable time schedules were determined for individual interviews and the focus group discussion. All the participants signed a consent form (Appendix B) informing them of their rights and responsibilities by participating in this study.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Interviewing is the most common method adopted for conducting qualitative research because it is flexible enough for researchers to “follow emergent directions and probing that can effectively capture participant’s views, beliefs, emotions, thoughts, and thinking” (McMillian, 2016, p. 344). In this study, I applied two methods for collecting qualitative data – semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview. In this study, participants took part in two different sessions: 1) an individual interview with me, and 2) a focus group discussion which includes all the participants who have been interviewed individually. Both the individual interviews

and focus group discussion were audio-recorded by a smartphone which needs a 6-digit-number password to access, and then the recordings were transferred from my smartphone to my password-protected laptop.

### **3.3.1 Semi-structured interview**

Interviews are “necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88), and semi-structured interviews allow researchers to enter “the psychological and social world of the respondent” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 59). In the first phase of data collection, open-ended questions were asked in each semi-structured interview; the rationale was that through open-ended questions, researchers can “identify any comments people might have that are beyond the responses to the closed-ended questions” (Creswell, 2012, p. 220).

In this case, these individual interview questions are for obtaining participants’ perspectives on their English communicative competence. They were asked about three major topics (Appendix C). In the first part of the interview, I first introduced the definition of English communicative competence and ensured that they understood the concept. Then the participants were asked to detail their perspectives of their current communicative competence on and off the campus with examples. Secondly, the participants were asked about their educational background in order to lead them to explain the possible reasons having the current communication competence by linking

with their previous English education experience. The third part focused on the participants' expectation of their oral English development. They were asked to recall the strategies they have applied to improve their communicating skills and evaluate their efficacy.

Four interviews were conducted in the group study room of the MUN library, and the other one happened in a lab room in the Engineering building for the convenience of the participant who majored in Computer Engineering. The average length of interviews was approximately one hour and fifteen minutes, with the shortest being one hour and the longest being one hour and 38 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Chinese.

### **3.3.2 Focus group interview**

According to Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick (2008), focus groups are used for generating information on collective views. They are also useful in generating a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs (p. 293). According to the Focus Group Discussion Agenda (Appendix D), after each participant has been interviewed individually, a focus group discussion was held. It lasted for approximately 2 hours. All the five participants were invited to a group study room located in the second floor of the library at MUN. Paper and pens were provided for each participant to note down their ideas during the discussion. In the discussion, they shared experiences of using various English-learning strategies to improve their

communication skills, and then proposed pertinent suggestions. Then they discussed what Memorial University has done and their expectations for what the university could further do to better support international students in improving their communicative competence academically and interpersonally. During the discussion session, I required every participant to take turns to answer each question in order to avoid the situation where some individuals dominated the discussion while some stayed quiet and only listened to others' discussion, which occurred in the first 20 minutes of the interview. The focus group discussion was conducted in Chinese.

The focus group offered a great platform for participants to share experiences and exchange ideas, and allowed me to obtain a richer understanding of participants' experiences and expectations. In addition, it confirmed some points expressed in individual interviews.

### **3.3.3 Post-interview actions**

After I finished individual interviews and focus group interview, I first thanked everyone through the WeChat group and IO Listserv for their enthusiasm and support, to end participant recruitment. Then I copied the individual audio files and focus group interview recordings to my password-protected laptop into six separate folders, and assigned each individual folder by the names of SA, SB, SC, SD, and SE respectively, which contain all the relevant documents that are linked to each participant. The focus group interview recording was named as "Focus Group", and

the transcript and translation were saved in the same independent folder. I transcribed the individual interviews and focus group interview and then translated the transcript into English in word documents, during which new questions and issues that were unsolved or unclear in the interview emerged. I typed them in the margin of the document so that I could send the transcript and translated file to the concerned participants while doing the follow-up member check. Both participants responded to my follow-up emails that had noted unsolved issues, and new answers were transcribed and updated in their corresponding file. All participants confirmed the accuracy of their respective transcript and its translation.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

“Data analysis is the process used to answer your research questions,” (Merriam, 2009, p.176). In my study, four main themes were embedded in my research questions, they are – performances of communicative competence on and off the campus, the relationship between English learning experience and current communicative competence, strategies employed for improving English in general or specifically on communicative competence, and experiences and expectations for the support from MUN. After setting the four main themes, each transcript was categorized following the four themes, and relevant information obtained from each participant was interpreted and compared. The verification of participants’ self-assessment of their communicative competence was interpreted by the examples they provide. Subthemes



for each theme were decided while comparing and summarizing the similarities and differences within the data participants provided.

In addition, while reading the English transcripts from interviews and focus group discussions, some intriguing themes emerged through cross-case comparisons such as “sociocultural strategies”. Therefore, the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009) was also adopted to analyze and interpret the data for completing the discussion and implication part of the thesis. According to Kolb (2012), this method is used by the researcher to develop understanding of data by generating codes. By applying the constant comparative method, four themes meriting elaboration were chosen and I discuss them in the discussion section of this thesis with supporting references.

After identifying four main themes and their subthemes, and the four themes worth discussing, the analysis of both types of interviewing data was conducted in three steps. I picked one transcript and categorized it according to the previously decided themes. Next, I classified and noted in the margins the characteristic of examples given by the participant. At the same time, I highlighted important phrases reflecting the themes and the subthemes, and eliminated irrelevant sentences. Then I analyzed the other four and the focus group transcripts following the same steps. Finally, I compared the notes and highlights, and synthesized similarities and differences among participants’ responses. The findings which provide answers to my research questions, along with emerging themes requiring further discussion, were

listed in a separate document.

### **3.5 Ethical Issues and Trustworthiness**

In this study, all data collected was identifiable only by reference codes (e.g. SA, SB, SC...), which gives no identifiable information of who provided that data. The name of participants appears only on consent forms, which were kept separately from participants' data and cannot be linked with reference codes. In this case, there was a third party offering a professional check to the researcher's Chinese-to-English translation. The third party involved in this research signed a confidentiality agreement for not disclosing any data provided by the researcher (Appendix E).

Creswell (2015) included "member check" as one of the approaches to validate the data collected and improve trustworthiness of a study. Member check, as explained by Creswell, "involves taking the findings back to participants and ask them about the accuracy of the report" (Creswell, 2015, p. 259). Another approach is "external audit". In my research, all participants viewed their parts of the transcript both in Chinese and English to check the interpretive accuracy of their words. Moreover, after receiving confirmation of transcripts and translation from all the participants, I asked my college translation teacher to help me check if there were any inaccurate translations. Both strategies were applied to improve the trustworthiness of my research.

It was worth noting in this research that although participation was confidential, it was not anonymous to the researcher and other participants of this study, because

there was not only semi-structured individual interviews, but also the follow-up focus group discussion. Although I safeguarded the confidentiality of the discussion to the best of my ability, the nature of focus groups may prevent me from guaranteeing that other members of the group would do the same. However, every other reasonable effort was made to ensure participants' anonymity; for example, every participant was reminded in their consent form to respect the confidentiality of the other members by not repeating what was said in the focus group to others. Reference codes are used in my report, so the participants will not be identified in any reports and publications.

### **3.6 Researcher's Role in Qualitative Research**

Curtis and Pettigrew (2010) claimed, "the researcher will always have an impact upon the research they are conducting and will always approach their subject with existing assumptions, biases and ideas" (p. 59). I used to be an English learner, as well as an English teacher in a public junior high school in China. Now I am a Chinese graduate student in the Faculty of Education, an English communicator. My role as an international student made it easier for me to build positive relationships with the participants in a short time and relate their experience to mine. It helped me collect rich data and generate better interpretations from it.

Curtis and Pettigrew (2010) continue to argue that "rather than seek to deny their inevitable biases, interpretivism suggests a researcher should attempt to critically reflect on these and make them clear" (p. 59). Realizing this, I constantly reflect on

my own biases in the process of translating and interpreting the data. I tried to maintain objectivity to the largest extent and be responsible for playing the role of a researcher.

## Chapter 4 Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of this study. The categories and themes both from individual interviews and focus group discussion are presented, in the following order, in light of the research questions posed:

1. The demographic information of each participants and their English learning experience in China.
2. Participants' self-evaluation of their English communicative competence in terms of linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and fluency in both academic and daily communication contexts. Examples collected from participants with regard to each concept are presented.
3. Strategies participants use to improve their English communication skills.
4. Support Memorial University and St. John's have offered to help international students' social adaption and academic achievement, and advice for Memorial University to meet international students' academic and social needs.

The data was collected from personal interviews and focus group interview with five participants. Three of them are female and two are male.

## 4.2 Participants Profiles

**Participant one:** SA is a 27-year-old female from the South China. Before she came to Canada, she finished her college years in a Normal University in China. After her graduation from college, she taught listening for IELTS (International English Language Testing System) for three years in a highly experienced English Training Institution. She is now in the program of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Studies and has completed all her courses. At the time of the interview, she was at the stage of collecting data for her research.

She started learning English in Grade 3 as most 90s-generation children did. She said her parents, back then, did not have the long-term vision of sending her to a private English training school to learn extra-curriculum English. When she was asked to recall how much English knowledge she learned in elementary school, she admitted that she did not actually listen to the teachers when having English classes until she just started Grade 7, because it was in that grade that English scores would be counted officially to students' final evaluation. She said she did not even remember a single word before she went to middle school.

She did not have any English teachers from an English-speaking country until she went to college majoring in English Teaching. Her English teachers in junior and senior high school taught English to the test and paid much attention to vocabulary and grammar; speaking was the least emphasized part of daily English learning. At her

university, she took the required 3-hour oral English classes weekly with teachers from English-speaking countries.

**Participant two:** SB is a 28-year-old male from the North China. He just started his first semester at MUN, majoring in MBA (Master's Business Administration). He has completed his Bachelor of Business Administration at Simon Fraser University. Unlike SA, he has no working experiences. He was educated from elementary school to graduate school without any gap year.

Raised in a middle-class family as the only child, he received full attention from his parents. They invited an English tutor to teach him "New Concept English"<sup>1</sup> when he was just in Grade 1. He outscored his classmates in English both in elementary and junior school. However, because of his poor ability for big tests, he did not make it to a key senior high school, his parents sent him to a private international high school where his teachers of all subjects except Chinese were foreigners. He said that high school knowledge has built a foundation for his whole cognition of Western culture, value and view of life.

**Participant three:** SC is a female who comes from the South China. She is 24, and she completed her Bachelor's degree in Quality Management Engineering in a college in her home city. Now she is a Master's student in Environmental Engineering. Before enrolling in her Master's program, she had spent 3 months learning in the Bridge

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<sup>1</sup> It is an extremely popular extra-curricular English textbook in China. NCE New Version was first published by The Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in China in 1997. This series of textbooks have had a great influence on generations of Chinese learners and is still popular among varieties of learners and teachers.

Course of the ESL department, but it is not because she was not qualified to enrol directly in her program. In fact, she had a total score of 7 in IELTS, with only having a score of 5 in speaking test. Her family wanted her to be more competent in English, so they paid the extra fee to take the ESL Bridge Courses.

She said that she loves English learning but did not come from a very rich family so she has been doing part-time jobs since her first year of college such as tutoring and assisting in English teaching in English training institutions. When she was in high school, she did not have the chance to practice her spoken English, because schoolteachers put a lot of emphasis on grammar and vocabulary. Due to her two-year experience of learning Cambridge Young Learners English<sup>2</sup> from the age of six to eight, she could get decent marks in tests, so she loves learning English though she did not choose to major in English at university.

**Participant four:** SD is a female came from the North China who is 28 years old. She completed her Bachelor degree in a prestigious university in the North too. She majored in English in college, and went to the UK to study TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and completed her Master's degree in one year. Then she traveled and worked in Australia for one more year. She decided to apply for the course-based program of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Studies for another Master's degree in Canada to immigrate after graduation. She has completed four

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<sup>2</sup> It is the English lesson which is provided in English learning institutions in China for learners to pass a series of fun, motivating English language tests. It aimed at children in primary and lower-secondary education. There are three activity-based tests – Starters, Movers and Flyers. This gives students a clear path to improve in English.



courses in her three semesters at MUN. She told me that she takes pride in her spoken English because she got 7.5 on the speaking test of IELTS.

Like SA, she first learned English in Grade 3, and her parents did not pay much attention to her studies, so all of her English knowledge (mostly grammar and vocabulary) before she entered university was taught by schoolteachers. She attributed her fluent spoken English to her extroverted personality and three years of experience living in an English-speaking country.

**Participant five:** SE is 24, a male from a northern province of China. He went to a prestigious university in Shanghai, majoring in Computer Engineering. In the Fall semester in 2018, he enrolled in the same graduate program at MUN. Before that, he took the ESL Bridge Course for three months like SC.

He said that he started learning English in Grade 3, and the English scores were counted to the total semester evaluation. Like SB, his parents sent him to learn New Concept English for three years until he went to middle school. He admitted during the interview that he did not fully understand the extra-curricular English lessons when it came to a more advanced grammatical level; it started becoming a little clear to him after his middle school teacher taught it all over again in a more organized way.

He has never been taught by a teacher from other countries; all his English teachers were Chinese. He said that when he was in college, he learned College

English<sup>3</sup> by himself instead of from his teachers, only remembering vocabulary and working on some text papers before CET 4 and CET 6<sup>4</sup>.

### 4.3 Previous English Learning Experience

By comparing and summarizing the data collected mostly from individual interviews, I found some common features of their English learning experience. For instance, four of them started learning English from Grade 3, and for the first few years of Millennium, the English subject was not quite emphasized in primary schools in China. Participants described school English lessons as “rigid”, “geared to test”, and the grammar teaching method as “formal”, “prescriptive”.

*Primary teachers seemed to be unqualified to teach English students, and the discipline in classes was not good. As far as I could recall, the students in English classes were always too rumbustious to actually listen carefully to what the teacher was saying, because in elementary school at that time, English was not an important subject as Math and Chinese. (SC)*

When I asked how teachers taught English in their junior and senior high school, most participants responded using almost the same words, SA said:

*You know, I believe your English teachers taught you in the same way. Every time*

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<sup>3</sup> A required course offered in universities in China for all non-English major students in their first two academic years.

<sup>4</sup> College English Test (CET) is a national English as a foreign language test. It includes two levels – CET 4 and CET 6. All non-English major Chinese university students are required to pass CET 4 for their bachelor’s degree and CET 6 for their graduate degree. It is meant to ensure that Chinese undergraduates and postgraduates reach the required English levels specified in the National College English Teaching Syllabuses (NCETS).

*they started a new lesson, they would let you read after them the new words for several times. Then they would read the texts by themselves or play the radio tapes. Sometimes you might have to read each sentence after her for two or three times. After that, they would start explaining the new grammatical knowledge, like tenses, voices, followed by examples of usage. The Chinese meaning of phrases or the usage of some important words would also be provided. You just need to listen to the explanation and write down the notes on your textbook so that you can review them again and again when it was near the tests.*

Most English teachers put much emphasis on vocabulary and grammar learning, and barely provided any opportunities for students to practice their spoken English. Sometimes teachers would teach completely wrong pronunciations of words to students.

*I remember once when I was to buy some groceries here but couldn't find the location of onions. I asked a lady where I'd find some onions, she seemed confused and kept asking me 'what do you wanna find again?'. At last, I even got offended because I believe I am very articulate whenever I speak English, let alone it was such an easy word 'onion'. After at least five times I repeated that word, she finally got it. I didn't know that ['ɔ:njən] was wrong until she said that word with the right pronunciation ['ʌnjən]. I looked up the dictionary and felt embarrassed. At the same time, I feel sorry for my middle school English teacher*

*because she taught us many other wrong pronunciations of easy words besides 'onion'. (SC)*

In addition, students know little about the culture of Western countries and lack intercultural communicative competence because their teacher “taught English to the test” instead of using English as a “tool for communication”. Some students expected to have a chance to talk to a real native speaker. SD was one of them:

*When I was in senior school, I longed for having a foreign English teacher to satisfy my curiosity about Western cultures, but I only have probably two lessons taught by a foreigner. Those two lessons turned out to be the experimental classes for 'New Curriculum Reform'.*

Although most participants shared many similarities in their English learning experience, students raised in wealthy families and receiving advanced education like SB do exist. He learned English from a tutor from Grade 1, and went to an international high school which charged 40,000 RMB (approximately 8,000 Canadian Dollars) for one semester. He received an authentic English education since the age of 15, almost all of his teachers were English native speakers. He became excited when he spoke of his large vocabulary and being erudite in Western history and cultures.

*I feel like I know a lot more words and knowledge than other Chinese international students do, so I don't have that many kinds of embarrassing scenarios studying here at this university. I believe I benefit this from all those*

*authentic English-speaking classes I took in senior school and college.*

Reviewing the interview results of participants' English learning experience, it is not surprising that the participants relate their previous learning experience to their present English performance in a host country. Next, the results of participants' evaluation of their English performance on communicative competence are presented.

#### **4.4 Self-assessment of Communicative Competence**

The data is analyzed following Hedge's (2000) taxonomy of communicative competence. The participants' experiences in the academic context and in daily situations representing two components of communicative competence – linguistic competence and pragmatic competence, are expounded respectively. The other three components – discourse competence, strategic competence and fluency are respectively discussed in both situations together.

##### **4.4.1 Linguistic competence in academic contexts**

In a graduate academic context, situations requiring students to communicate and develop interpersonal relationships include class interaction with instructors and classmates, private meetings with instructors and academic workshops.

Sufficient linguistic competence serves as an essential basis for EFL learners' to express their opinions and intentions clearly and accurately. In this study, four of the participants mentioned that language is just "a tool for communication", it is not

necessary to “overstate the importance of accuracy”. The other one participant SC showed her strong eagerness to self-monitor to “sound like a native speaker”. Overall, participants showed confidence in their linguistic competence including pronunciation, vocabulary usage and sentence structure.

When it came to pronunciation and grammar, SC said:

*I know I shouldn't pay so much attention to it because I am not an English-majored student, and people would get me anyways though I might make a lot of mistakes. I am strict to myself because I think now that I've learned English for so many years, and watched at least 30 American TV series, if I pronounce certain words wrong or make obvious grammatical errors in a sentence, I would soon recognize it and try to self-correct, or else I will feel weird and uncomfortable. I always feel bad about myself if I still make mistakes while knowing the correct pronunciation and grammar.*

It is common that second language learners make grammatical mistakes occasionally even though they know the correct expression, because the mother tongue somewhat influences speaking in the target-language (Ellis, 1986). Fluent and advanced as SB is, he also makes “foolish” mistakes in front of instructors:

*Sometimes when I speak too fast, I couldn't even notice those frivolous errors I made, the typical one is the use of mixed personal pronouns. I never care about making this kind of mistakes at all, because I don't think it'd show my*

*incompetence.*

Both SB and SD are confident in their linguistic competence in the academic context, so they considered themselves as “sufficient” in this aspect of communicative competence. They expressed their opinions that “it is enough as long as the information recipient understands you”. SE assessed his grammar in spoken English as “not so good” but “is becoming much better” than the time when he first came to St. John’s. From his arrival until now, he also had no worry about his linguistic competence.

*I guess I was never upset about my grammar and vocabulary because my major doesn't require a high level of English literacy either for speaking or writing. At first, I could hardly organize words to build sentences, let alone sentence structures or grammar. When I talk to my instructors or classmates, I even only say key words without function words like prepositions. I would do some self-correction at first, but gradually, I learned to just let it go, because I noticed people could still understand me pretty well even though my speaking was just a pile of fragments.*

SA, as an English-major student and former ESL teacher, showed her confidence in her linguistic competence from another perspective. She compared the Chinese accent of English with accents of other non-English-speaking countries, and claimed that Chinese speak English “more clearly”, and Chinese people are “more articulate”.

She said:

*The people I met from classes or workshops, they are from a lot of different countries, at first, I felt it was a little challenging when I listened to those who have very strong accents. As time went by, I found it wasn't an obstacle for locals to understand my strong-accent fellows. I therefore assume that my pronunciation is also fine to English speakers.*

In a nutshell, participants in this study may still be challenged by their ability to communicate in academic situations, but often they were not overtly concerned about it for various reasons with the exception of SC, whose obsession with spoken accuracy in pronunciation and grammar prevented her from speaking fluently, which will be described in detail in the section of 4.4.7.

#### **4.4.2 Pragmatic competence in academic contexts**

Pragmatic competence is generally considered to include “illocutionary competence” and “sociolinguistic competence” (Bachman, 1990). In an EFL context, social and cross-cultural knowledge is necessary to “select the language forms to use in different settings, and with different people in different roles and with different status” (Hedge, 2000, p. 49). In this study, all five participants assessed their pragmatic competence as “somewhat insufficient”, two of them gave detailed examples of what happened when they were in the academic situations.

Once SD was in a career workshop, she was talking with one potential employer



when she saw her Indian roommate K walking towards her. She waved to K to come because she knew K was also interested in that job. Then her roommate came and stood closely beside her, listening to them quietly throughout the conversation. When they arrived home, SD asked her roommate why she did not join the conversation, her roommate said “I thought you weren’t willing to let me interrupt, because you didn’t introduce me to the employer”. SD felt surprised and confused about the “ritual etiquette” of introducing your friend to whomever you are talking with. She explained to me:

*That [etiquette] to me was not obvious, I never really...I mean in China we don't really do this, right? We just kind of assume that, you know, once you get talking, we'll get to know each other. So we never say 'Oh, this is blah blah', 'Have you met blah blah'. I guess there's a lot more other Western conventions I've never got the chance to know.*

Compared to SD, SE’s experience in an academic writing class caused more serious consequences. SE received negative feedback on one of the assignments he was most satisfied with, and he was eager to know the reason; he even questioned whether or not the instructor failed to review his assignment attentively. Therefore, he raised his hand, and said in a high voice to the instructor “Miss X, I don’t agree with your comments left on my assignments”. The instructor’s face immediately turned red with anger. After class, the instructor suggested SE should learn some “pragmatic

manners”. SE asked me,

*Before raising my hand to argue, I remembered one article I once read claiming that compared to Asian teachers, Western teachers are more open and more encouraged to receive different voices from their students. Was it all wrong?*

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to answer at the time of interviewing because I am also a second language learner who still needs to learn the target cultures. There are numerous articles discussing different attitudes towards disagreement with teachers in eastern and western classrooms. However, the situation SE described was not due to cultural differences; instead, it concerned pragmatic manners and dictions when expressing disagreement and showing different ideas. Leech (2005) claimed that despite cultural differences, there is no East-West divide in principles of politeness; being polite is a common pragmatic and behavioural basis for different societies. SE violated the principles of politeness when he showed doubt of the teacher's personal feedback loudly in front of the whole class. As his instructor suggested, besides cultural differences, SE should also concern about his conversational courtesy.

In addition to detailed examples, SC expressed her dismay because of her “inappropriate manner” in class discussions.

*The class was divided into groups to discuss and finish a project together. I rarely talk because of my English ability, which made the group members think I was not cooperated and aloof...I did make contributions to the project, but they couldn't*

*get me just because I was not talkative as they were. That's unfair.*

The misunderstanding was caused by the lack of intercultural communication on both sides. SC's lack of confidence in speaking English caused a challenge in communication, and the other group members' intercultural insensitivity aggravated the existing misunderstanding.

#### **4.4.3 Linguistic competence in daily conversations**

Situations requiring communication on a daily basis include chitchat with friends, greetings, farewells, congratulations, compliments, apologies and many other situations.

Participants in this study evaluated their linguistic competence in daily conversation as "fine". According to them, they rarely encounter embarrassing situations when they were not able to search out the right words for specific situations, because

*Mostly we would change to use another way to explain the word or sometimes use the body language. These ways always work. (SA)*

"These ways" mentioned by participants also serve as performances of **strategic competence**. Applying these means could keep the conversation going on, and avoid embarrassment on account of a sudden lack of vocabulary resources.

Except changing means of expression, one of the participants SC mentioned that

she always paid extra attention to how native speakers say words to describe something that she could not be able to express accurately. For example, when she chatted with her local roommate J, she noticed J used “shovel” the snow instead of “sweep”, “assume” instead of “think”, “power” instead of “electricity”, “be supposed to” instead of “should” etc. SC wrote them down and tried to use them when she had the chance to talk about some similar subjects. She said learning these words made her expressions “sound more native”.

In spoken English, the pronunciation or forms of some words and phrases would also be changed to make the conversation smoother, especially in American English. Apart from SC, SA and SD who has a linguistic background, also noticed that native speakers would use contractions such as “gonna”, “wanna” and “would’ve” when they say “going to”, “want to” and “would have”. Besides, American speakers would always pronounce unstressed consonant [t] to flap [t] which sounds like [d] as in “peanut butter” when the [t] was located between two vowels. They noted down, practiced and applied these to their own speech.

Compared to the three girls, SB and SE still held their viewpoint:

*Our present linguistic competence is enough to make us understood by not only locals but also international students from other countries. It’s meaningless trying to sound infinitely close to native speakers. After all, you are not a native speaker.*

SB further argued:

*Daily conversations should be casual; how could you be casual if you were busy with learning new words and expressions?*

In general, most of the participants in this study paid less attention to their linguistic competence, and placed especially less emphasis on the pronunciation of certain words. They advocated casual and natural flow in daily conversations.

#### **4.4.4 Pragmatic competence in daily conversations**

The results of this study reflect that the participants in this study not only did not develop good pragmatic competence in the academic context, their competence in dealing with daily conversations also needs to improve.

One of the findings that interests me the most is that every participant has faced the same dilemma when they were asked “How are you?” for the first few times. The standard answer they all learned from their textbook is “Fine. Thank you, and you?”, but none of them really thought they should answer exactly like that. SE said,

*The first time I got asked “how are you”, I literally froze and my heart was like in my throat. I know if I say “fine”, it’d sound a little bit weird, but I really didn’t know what to say otherwise. I remember I finally figured it out when I was in line waiting for my turn to be served in a grocery store. I paid attention to the answers of the people ahead of me every time when the cashier greeted them, and then I collected some acceptable versions of how to reply to greetings and farewells.*

SC treated the way of greetings and farewells even more seriously. She specifically asked her ESL instructor expecting to get the “actual standard answer”. She said,

*Before I came here, I always doubted the simplest knowledge I've learned in China like how to respond to “How are you?” or “How're ya doin'?” or “How's everything going?”. I guess deep down I am self-abased and afraid of “losing face” if I respond with too formal answers. From the day of my arrival in Canada, I haven't stopped observing, listening and learning in any social occasions. Having stayed here for almost a year, I have learned some basic etiquette and habits that I wish I would've learned at school in China. I know I am still a lot far from being pragmatically competent, but I am progressing day by day.*

Except some social conventions when acquaintances or people who just meet to greet each other, there are also some examples given by participants who had part-time jobs in services industries. SA worked as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant, and SC worked as a salesperson in a hardware store. They both said that at the beginning, they needed to see what their co-workers say to the customers and learn how to be polite. SA gave me an example of speaking conventions when the servers give bills to their tables.

*Based on my observation, the waiters would mostly say, “Whenever you are ready... (I'm ready)”. Then I kept it in my mind and said this sentence to my customers ever since.*

Another occasion mentioned in the participants' description is the time when people exchange information. SB exemplified what he learned here in Canada.

*When we were kids, we used to say “play with” someone. As we grew up, I barely hear anyone around me say “play with”. In most occasions, my classmates would just say “hang out (with ...)”. I noticed that but didn't give much thought about it until someday I watched an American movie, the plot was about a teenager's awkward monologue over the usage of “play” and “hang out”. This is the first time I knew that “play with someone” has sexual meanings for adults.*

When being asked about his thoughts over this discovery, he said,

*I have to be careful to use some words with connotations. To do that, I might need to be more discerning and prepare myself with more culture- and implication-related knowledge so that I could avoid making embarrassing mistakes as much as possible.*

In situations for exchanging information, SE identified two pragmatic mistakes Chinese are most likely to make based on his own experience. Many Chinese ESL teachers always ask students “Understand?” or “Do you understand” to keep monitoring students' comprehension of new-learned knowledge. It is completely a grammatically correct sentence. However, it would seem rude for an English native speaker because it contains the implication of blaming the listeners for having terrible comprehension ability. The speakers would always say, “Did I make sense?” “Does

that make sense to you?” or “Do you follow me?” to make sure the listeners are on the same page with them.

Conversely, for the listeners, if they understand what the speakers mean, they are supposed to say “I see” rather than “I know”; “I know” is just a literal translation of Chinese meaning “I see” into English words, but it contains the implication that the listeners already know about the speakers’ speech content.

When being asked whether his English teachers have ever taught that in class, he denied and said,

*I feel that this kind of knowledge can never be taught from textbooks or schoolteachers, you have to experience it in authentic situations. Gradually, you may find yourself getting the hang of it.*

To summarize, no participants were satisfied with their current pragmatic competence in social communications; they were still observing and learning.

#### **4.4.5 Discourse competence**

Before starting interviews, the participants, except SA and SC who majored in English at university, did not know the actual meaning of the term “discourse competence”. After I told them that it is the competence speakers have to initiate, enter, interrupt, check and confirm in conversations, SC was able to list some discourse markers such as “by the way” and “on the other hand”. When I said being



able to use cohesive devices to reference is also an essential part of being discourse competent, SE said,

*I see. The exemplary test papers of Gaokao [Chinese College Entrance Examination] would always have at least one question requiring students to choose the right answers that the cohesive devices refer to, and I remember this kind of questions were always set in the reading part.*

Almost all participants had the same experience. Even for SB, he had done exercises of this kind in middle school. Therefore, they all felt confident in their discourse competence. Moreover, SC and SE said their Academic Writing Course instructor here at MUN once taught this topic for a whole class session.

SA and SD reported:

*Discourse competence is more presented in textual writing for adding logic and order to expository composition. It is hard to notice and to apply to because of the natures of oral communication, but it always comes naturally when speakers engage in an informative conversation.*

Due to the participants' similar English learning and testing experience, their discourse competence was assessed by themselves to be fine and enough for understanding others and expressing themselves in contexts.

#### 4.4.6 Strategic Competence

As mentioned in Section 4.4.3, participants constantly use strategic knowledge when they encounter situations in which they fail to convey messages because their linguistic resources do not allow them to express them successfully. This situation could happen in both academics and on a daily basis. The strategies language learners could use were divided by Corder (1981) into two main types, message adjustment strategies and resource expansion strategies.

Message adjustment strategies involve either a slight alteration or a reduction of the message. SD told me that despite the fact that she could “speak rather fluently”, she always felt that she failed to express the “full meaning” of what she really meant. Sometimes she had to “neglect unimportant detailed descriptions” to express only the “rough idea”. Her feeling was consistent with Dörnyei and Thurrell’s (1991) comments on using message adjustment strategies, it “often leads learners to feel that what they say sounds simplistic or vague” (p. 18).

Different from SD, the content SB, SC and SE studied is either engineering or business, which “involve a large amount of numbers, calculations and abstract terminologies”. Therefore, they tended to use strategic knowledge in daily communications, and mostly for descriptive words. SE said,

*Once when I talk to my friend, I wanted to say “pinch”, but I didn’t know that word at that time. I started squeezing a piece of flesh in my arm to the middle by*

*using my thumb and the index finger, asking him: “How do you say this in English?” He chuckled and answered: “pinch”. I remembered this word until now. I think I’d never forget it.*

In the situation described above, SE used non-verbal means, which under the category of resource expansion strategies – gesture, to compensate for the verbal communication failure. According to Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991), these expansion strategies are either co-operative or non-co-operative. The co-operative strategies involve the learners’ direct appeal for help to their interlocutor (e.g. questions like “What do you call . . . ?”) like SE did when he asked his friend “How do you say this in English?”, or can be indirect (e.g. by means of a pause, eye gaze, etc.). The non-co-operative strategies do not call for the communication partner’s assistance – the learner tries to overcome the problem by drawing on his/her own resources through circumlocution, approximation, invented words or by non-linguistic means (p. 18) like SE did when miming the gesture of “pinch”.

From the details SD and SE elaborated, Chinese students have developed fairly good strategic competence. Paribakht (1985) also found that strategic competence in L1 is transferable to L2 learning situations, and thus adult learners often enter the L2 learning situation with a fairly well-developed strategic competence (p.17).

#### **4.4.7 Fluency**

Based on Hedge (2000), the ability to respond coherently within the turns of the

conversation, to link the words and phrases of the questions, to pronounce the sounds clearly with appropriate stress and intonation, and to do all of this quickly, constitutes fluency (p. 54). In this study, except SB and SD, the other three participants evaluated themselves as somewhat not fluent.

SA reported that her English fluency depends largely on the situation and the content of the conversation. She exemplified,

*If I was only chitchatting with my close friends, I'd be super relaxed and not afraid of making any mistakes. I'd probably speak more fluently than usual; if I discuss certain terms of a research project with my co-researcher or my supervisor, the jitters would certainly affect the functions of my brain, which would make me more nervous and even could cause linguistic disorder if it got serious.*

Unlike SA, SC was not able to speak English fluently no matter what the situation is. She has to “go over each sentence” in her mind before she finally speaks it out, which she claimed to be the one of the main reasons for her incompetence in conversational fluency (as indicated earlier in the concluding part of the section of 4.4.1). She said,

*I guess I can't reach the speed to the fluent level because: 1) Before actually say sentences out loud, I have to consider too many things in my mind from pronunciation, collocation and grammar to sentence structure, stress and*

*intonation and so on, and I'm a slow thinker. 2) I always feel stressed when I speak English, I am obsessed with speaking error-free sentences.*

She had no idea where the stress comes from, but she once accidentally found that she could speak English much more fluent after drinking a little alcohol. SE admitted he could not speak quite fluently either, no matter in what condition.

*It is just a matter of input, I don't have that large vocabulary, and I'm not that familiar with all those fancy sentence patterns, so of course I couldn't be fluent.*

SB agreed with him, he said,

*I read a lot, and I guess I just got pretty good memory, so now I pretty much have enough productive words to express all that I'd like to say. I think that's the reason why I could speak really fast. Input always comes first.*

SD added affective factors to be influences on fluency in addition to the “input” theory.

She said,

*When you've reached to a certain amount of input, the more relaxed when you speak, the more fluent you can get.*

The participants generally assessed themselves as insufficient in speaking fluently. They emphasized the roles of productive input and types of contexts play in affecting performances in speaking.

## **4.5 Learning Strategies for Improving Communicative Competence**

All of the participants in this study were somewhat aware of their difficulties in English communicative competence. Therefore, they used some strategies attempting to overcome their defects in the target language ability. Seven strategies were identified: a) learning from others; b) taking ESL classes; c) participating in school activities; d) volunteering; e) choosing to live with people from other countries; f) working part-time; g) using vast learning materials online.

### **4.5.1 Learning from others**

Learning from others was the most frequently mentioned strategy that participants used to improve their communication skills. For instance, as mentioned before in Section 4.4.4, SA observed what other servers say to customers under certain circumstances, and learned to do the same. SE also gave an example of learning how to order drinks from an “experienced Chinese peer”:

*It was awkward the first time I ordered orange juice at the University Center. I said “I want a cup of orange juice, L-sized, please.” The busboy asked with a confused expression “pardon? L-sized?”. I pointed at the picture hanging in front of me and said “the biggest”. Thank god he finally understood me. Then I stand by the customers’ line, listening carefully to the next Chinese student ordering his meals. He used “Can I have a medium cup of Coke and ..., please?”. Then I knew that I should use “large/medium/small cup of ...” for drinks. I should thank him.*

Compared to learning from Chinese peers, SC preferred learning from native speakers. She explained:

*In terms of learning native expressions, I always have absolute trust in native speakers. If I wasn't sure how to describe something or express some feelings, I would always seek help from my friends or roommates, or sometimes even my instructors. Asking native speakers turns out to be a very effective way to learn the most native expressions.*

Participants in this study used the strategy of “learning from others” most frequently considering it is the easiest way for them to learn English in their daily life when they are staying in such an advantageous environment: people around them are all communicating in English.

#### **4.5.2 Taking ESL classes**

Among the five participants, four have taken some ESL classes for improving their communication skills. SA has registered for two of the free ESL bridge courses for one semester, “Academic Culture & Advising” and “Reading & Critical Response”. She evaluated the peer study groups and discussions as the most helpful opportunity for her to improve communicative competence:

*In those group discussions, I've been given full freedom to elaborate on my own thoughts over certain discussion themes. I think it was challenging as well as beneficial to my logical thinking, sentence organizing and academic expressing.*

*Through intensive exercising, I honestly consider that my academic communication skills peaked during that semester.*

SC also took ESL bridge courses intensively for three months before enrolling in her graduate program. According to her, some of her instructors were not native speakers of English, but they spoke as fluent and native as local residents do. With no pressure of passing the CAEL (Canadian Academic English Language) test, she “constantly observed and simulated” the ways her instructor taught and spoke English. However, she considered her action as “minimal-rewarding”.

*Perhaps it’s because the learning period was comparatively short, I don’t see any prominent improvement in my oral English from taking ESL classes, but the knowledge I’ve learned did help a lot with my academic writing.*

Unlike SC, SE saw every English-instructed class as “useful input”. He said,

*Whether you could feel it clearly or not, you’re always improving if you take classes instructed by English-speaking teachers. I believe in the “immersion” theory, and I believe that the quantitative accumulation of all aspects of English knowledge would certainly induce qualitative change someday.*

SD took free ESL classes offered by ANC (Association for New Canadians) and RIAC (Refugee and Immigrant Advisory Council) three sessions a week since she started the Master’s program. She had learned many interesting English idioms, and she tried to use them in her everyday conversations with her Indian roommate. She



found it effective to “master” those phrases if she wrote them down, review regularly, and used them as much as possible.

#### **4.5.3 Participating in school and social activities**

During personal interviews and focus group discussions, SA and SD mentioned many activities organized by the International Office of MUN. They said they attended every interesting activity as long as their schedule allowed. SA became good friends with a Nigerian girl studying in the same program with her in Education, but surprisingly, they met in church. SA said,

*I have never met her in the Education building before, so I guess I might have no chance to meet and make friends with her if it wasn't for the church. We had much in common, so there are many topics to talk about between us. Besides, I gathered so much information about my program such as textbooks, thesis writing, and graduation procedures.*

Similarly, SD described her experience of participating in a Pumpkin Carving Contest last year. She became friends with three Japanese girls.

*At first, I decided to participate in this activity just for learning the Halloween cultures. It turned out to be more beneficial because in the process of carving a pumpkin, I learned how to cooperate with others, how to express my own ideas with respect. I believe those were also important parts of communication abilities.*

The experiences of SA and SD show that school activities were more than platforms for interpersonal and intercultural communication; they were also good opportunities to make new friends.

#### **4.5.4 Volunteering**

Of the five participants in this study, two had volunteer experiences. SA said that in the first year of her program, she always paid attention to the emails from the International Office asking for volunteers for some international events. However, she quit doing so in the second year because she did not see much benefit for language improvement from volunteering to help in school events.

SC volunteered to teach Chinese in RIAC for four hours a week.

*In the classes, I have to explain everything that I taught in English. Since the classes were free, I could adjust my teaching content to my students' interests instead of restraining it just to Pinyin (pronunciation) and Chinese characters. I need to introduce culture, history, and so many other aspects of China to my Canadian students. They usually interacted with me actively, from which I learned their words, sentence patterns, and even the natural process of social interaction. I strongly felt my spoken English has improved a lot since I started teaching Chinese in RIAC. I've decided to continue volunteering until I graduate from MUN.*

SC indicated that volunteering socially seemed to be more productive in

English-language improvement than volunteering in school events.

#### **4.5.5 Choosing to live with people from other countries**

SC and SE were both living in houses with no other Chinese, and SD lived with an Indian girl in a condominium. SC chose a home-stay from the first month of her life in Canada. She said,

*The landlady was such a delight. She took me to the groceries every week, and sometimes she would drive me to some beautiful parks with her cute puppy. Whenever I had questions about English, I'd ask her. She helped me overcome culture shock and taught me Canadian customs, festivals, food and culture. I've definitely made the right decision to choose a home-stay.*

SD also had a pleasant accommodation with an Indian girl. They both are extroverted and talkative. SD said the two of them had a “win-win pact” of chitchatting for 1.5 hours every day to ensure emotional and oral communication. The “pact” made her spoken English more fluent, and her student life in Canada more balanced. She was content with her lifestyle.

SE lived in a house with a local landlord and an Iranian graduate student. He said that he purposefully chose not to live with Chinese because his parents did not allow him to.

*It was much more difficult for me to find a house without Chinese roommates. You*

*know, I am majoring in Computer Engineering, and a lot of my classmates are Chinese. When I was in school, I only talked to my Chinese classmates and friends. Living in an environment without Chinese could at least force me to use English and push me step out of my “comfort zone”.*

Either voluntarily or being forced to, these participants’ statements demonstrated the positive effects of living with people from other countries.

#### **4.5.6 Working part-time**

The three girls in this study all had a part-time job at the time of the interviews. SA learned vocabulary and expressions related to service courtesy as detailed in Section 4.4.4; SD worked in the kitchen of a restaurant, and she learned plenty of names of food, seasonings and ingredients, which she said that she could never have learned from a textbook. SC worked as a salesgirl in a hardware store. Through working at this job, she not only learned unfamiliar words for products, but also filled the gap between her academic English knowledge and applied conversational English abilities.

*This job gives me a great opportunity to interact with various people having diverse accents and speaking styles. Through talking to them, I sensed the multiculturalism in Canada, and it distracted me from indulging in learning only formal and academic English. After all, most people speak more often than they write. It would be awkward and make me look nerdy if I say sentences full of*

*academic words in a casual situation.*

Aside from financial purposes, these three participants all appreciated how having a part-time job could help improve their spoken English.

#### **4.5.7 Using vast learning materials online**

Since the Internet became prevalent at the beginning of this century, the world became smaller, and cross-cultural learning and communication became easier. To different extents and in different ways, all five participants in this study had the experience of cultural and language learning on the Internet. SA loved watching movies, she said,

*I usually tend to search for English movies without subtitles. The resources are very limited and hard to find. Thanks to those who wanna learn English in this way like me, there are some websites offering “raw-meat (the way Chinese ESL learners call English shows or movies with neither English captions nor Chinese subtitles)” resources. For the movies with subtitles inserted, I’d use the “subtitle blocker” (a software) I bought on Taobao (Chinese EBay). You know, I taught IELTS listening, so I kinda being used to watching English movies in this way; it’s helpful for me to practice listening skills.*

SB loved playing video games; he learned many words from it:

*Since college, except for studying, most of my time was spent on video games. I’ve*

*learned many military words. In addition, since I elected French and Italian and self-learned Germany in college, I could relate between languages and remember new words easily.*

SC loved watching Disney animated movies and TV episodes for teenagers:

*I have a membership in Deefun (A famous group for English-Chinese translation and subtitle producing). I love watching videos with both English and Chinese subtitles, because it is convenient to learn good expressions without constantly looking up the dictionary. At first, I thought I have well-enough memory to remember every new expression. The fact was that I remembered them just at that moment, but I completely forgot everything even only after a few hours. So I prepared a notebook to write them down and reviewed them constantly. It is really a good way to learn English while watching American TV series.*

All the participants mentioned watching YouTube videos as their strategy to learn the language and different cultures. SA and SD indicated in the focus group discussion that there are some excellent ESL teachers from many countries uploading free short teaching videos to YouTube regularly, introducing cultures and frequently used English expressions.

*Now that we're out of China, it became much easier for us to access all kinds of popular international apps and websites which contain infinite valuable learning materials. We should take advantage of this chance and make full use of it.*

SE agreed with them, and he added that there are also some uploaders in Bilibili<sup>5</sup> making and transporting English learning videos on YouTube to Chinese viewers. He sometimes searched for and watched them when he was in the mood for learning English. He admitted that his English interpersonal skills were mostly learned from watching these videos uploaded by Chinese uploaders who have the experience of studying abroad.

#### **4.6 School and Social Support**

In addition to participants' own efforts for cultural adaption and improvement in English language communication, the participants also expressed appreciation to Memorial University and the provincial organizations in Newfoundland and Labrador for providing friendly and warm support to international students and immigrants. Suggestions on how the university could better support graduate students' academic learning and social interaction were provided.

##### **4.6.1 Support from Memorial University**

According to the results of the focus group discussion, the support offered by MUN contains two main aspects – social adaption and academic success of international students. The International Office took charge of helping with students' social adaption, while various EDGE (Enhanced Development of the Graduate

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<sup>5</sup> A video sharing website themed mainly around animation, comic, and game in China, where users can submit, view, and add commentary subtitles on videos.

Experience) workshops were hosted to foster their intellectual skills and competencies in academic learning (See Figure 1 and 2).

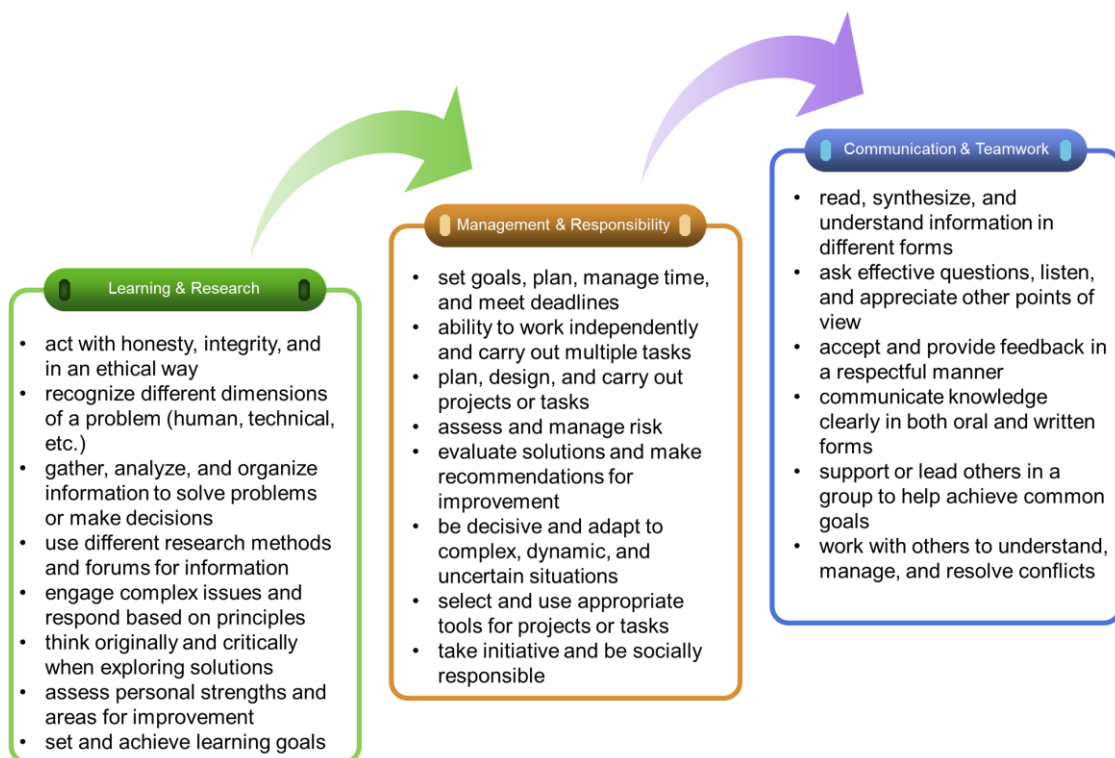


**Figure 1 Summary of support for social adaption**

Except for these activities hosted regularly every semester, the IO also organized walking and hiking events every now and then. The participants reported that all these events and programs seemed to be interesting and enriched international students' social life in many ways.

The high-level intellectual skills listed below are to foster through Memorial's Enhanced Development of the Graduate Experience (EDGE) workshops. The intellectual skills listed in the figure can be found at <https://www.mun.ca/edge/>



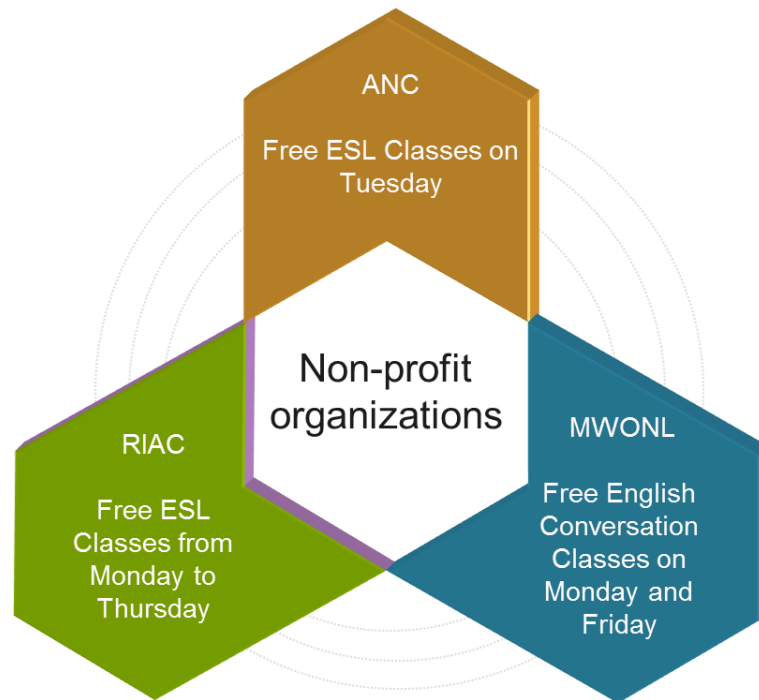


**Figure 2 Intellectual skills fostered through the EDGE workshops**

Four of the participants except SB were reported to have attended at least one of the EDGE workshops. They regarded the workshops as “niche-targeting” and “very helpful” in fostering specific skills in academic learning.

#### **4.6.2 Support from the provincial organizations**

During both the individual interviews and focus group discussion, SA, SC and SD mentioned three non-profit organizations (See Figure 3) offering free ESL classes, which were ANC (Association for New Canadians), RIAC (Refugee and Immigrant Advisory Council), and MWONL (Multicultural Women’s Organization of Newfoundland and Labrador).



**Figure 3 Non-profit organizations offering ESL classes**

The organizations offer classes seasonally in a fixed schedule. SA said that although the ESL teachers sometimes might not be professional (being trained to teach English) volunteers in RIAC, the classes were always “intriguing” and “informative”.

#### **4.6.3 Suggestions**

The participants in the study generally presented satisfaction with the support provided by MUN and social organizations. However, there were some recommendations SA and SD proposed in the focus group discussion.

SA and SD both expressed their dissatisfaction over “online courses”.

*We crossed over the sea expecting to experience “immersion” and face-to-face*

*interaction with people, but the fact was that most of the courses were offered online or “online-only” in our program. This made us depressed for a very long time. We went to the office of graduate studies in our department and even to the SGS in MUN requesting courses to be offered on campus, but it resulted in little effect. We really hope our department could take the voice of both domestic and international students’ requests into consideration, and work out a feasible solution on this issue as soon as possible. (SA)*

SA further requested the Faculty of Education to offer a platform and more opportunities for interaction between graduate students who were in the same program and chose the same program routine.

*Because there are only six required courses Master’s students should take and even fewer courses they could take on campus, I always feel alone studying in this program. I mean, I don’t have many peers to discuss my studying process. This kind of feeling isn’t good at all. Sometimes I’d vision how helpful it would be to my study and my psychological well-being if I could use some peer support, we could’ve exchanged information on so many things in the difficult course of graduate studies.*

Since SA and SD were both studying in Education, the suggestions were mostly concerned with the development of the support system in the Faculty of Education. However, the School of Graduate Studies at MUN could also use the advice for

reference to the administrative management of other departments in graduate studies.

#### **4.7 Summary**

Influenced by educational background and previous English learning experience, Chinese international students evaluated themselves to be incompetent in intercultural communicative skills in both academic and social-interaction contexts. The insufficiencies of their ICC were especially represented in categories of pragmatic competence and fluency. Realizing their weakness in spoken English, Chinese international students applied strategies for self-improvement, including learning from others, taking ESL classes, participating in school activities, volunteering, choosing to live with people from other countries, working part-time and using vast learning materials online. They expressed gratitude to the school and social support in place, and articulated expectations on further support for the School of Graduate Studies of MUN.

In the next chapter, in-depth discussion and implications for support and pedagogy are provided.

## **Chapter 5 Discussion**

In this chapter, I first interpret the findings and present in-depth discussion about Chinese international graduate students' challenges in English communicative competence, how previous English learning experiences affect their communicative competence, their attempts of self-improvement and their perspectives on the support they have received, in order to shed light on the support Canadian universities could further provide and the pedagogical implications for ESL teachers in both Canada and China. I then present limitations of the study and make recommendations for further research to conclude this report in Chapter 6.

### **5.1 Participants' General Self-evaluation of their Communicative Competence**

From the interview data, it is obvious that among the five main categories of communicative competence (Hedge, 2000), participants in this study reported more challenges in terms of pragmatic competence and fluency.

#### **5.1.1 Pragmatic Competence**

As displayed in the findings section, all five participants assessed themselves as lacking pragmatic competence in both academic and daily contexts. Through the examples illustrated in Section 4.4.2 and Section 4.4.4, it can be concluded that the mistakes they made or new expressions/etiquette they learned, were all culture-related.

There are considerable anecdotes of pragmatic failure caused by cultural

differences; one ended with a tragic outcome. It took place in America in 1992. A Japanese exchange student Hattori Yoshihiro, wearing a Halloween mask and costumes, was shot to death by his party-hosting friend's neighbour, just because he was unable to understand the meaning of the exclamation "Freeze!" (See detailed story in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting\\_of\\_Yoshihiro\\_Hattori](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Yoshihiro_Hattori)). This extreme example of tragedy resulted from a misunderstanding between an English native speaker and a non-proficient Asian student. According to Hwang (2008), such misinterpretation commonly yields the gap between real-world English and textbook English. She suggested that EFL classrooms should "expose learners to English as it is used in the real world and by real speakers", that is, teaching English pragmatics (p. 31), to avoid as many pragmatic failures as possible.

Fang (2010) summarized, pragmatic failure is usually manifested at word, sentence and discourse levels. She exemplified, in a lexical level, English learners should pay attention to culture-loaded words, such as those concerned with animals, colors, flowers and taboos; in a sentence level, pragmatic failure is caused mostly by the insufficiency of learners' knowledge about the lexical and grammatical usage of the target language, which Thomas (1983) called pragmatic-linguistic failure. For example, "Never mind" is often used by Chinese English learners as a response to thankfulness while it is in fact used to respond to one's apology; in a discourse level, it is closely related to cultures and constitutions of the communicator's native language. Chinese native speakers sometimes will unconsciously transfer their native cultural

pattern into the English speaking world on the occasion of “greeting”, “complimenting” or “accepting gifts” (Hwang, 2008; Fang, 2010). In this study, all of the participants reported to have experienced embarrassment the first time they were asked “How are you”, which was the typical pragmatic failure of the “greeting” scenario.

However, it should be noted that participants in this study possessed the pragmatic sensitivity and awareness for intercultural communication. For them, if they were not sure about the proper ways to say certain words under certain circumstances, they would 1) consciously ask someone who knows how, as SC did when she consulted her English-speaking ESL teachers with the “standard answers” for greeting, or 2) simply observed how other people would say it, as SA learned “whenever you’re ready” from other servers at the Chinese restaurant and SE learned how to order drinks from other customers waiting in line. If they failed to follow certain cultural rituals, they would apologize and learn more about it privately so that they would not make the same mistakes next time, as SB learned the connotation of “play with”, SD learned to introduce newly joined people to the conversational group as social rituals, and SE sensed the subtle implications when exchanging information.

Although participants in this study generally had negative evaluations of their pragmatic competence, their awareness of and positive attitudes towards cross-cultural differences in conversation may be indicative of their development on the other two dimensions of intercultural communicative competence – knowledge and skills in

Byram's (1997) model. Their positive attitudes towards other cultures may eventually enable them to successfully "integrate with other communities" (Cruza, 2013, p. 123).

### **5.1.2 Fluency**

In addition to pragmatic competence, the data interpreted from the interviews also demonstrated the participants' perceived challenges in fluency. Through the participants' discussions of their English fluency, the importance of second language input was stressed by SB, SD and SE. It is the fact that fluent L2 communication requires sufficient L2 knowledge (MacIntyre & Baker, 2003, p. 67), but the anxiety during the communication is also one of the influential factors. It is noticeable that both SA and SD acknowledged the significance of psychological and affective factors for speaking fluently. Besides, the explanation of SC about the reason why she was always not fluent in speaking also reflected her problems on language anxiety.

Foreign language anxiety has been theorized as occurring at three stages: input, processing, and output (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). The two reasons raised by SC for why she could not speak fluently can be interpreted as that she was experiencing language anxiety at both stages of processing and output. SC's description of herself as a "slow thinker" revealed the anxiety she was experiencing at the stage of processing. According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), speaking in the target language requires more than one mental activity at one time like "choosing words, pronouncing them, and stringing them together with the appropriate grammatical



markers, etc.” (p. 39). In order to perform these operations while communicating, “complex and nonspontaneous mental operations are required”; failure to do so may “lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.128). SC’s self-evaluation of being a “slow thinker” showed her limited processing mental capacity, which caused anxiety while speaking, and the anxiety conversely impedes the operational capacity of her mind, both of which caused her impaired performance on fluency. SC also expressed her obsession about “error-free sentences”; this showed her nervousness and fear of demonstrating her ability to use previously learned material at the output stage. Her high expectation of flawless and fluent output backfired in her actual performance.

Sociolinguists posit that social relationships can also have a deep impact on conversational interaction. Wolfson (1989) in her *Theory of Social Interaction* postulated that inequality of status or social distance “disfavour attempts at negotiation” (p. 131). Leary & Kowalski (1995) working on the construct of “social anxiety” also asserted that interacting with one’s boss or someone high in status or power, and dealing with complete strangers could contribute to the feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and awkwardness (p. 1). SA’s description of her different performances in fluency while interacting with friends as opposed to with her supervisors indicates the influence of social status and power relations on language anxiety and thus on conversational fluency.

To aid L2 learners on conversational fluency, researchers suggested ESL teachers should teach “gambits”, also termed as “prefabricated language”, such as “I’d like to make another quick point”, “I agree with that in part but...” (Hedge, 2000, p.55), or “lexical phrases” called by Nattinger (1988). The advantage of learning these phrases is that they could be quickly retrieved from memory, thereby “reducing processing difficulty” (Lewis, 2002, p.121). This also fits well with the insight of the participants who identified the importance of accumulating ample input.

## **5.2 Influences of Previous Learning Experience on Current Communicative Competence**

The overall insufficient pragmatic competence and speaking fluency, derived from the results of the participants’ self-assessment on their communicative competence, to some extent, can be attributed to participants’ previous English learning experience. In China, there are three main education systems: 1) the system of school education, including pre-school education, primary education, secondary education and higher education); 2) the system of vocational education; 3) the system of adult education (Chinese National Commission for UNESCO and Chinese Adult Education Association, 2008, p. 7). The first system is the general school system in China, which is representative of the experience of the five participants in this study. By comparing the experience among participants, I found some similarities and differences in their educational background, which might have resulted in their

different performances on current communicative competence.

Similarities: 1. All five participants started learning English in Grade 3, but the English classes and scores did not seem to be emphasized in primary school.

2. English teachers at public secondary school generally used traditional grammar-translation teaching method which mostly emphasized vocabulary and grammar and overlooked the practice of oral communication. The English classes were teacher-centered and exam-oriented.

In 2001, the Ministry of Education issued the first set of primary school English textbooks, and encouraged primary schools to start offering English lessons in several regions in China (Ministry of Education, 2001). All participants in this study were born in the 1990s and received English education since Grade 3. This means they had learned English for at least 14 years. However, their spoken English skills did not reach the levels they expected to have reached with this many years of English learning. It was the result of the prevailing teaching methods at that time. Overemphasizing vocabulary and grammar, and overlooking the practice of spoken English and cultural-knowledge teaching in the general school system, which was reflected in the interviewees' description in Zeng's (2006) study, led to a large number of "mute" and "deaf" English language learners with high performance in linguistics and low communication skills and pragmatic awareness (Zhang, 2008; Zhao, 2009).

Differences: 1. SB and SC had received early English education before they started

their third year of primary school, while SA, SD and SE did not take English classes seriously until they enrolled in secondary school.

2. SB and SD had earlier and longer experiences of interacting with English native speakers than the other three participants.

According to the findings of Penbek, Yurdakul and Cerit's study (2009), L2 learners' cultural sensitivity and L2 fluency improve with the levels of engagement in international interactions. Compared to this study, participants SB and SD's rather high evaluation of their ability to speak English fluently may be a result of earlier and longer exposure to an authentic English interaction environment.

### **5.3 Autonomous Learning Strategies**

Learning is a mental process that requires individual effort (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Krashen, 1982). Under the guidance of this cognitive conception, participants in this study were interviewed about their strategies to improve their communicative competence or general English speaking skills. Seven strategies were identified in the findings chapter. Two main themes were interpreted to categorize the strategies used by participants. The first one related to the sociocultural theory, and the second theme discusses the strategies related to online English learning in this electronic era.

#### **5.3.1 Sociocultural strategies**

Vygotsky (1978) propounded the significance of social relations in human

development and pointed out that language learning is socioculturally constructed in the learners' community. A language learner usually learns to speak by taking discourses from "other people's mouths" and "other people's intentions" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294) and later tries out these discourses as their own utterance. Participants in this study who used the strategies of learning from others, participating in school activities, volunteering, choosing to live with people from other countries and working part-time were all actions that could be interpreted in light of the sociocultural theory.

Many studies have confirmed the important role of social interaction in facilitating learners' English proficiency and communication skills. Suh, Wasansomsithi, Short, and Majid (1999) investigated the out-of-class learning experiences of eight Asian international graduate students enrolled in an ESL program at Indiana University in the United States. Through interviews, most participants reported to resort to interacting with native English speakers as the dominant way to improve their English proficiency. Kodama (2007) reported that effective out-of-class learning activities for students' English-language improvement were language exchanges, clubs, churches and social events, and volunteer experiences. The self-study of Liu (2011) presented in detail her own English-learning experiences during the time when she pursued a Master's degree in Canada: volunteering, working part-time in the English community, choosing homestay as accommodation, participating in school activities such as speech contest and presentations, and developing leisure-time hobbies related to English. Her purpose was to set examples

for international students to adopt autonomous language learning methods to become conscious of their own English learning process. The strategies she applied were all mentioned by participants in my study, which reflected the participants' strong awareness of effective sociocultural autonomous learning.

### **5.3.2 Online learning**

Through the data collected from individual and focus group interviews, taking advantage of vast English learning materials on the Internet was widely discussed by participants. It mainly included two ways: 1) watching English movies and TV series; 2) watching videos that teach cross-cultural and pragmatic knowledge.

Yang (2011) found that foreign films and TV series were the main resources Chinese college students used, and the one they preferred to use, to make sense and learn about the cultures of the U.K. and America. She also suggested that these sense-making activities affected Chinese college students' understanding of and attitudes towards foreign people and culture, as well as towards domestic people and culture. The participants in my study were in a privileged place to learn Western cultures on the Internet with the collaboration of experiencing and practicing what they learned in their everyday life.

With the Internet developing considerably fast and the technological area becoming more and more mature, a rapidly increasing number of ESL teachers start teaching online, attracting a considerable number of L2 learners. As far as I know,

numerous valuable English learning materials are taught and shared freely online by English teachers as well as learners from all over the world. As expounded by SE, besides YouTube, Bilibili is another popular place for uploaders to upload free English teaching videos and transfer useful YouTube videos to English learners who have no access to certain websites out of China. CCTV COM (the most authoritative news website in China) reported that there is a new trend for young people to study on Bilibili. According to the data from Bilibili, 18.27 million people have studied on the Bilibili website in the past year, which is equivalent to twice the number of students taking the college entrance examination in 2018. In addition, English learning accounts for the majority of the learning purposes on this website (CCTV COM, 2019). The Bilibili website has become a new primary social learning platform for young generations to learn various skills online.

#### **5.4 Recommendations for University Support and ESL Pedagogies**

Based on participants' suggestions that they proposed in the focus group interview, recommendations are presented for Memorial University to further support graduate students. Moreover, suggestions for ESL pedagogies are also listed according to participants' reports on the relationship between their previous English learning experience and current communicative competence.

##### **5.4.1 Recommendations for university support**

Holmes (2004) asserted that there are always “unexplained conventions” that

international students must adapt to “succeed” in western universities: the “onus is on these Chinese students to reconstruct and renegotiate their primary culture learning and communication styles to accommodate another way” (p. 303). Holmes claimed that this process of accommodation would disadvantage and further differentiate international students. Therefore, the university should also take the responsibility of adapting to meet international students’ needs.

In this study, SA and SC proposed two suggestions for the School of Graduate Studies at MUN; one was to offer in-class options for each course in the Faculty of Education, and to try to protect these courses from being canceled due to low enrollment. The other one was to provide a platform for graduate students to get to know each other for the convenience of information exchange and academic peer support. Tran (2011) argued, “Reciprocal adaptation from international students and academic staff rather than the onus of adaptation being placed on international students is paramount to the enhancement of teaching and learning and the sustainable development of international education.” (p.80). Her study suggested that reciprocal adaptation of academic staff and international students was critical to the process of internationalizing the curriculum.

#### **5.4.2 Recommendations for ESL pedagogies**

Findings of this study also suggest that ESL teachers, especially teachers in China, need to change their teaching methods to raise students’ awareness in cross-cultural



communication. For many educational changes, teachers are the crucial factors as their contributions to and participations in the innovation are essential. Without their willingness, understanding, cooperation and participation, there can be no changes (Brown, 1980; White, 1988).

Based on the literature and the findings of this study, it is clear that students would benefit from the following changes to English language instruction in schools in China:

1. Teachers should change their views about language which is not a system of linguistic knowledge but a means for communication.
2. They should change their traditional role of a knowledge transmitter to a multi-role educator. The teaching objectives of the new English curriculum requires that language teaching is more than just teaching the knowledge and skills, it includes caring for students' affective needs, developing their learning strategies, widening their cultural horizons and establishing international perspectives through the process of language learning.
3. They could use more formative assessment in addition to using tests, and teach to skills instead of teaching to tests.
4. They could also apply modern technology in teaching, creating more effective resources for learning and for using the language.

In fact, these suggestions have been proposed and stressed for nearly two decades.

However, considering the complex situation of Chinese education, it is not easy to change. To many teachers, change is a rather painful and stressful experience as they are bound to “cope with both the mental and emotional demands of relearning aspects of their professional culture in order to be recognized as a competent professional using the new approach” (Wedell, 2001, p. 3). Therefore, teachers’ professional training should also be provided by the Chinese Educational Bureau to equip English teachers with sufficient knowledge on how to implement changes in real classes.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion

This study is significant because it can help universities in Canada have an understanding of Chinese graduate students' perceptions of their communicative competence, and enlighten Chinese ESL teachers to pay attention to the improvement of learners' intercultural communication competence.

The theoretical framework of this qualitative research is Hedge's (2000) taxonomy of communicative competence. It includes five components, namely linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and fluency. The result of this study showed that participants in this study perceived more challenges in terms of pragmatic competence and fluency. This may be influenced by participants' educational background and previous English learning experience. Realizing their weakness in spoken English, Chinese international students applied strategies for self-improvement, including learning from others, taking ESL classes, participating in school activities, volunteering, choosing to live with people from other countries, working part-time and using a vast number of learning materials online. They exemplified the school and social support in place and expressed gratitude to it. They also articulated expectations for further support for the Faculty of Education and the School of Graduate Studies of MUN that they should offer in-class options for as more courses as possible and offer a platform for graduate students to know each other for the convenience of peer support. The

recommendations for ESL pedagogies are also presented.

However, there are also some limitations in this study. Some issues, which were not explored in this study, also require further research.

### **6.1 Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations can be attributed to the design and the methodology of this study. First, the researcher is the sole interviewer and also an L2 learner herself. The personal experience of the researcher may add biases to the interpretation of interviewed data. To reduce the impact of personal biases, I have made efforts to maintain objectivity as much as possible. I did a member check for transcripts and translations. I also invited a third party to check my Chinese-to-English translation of the transcripts.

Second, the assessment of participants' communicative competence was based on their own criteria and subjective perceptions. There was not a common standard for participants to evaluate their competence more objectively. Besides, although participants' self-assessment were verified to some extent by examples, there was not a published measure such as Likert-type scales or other approaches used in this study to assess their self-knowledge. This prevented the researcher from presenting the data of participants' assessment more accurately.

Another obvious limitation is that this study was limited to only five participants, and all of them were Master's students at MUN. As such, the finding about

communicative competence in this study cannot be generalized to all Chinese graduate students attending MUN or other universities in Canada. In this case, I may not be able to generate assumptions about communicative competence concerning a particular cultural group such as Chinese graduate students, because the sample is not representative of all the Chinese graduate students attending Memorial University.

## **6.2 Implications for Further Research**

Further studies on Chinese graduate students' communicative competence should include more participants that are qualified, such as inviting a similar number of doctoral candidates as Master's students. In addition, a more validated device should be applied to aid participants to make a more accurate assessment of their communicative competence with a standard reference, and Likert-type scales should be used for collecting data in order to strengthen the veracity of the findings that are drawn from the data.

There are several other themes that emerged in the process of interpreting the data, but they were not explored in this study. Further studies could include the discussions on the relationship between authentic English materials learning at early ages and the performances of participants' communicative competence. In this study, the female and male participants majored in different fields and had different personalities; their different attitudes towards the improvement of intercultural communicative competence were not explored due to the small sample size. Further studies with

relatively large sample sizes could investigate gender, major and personality's influence on participants' attitudes towards the development of their English communicative competence and correspondent language learning strategies. Further studies are needed to address the above questions and problems.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A Recruitment Advertisement

#### Participants Needed for Research in Second Language

##### Communicative Competence

Are You:

- A Chinese student who speaks Chinese as your first language?
- Currently a graduate student?

If you answered yes to these questions, you are invited to volunteer to participate in the study “Exploring communicative competence of Chinese graduate students at Memorial University”.

You will be asked to participate in an individual interview and a following focus group discussion with the other 3-5 participants.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and will involve either or both two sessions as your choice, the first individual-interview session will take 1.5-2 hours, and the following focus group session will last approximately 2 hours.

By participating in this study, you will have a chance to talk about parts of your academic and social life with the loyal researcher and maybe also with your colleagues who may have similar or distinct experiences. You may gain general insight into second language communication, and have a general understanding of English communicative competence.

This study is not a requirement of MUN and the International Office, and your participation will not be reported to your instructors or administrators.

If you are interested in participating in this study or for more information, please contact:

Yushuo Zhang, M.Ed student, Faculty of Education  
Tel 709-764-3979 Email: yushuoz@mun.ca

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University’s ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.



## Appendix B Informed Consent Form

Faculty of Education  
St. John's, NL Canada A1B 3X8

Yushuo, Zhang  
Email: yushuoz@mun.ca  
Tel: 709 764 3979

### Informed Consent Form

Title: Exploring the communicative competence of Chinese graduate students at Memorial University

Researcher(s): Yushuo Zhang, M.Ed student, Faculty of Education, 709-764-3979. yushuoz@mun.ca

Co-supervisor(s): Dr. Xuemei Li, Faculty of Education, xuemeil@mun.ca  
Dr. Leslie Redmond, Faculty of Education, leslie.redmond@mun.ca

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled “Exploring the communicative competence of Chinese graduate students at Memorial University”

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your rights as a participant, including the right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, *Yushuo, Zhang*, if you have any questions about the study or for more information not included here before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

### **Introduction**

My name is Yushuo Zhang, and I am currently a graduate student in the Faculty of Education. This research will investigate Chinese graduate students' perspectives and expectations towards their communicative competence both in academic and daily-communication contexts. As part of my Master's thesis, I am conducting this research under the supervision of Dr. Li and Dr. Redmond.

I am interested in exploring the challenges Chinese graduate student are facing in terms of their second language communicative competence. Through in-depth interviews with Chinese graduate students, I will explore the main ideas of their perception, experience and expectation of their own English competence, in order to find effective ways to better support and help Chinese international students overcome difficulties brought about by their language ability.

### **Purpose of study:**

The purpose of this study is to understand the communicative challenges you may face while studying at a Canadian university. The further purpose of this study is to draw pedagogical implications for Chinese ESL teachers to prepare ESL learners with better communicative competence so that the learners could adjust to life in an English-speaking country when they have opportunities to study abroad.

### **What you will do in this study:**

Before starting, I would like to ask you some questions to obtain some basic socio-demographic information: your age, gender, your education level and your program of study. In this study, you will participate in two interviews, the first one is an individual interview with me, and the second one is a focus group interview with me and other participants in this study.

In the personal interview, you will be asked in a detailed manner about your perspectives, experiences and expectations of your English communicative skills. In the focus group interview, you will be asked to discuss your English learning experiences, opinions and expectations of your oral English development with the

other 3-5 participants in this study, who are all Chinese graduate students studying at MUN.

**Length of time:**

The personal interview will last 1.5-2 hours. This includes time for you to read and understand this form, as well as time for you to ask any questions you may have. The following focus group interview will last approximately 2 hours.

**Withdrawal from the study:**

You do not have to participate in this research project. If you do agree to participate, you can withdraw at any time without any penalty or negative consequences. You can ask to have your data deleted at any time by emailing or telephoning the researcher, and orally requesting the researcher to delete your data that has been obtained until the end of the data analysis session (two months after data collection has concluded, prospectively on May 20). The researcher will immediately delete all the digital data that obtained from your individual interview stored in the computer and also clean the recycle bin, the paper-form data will be shredded by a shredder permanently.

Considering the professional requirement for dealing with voice processing in an audio file and the scarcity of the researcher's resource in this field, if you have participated in the focus group discussion before you decide to withdraw your data, the best thing I can do is not analyzing and not reporting or publishing any word you have said and any data you have provided in the focus group discussion. In addition to that, I will contact those participants who have participated in the focus group discussion with you as soon as you requested for withdrawal, and politely asking them to respect your confidentiality.

**Possible benefits:**

People who participate in this study may gain general insight into second language communication, have a general understanding of English communicative competence, and have a chance to talk about parts of their academic and social life in complete confidentiality.

**Possible risks:**

Minimal: You may feel shy or upset to talk about your embarrassing moments caused by your communication skill. In most occasions, emotional discomfort is light, and

not greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. However, if you have any extreme emotions during the individual interview, I will end the interview immediately and accompany you to seek help from counseling service; if it happens during the focus group interview, I will suggest you seek supports at any time by contacting the MUN student wellness and counseling center. The contact information is:

Student Wellness and Counselling Centre  
5th Floor University Centre, UC-5000  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
Tel: (709) 864-8500  
Fax: (709) 864-2087

### **Confidentiality**

All data collected will be identifiable only by a reference number (e.g. participant-1, participant-2), which gives no identifying information about who provided that data. Your name will appear only on this consent form, and consent forms will be kept separately from participant data and cannot be linked with participant numbers. Before being exposed to your data, any third party that will be involved in this research will sign a confidentiality agreement for not disclosing any data you have provided.

### **Anonymity:**

Your participation is confidential, but not anonymous to the researcher and other participants of this study, because there will not only be semi-structured individual interviews, but also the follow-up focus group discussions. However, every other reasonable effort will be made to ensure your anonymity. Pseudonyms will be used in my reports, so you will not be identified in any reports and publications.

As one of the participants in this study, you should be reminded of this inherent limit to confidentiality in a focus group setting: although I will safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion to the best of my ability, the nature of focus groups prevents me from guaranteeing that other members of the group will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other members of the group by not repeating what is said in the focus group to others, and be aware that other members of the group may not respect your confidentiality.

### **Recording of Data:**

The personal interviews and focus group discussion will be recorded by my smartphone which needs a 6-digit-number password to access, and saved as audio files.

**Storage of Data:**

The data in paper forms such as consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet not accessible to anyone outside the study. The electronic data such as recordings will be stored in files securely in the researcher's computer which is password protected.

All files (electronic and paper-based) will be kept securely for a minimum of 5 years as required by Memorial University policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research, and then securely destroyed. Electronic files will be deleted from computer hard-drives and servers, and electronic “rubbish bins” will be emptied.

**Reporting of Results:**

The data collected in this study will be part of a master’s thesis and may be presented at various scientific conferences, and I hope to publish the results in a peer-reviewed journal. Pseudonyms will be used when reporting the results. The reporting will use both direct quotations and paraphrases.

**Sharing of Results with Participants:**

If permission has been obtained from my participants, I will send a summary of the results and implications of this study to their personal email address as soon as I finish the data analysis.

Participants could also access the more comprehensive report through reading my finished master’s thesis which will be available through

<http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/search/collection/theses>

**Questions:**

You are welcome to ask questions at any time during your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact: *Yushuo Zhang, Department of Education, 709 764 3979. [yushuoz@mun.ca](mailto:yushuoz@mun.ca)* or either her co-supervisors *Dr. Xuemei Li, Faculty of Education, [xuemeil@mun.ca](mailto:xuemeil@mun.ca)* or *Dr. Leslie Redmond, Faculty of Education, [leslie.redmond@mun.ca](mailto:leslie.redmond@mun.ca)*

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

**Consent:**

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research project.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study without having to give a reason and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that any data collected from you up to the point of your withdrawal will be destroyed.

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

**Your signature:**

I have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits. I have had \_\_\_\_\_ adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.

I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation.

I agree to be audio-recorded during the interview and the focus group.

Yes  No

I agree to the use of quotations.  Yes

No

I would like to receive feedback of this study from the researcher through my personal email.

Yes     No

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher's Signature:**

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Part 1**

1. What do you know about communicative competence?
2. What do you think of your current communicative competence when you talk with your professors?
3. Can you specify by examples why you believe you are competent/not competent in communication with your professors?
4. What do you think of your current communicative competence when you talk with your English-speaking classmates or friends?
5. Can you specify by examples why you believe you are competent/not competent in communication with your classmates or friends?

#### **Part 2**

6. How did your English teachers teach you in your junior and senior high school and in university?
7. Do you incline to link your current English communicative competence to your English learning experiences in China? Why?

#### **Part 3**

8. What are your expectations for your English improvement?
9. Did you consciously use any strategies to improve your communicating skills? What are those techniques? Did they work?
10. What will you continue to do to improve your English communicating skills during your study in graduate programs?



## **Appendix D**

### **Focus Group Discussion Agenda**

Hopefully, for every question, every participant should first take turns to speak, then they can discuss with each other on the subjects that interests them.

1. Share your experiences and give suggestions of some English-learning strategies that work or do not work for yourselves to improve your communicating skills.
2. As far as you know, what the Memorial University has done to support international students with your academic study and daily communication? Have you ever used those supports? How do you evaluate their efficacy?
3. Could you provide any other good ideas and suggestions for the university further to do to better support your study life in Canada?

## Appendix E

### Confidentiality Agreement

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**Project title:** *Exploring the communicative competence of Chinese graduate students at Memorial University*

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have been asked by the researcher *Yushuo Zhang* to help her check the Chinese to English translation of the data.

I agree to:

1. keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than *Yushuo Zhang*.
2. keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.
3. return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to *Yushuo Zhang* when I have completed the research tasks.
4. after consulting with *Yushuo Zhang*, erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the *Researcher(s)* (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Researcher - print name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Transcriber - print name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)