



Research Study

Chinese Student Newcomers' Transition to a Canadian Postsecondary EAP (English for Academic Purposes) Program: Bicultural Responses and Acculturation

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ABSTRACT. The study investigated the cultural and linguistic lived experiences of Chinese international student newcomers in a Canadian postsecondary English for Academic Proposes (EAP) program. This article aims to explore Chinese students' transition trajectories within an educational institution in Canada. As Chinese English learners are immersed in Canadian tertiary education settings, their assumptions about knowledge and culture will be challenged, impacting their identities and learning trajectories. Experiences of integration can be positioned across a continuum of bicultural practices, favouring the home or host cultures, depending on how newcomers select and respond to the acculturation process. In this study, we argue that Chinese-dominant biculturalism is one type of response to the host culture by students who have limited English proficiency and little contact with the larger Canadian society. On the other hand, Canadian-dominant biculturalism is another response type that marks an ongoing adjustment of identity loss, transformation, and reclamation, which involves a process of transforming identity between the initial feelings of loss and final reclamation as participants work through experiences of marginalisation. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of Chinese students' trajectories and have implications for how home and host institutions can support these students as they embark on their studies internationally.

RÉSUMÉ. Cette étude a porté sur les expériences culturelles et linguistiques vécues par les étudiants internationaux chinois nouvellement arrivés dans un programme postsecondaire canadien d'anglais sur objectifs universitaires. Cet article vise à explorer les trajectoires de transition des étudiants chinois au sein d'un établissement d'enseignement au Canada. Au fur et à mesure que les apprenants chinois s'immergent dans l'enseignement supérieur canadien en anglais, leurs hypothèses normatives sur les connaissances et la culture sont remises en question, ce qui a un impact sur leurs identités et leurs trajectoires d'apprentissage. Les expériences d'intégration



peuvent être positionnées sur un continuum de pratiques biculturelles, favorisant la culture d'origine ou la culture d'accueil, en fonction de la manière dont les nouveaux arrivants choisissent et réagissent au processus d'acculturation. Dans cette étude, nous soutenons que le biculturalisme à dominante chinoise est un type de réponse à la culture d'accueil par les étudiants qui ont une maîtrise limitée de l'anglais et peu de contacts avec la société canadienne dans son ensemble. D'autre part, le biculturalisme à dominance canadienne est un autre type de réponse qui marque un ajustement continu de la perte, de la transformation et de la récupération de l'identité, ce qui implique un processus de transformation de l'identité entre les sentiments initiaux de perte et la récupération finale au fur et à mesure que les participants travaillent à travers des expériences de marginalisation. Nos résultats contribuent à une meilleure compréhension des trajectoires des étudiants chinois et ont des implications sur la manière dont les établissements d'origine et d'accueil peuvent soutenir ces étudiants lorsqu'ils entreprennent leurs études à l'étranger.

Keywords: *Transition; identity; acculturation; biculturalism*

INTRODUCTION

Since China's opening up and reform policies of 1978, English has played an important role in the nation's increasingly frequent cultural exchanges and development of trade relations (Hu, 2002). Due to the difficult and highly selective admission processes in Chinese higher education, students frequently look internationally for postsecondary opportunities. In 2019, there were nearly 890,000 Chinese students studying overseas, including 141,400 in Canada (New Oriental Education & Technology Group, 2020). The rapidly expanding Chinese middle class – which makes up about 5% of China's population - is the main source of Chinese students attending English-speaking postsecondary institutions (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). Since education reforms in 2001, English language education has been a compulsory subject starting in grade three of primary school (Guo & Beckett, 2012). Nevertheless, many Chinese international students fail to meet the English language requirements of their chosen degree stream despite spending years learning English. As a result, when these students arrive in Canada, they enrol in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs in preparation for their degree programs (Chen, 2020).

Canada is a notably diverse country, with 18.9% of the population born outside of the nation (Berry et al., 2006). Various English as a Second Language (ESL) programs across Canada provide avenues for building linguistic skills in the K-12 educational system for those who come from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Burnaby et al., 2000). In 2020 alone, there were around 116,700 Chinese international students studying in Canada, around 22% of all international students pursuing their education at all levels of study in Canada (Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE], 2022). These students choose Canada as their overseas study destination because of the quality of its education system and its reputation as a tolerant and non-discriminatory society and safe country (CBIE, 2022). Thus, it is not surprising that Chinese student newcomer youth are numerous throughout Canada's education system, and understanding their experience is important to bolstering their success (Yu, 2020).



In this article, we discuss the transition trajectories of four Chinese international students. We draw on a framework of the four-stage acculturation process, which posits that newcomers go through phases of initial enthusiasm, culture shock, recovery, and integration in the host country (Ministry of Education, 2001). Specifically, we focus on the last stage, integration, and argue that dividing this phase into two types - Chinese-dominant and Canadian-dominant biculturalism – is a more precise way to categorise these participants' experiences. The "Canadian" in Canadian-dominant biculturalism we use here refers not to nationality per se but rather describes a linguistic perspective of Canadian English or Canadian culture associated with English. Here, we describe these two strategies among participants who use either Chinese or English language as the more commonly used language in their daily life. When participants transitioned from the Chinese to Canadian learning context, they experienced varying degrees of marginalisation (i.e., feelings of exclusion that limited their ability to associate themselves with the host language and culture; Cao et al., 2017). Our focus here, though, is on each individual's approach to the transition process and how this impacts that individual's response to experiences of marginalisation. We also seek to summarise some common (un)successful traits of their integration trajectories which have implications for future research in the field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Motivation to Investment in Language Education

When considering the journeys of international students, motivation has long been considered an important factor contributing to successfully learning a second language. There have been debates in the literature about how interrelated effects from the social world affect language learners (Norton, 1995). Affective variables of individual learners include motivation, self-confidence and anxiety (Gardner, 1985; Krashen, 1981; Spolsky, 1989). Brown (1987) argued that other important variables include being introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited, and field-dependent or field-independent. However, Norton's (1995) study on immigrant woman language learners' communicative practices with Anglophone Canadians in their workplace revealed that "motivation is not a fixed personality trait but must be understood with respect to social relations of power that create the possibilities for language learners to speak" (p. 26). Norton expanded the view of motivation as a unitary component of individuals and proposed "investment," a concept based on cultural capital, as a more useful concept. Bourdieu and Passeron's (1997) notion of cultural capital referred to knowledge and modes of thought that distinguish a certain group or class in relation to its own set of social forms. Norton's (1995) concept of investment signalled the "socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practise it" (p. 17). These two concepts can be seen as offering complementary views of learners' affective variables: motivation serves as a psychological construct focusing on conscious and unconscious factors, while investment provides a sociological perspective focusing on histories, lived experiences, and social practices (Darvin & Norton, 2021). In the specific case of language learning, investment research depicts individuals as having a complex social history and multiple desires rather than being ahistorical and unidimensional beings. Norton (2000) conceptualised two types of investment: 'symbolic investment' refers to friendship, education, and religion, while



'material investment' consists of capital goods, real estate, and money. English competency in China is believed to be a useful language skill which can easily be transformed into other forms of symbolic and material resources. For example, good grades on English exams can enhance students' domestic and international educational prospects and bolster career choices, thus offering the potential for higher income and social status (Lin, 2017).

Acculturation Strategies

Adult newcomers are consciously or unconsciously "encultured" within their home society and culture, learning their home "culture in all of its uniqueness and particularity" (Mead, 1963, p. 187) before moving to a new culture. Acculturation refers to an adjustment process of social, psychological, and cultural changes newcomers go through when entering a new culture (Berry, 2003). Berry (2003) defines acculturation as a conscious strategy immigrants can utilise to balance their home culture and host culture. In this multidimensional model, Berry proposed four acculturation strategies of integration (biculturalism), assimilation, separation, or marginalisation in immigrant experiences, which means that individuals may resonate with both, either, or neither host and home culture (Berry, 1997, 2009). Different from the four-stage acculturation process (Ministry of Education, 2001) mentioned above, which focuses on integration as the result of acculturation process, Berry's (1997, 2009) model emphasises that integration is one of the four acculturation strategies, while there are three other possibilities (assimilation, separation, or marginalisation). Researchers found that the integration strategy is the most adaptive and successful approach, being associated with better psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Liebkind, 2001; Sam et al., 2008). This approach provides opportunities to draw on the strengths and resources of both home and host cultures (Sam & Berry, 2010). There is also a gender pattern in successful integration which was "weakly but significantly related to gender, with immigrant boys having a slightly better psychological adaptation score than immigrant girls, while immigrant boys scored lower on sociocultural adaptation" (Berry, 2009, p. 59). Taken together, these findings suggest that it is important for Chinese students transitioning to learning and living in Canada to be prepared to mobilise their languages and cultural knowledge to achieve this integrative, bicultural acculturation. One way to approach this is through selective acculturation. Developing from Berry's original concept of acculturation, Schwartz et al. (2015) define selective acculturation as "choosing to retain specific aspects of their heritage culture and to incorporate only selected aspects of [host] culture into their lives" (p. 145). There is an autonomy of the individuals deliberately acculturating into the host culture rather than reactively changing some aspects of themselves to acculturate as in Berry's concept. Understanding what this selective approach means for Chinese international students was one goal of this study.

Schumann (1976) defined social distance as the perceived difference between the language learner's home culture and the target language culture; this degree of social distance between the host and home cultures impacts learning efforts. The greater the similarities between the two cultures, the smaller the social distance, and the easier the eventual acculturation into the target language community. According to Schumann's (1986) perspective, acculturation is influenced by the degree to which an L2 learner perceives the distance between him/herself and the target language group: the smaller the distance, the easier it is for L2 learners to acculturate. This perceived distance is readjusted in response to events throughout the acculturation process. While Schumann does not



address this directly, it seems likely that successful acculturation will play a positive role in L2 learning. In the next section, we introduce previous research that describes how Chinese students experience a sense of ownership in English.

Chinese Students' Ownership of English

A sense of ownership of the host language can provide a means to lessen the perceived distance between cultures, allowing immigrant speakers to move more fluidly towards different communities to facilitate integration (Bermingham & Higham, 2018). The importance of ownership is underscored by research on the differences between language learners who either succeed or struggle to claim a sense of ownership of their second language. Lee (2008) researched Chinese students' learning English in a Canadian postsecondary ESL program and examined whether or not they can claim a sense of ownership in English learning. Some students in the study described the impossibility of refusing to learn English, while others have recognised the perceived "right and responsibility to learn English for the advancement of themselves or of China as a whole" (Lee, 2008, p. 97). Lee's participants felt a sense of discomfort and discrimination in some classroom discussions when critical analysis of culture could view cultural differences as promoting multiculturalism instead of being exoticised as "self" and "other." As a result, "few students (even those in the most advanced levels) ... felt the ability to claim English as 'their' language no matter what level of fluency they had achieved (or would ever achieve)" (Lee, 2008, p. 97). This resulted in these students disengaging from English learning. Norton (2000) noted similar results in her study of immigrant English learners in Canada who were ambivalent about practising English. This lack of participation from Chinese students in the Canadian ESL program was attributed to the possibility that "perhaps the learners are struggling because they cannot speak under conditions of marginalisation" (Norton, 2000, p. 16). Therefore these ideas of language ownership and identity are inextricably tied to conditions beyond an individual learner's language ability.

In the discussion below, we weave these varying threads together to consider how factors such as the ownership of English, motivation, identity, and acculturation strategies influence the experience of Chinese international students. While prior research has noted the importance of these constructs separately (e.g., ownership of English in Norton and Gao, 2008), we argue that incorporating the constructs and considering them together is a more effective way to explain learners' acculturation trajectories.

METHODOLOGY

Research Question

In this study, we sought to answer what acculturation trajectories reveal about how Chinese international students in a Canadian EAP develop bicultural strategies to support their integration. To investigate this question, we reviewed the acculturation trajectories of ten Chinese international students in a Canadian EAP and interviewed them to investigate their cultural and linguistic lived experiences. From the larger group of ten, we selected four



illustrative cases that provided the most representative characteristics of bicultural strategies. The table below introduces key details about these four.

Name (Pseudonym)	Age on arrival in Canada	Previous program	EAP entry Tier	Post-EAP year of study
Mary	20	GSP	3	Third
Tom	20	GSP	2	Third
Vera	20	GSP	2	Third
Vicky	20	GSP	2	Third

Table 1: Program information of selected participants

Interpretive Case Studies as a Method to Investigate Lived Experiences

To explore Chinese students' transition trajectories, we chose interpretive case studies, a qualitative research methodology. In contrast to quantitative research, which is often focused on hypothesis testing, qualitative research assumes "meaning is embedded in people's experience and that this meaning is mediated through the investigator's own perceptions" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). This study seeks to investigate participants' lived experiences and thus employs qualitative research methodology since education is a lived experience. Lived experience has been suggested by Dilthey (1985) as an immediate consciousness of life that is researched through human reflection. The study of lived experience provides a richer and deeper understanding of our everyday life and the world we experience immediately without reflection and (self-)analysis (Van Manen, 1997). To offer recommendations that may help smooth Chinese student newcomers' transitions, we investigated the cultural and linguistic lived experiences of Chinese student newcomers in Alberta, Canada and how they navigated the second language and culture.

Interpretive case study aims to present detailed descriptions of each case's phenomena, i.e., each participants' lived experiences and allows researchers to "illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data gathering" (Merriam, 1998, p. 38). In the larger study from which this article is drawn (Lin & Roy, 2019), interpretive case studies were used to document the learning trajectories of ten English language learners. Ten participants were recruited from an EAP program at a university in Alberta. Although participants met the admission requirement of the EAP program, they did not meet the English language requirement for their program (IELTS 5.5 or TOEFL 70); as a result, program rules required them to attend the EAP program before beginning the program. Eight of the ten participants came from one General Study Program (GSP), a 2+2 Chinese-Canadian program enabling students to complete a Bachelor's degree for the latter two years in a Canadian university after spending the initial two years of studying the major and English at a Chinese university. Of the remaining two participants, one was preparing to start his first year of undergraduate studies, and one was preparing to start graduate school.

Two rounds of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were carried out in October 2016 and January/February 2017. These interviews occurred one month after the participants arrived in Canada for the fall semester and after they had completed one semester of the EAP program, respectively. We use the four-stage acculturation as the theoretical framework. As previously noted, according to acculturation theory, there are four stages in the process



of adjustment, including initial enthusiasm, culture shock, recovery, and integration (Ministry of Education, 2001). During the transition from home culture to host culture, some ESL students may experience elements of different stages at the same time, while others may “remain in one stage for an extended period of time or may repeat characteristics associated with an earlier stage if the process has been interrupted” (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 8). We divide the last stage of integration into two variants: Canadian-dominant biculturalism and Chinese-dominant biculturalism. Observing participants’ lived experiences through two-rounds of semi-structured interviews, we further noticed that Canadian-dominant biculturalism contains a three-stage process of loss, transformation, and reclamation, which, similar to other acculturation stages, participants may either experience multiple stages at the same time or repeat some stage(s), as the larger adjustment model (Ministry of Education, 2001) suggested. Here, loss means intense feelings of loss, which are often imagined and temporary and can be a precursor to a transformation in identity that may occur. There is no estimation for how long each stage will last. Instead, it is dependent on where individuals are in their own trajectory. Therefore, the first author used one academic semester, an interval of approximately 3-4 months, as the interval between the two rounds of interviews to collect data. As it generally takes 1-3 semesters for students to complete the EAP program in this study, one semester was selected as the observation period to document participants’ lived experiences in order to understand their transition trajectories and see if or how they changed in the second language and culture.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interview design was employed to explore participants’ lived experiences in this article. We used a predetermined but flexible order for the open-ended questions, which allowed “individual respondents [to] define the world in unique ways” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). To this end, the first author gave the participants general questions so as to allow them room to respond in a personally meaningful way. Experiences varied across participants and were recognisable through their nuanced feelings and thoughts. Unlike tightly structured interviews, the interview design allowed for the discussion to follow topics introduced by each participant, which meant that, although each interview started with the same basic interview protocol, each interview developed in unique ways. Data collection for this study consisted of two stages. First, during the interviews, the first author engaged in dialogues with each participant and audio-recorded what the participants shared - responding with different, detailed follow-up questions based on each participant’s answers. During interviews, the first author also confirmed her understanding of the Chinese educational system with the participants to verify if her interpretation of their answers was correct. Second, follow-up questions in the same interviews were posed based on the first author’s interpretations and co-construction of meaning with the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Due to Chinese students’ self-assessment that their English proficiency was limited, the interviews were conducted in Mandarin and used a dialogic approach which involved different follow-up questions based on the conversations (Harvey, 2015). During the interviews, when they answered some of the questions that the first author thought needed clarifying, the first author had back-and-forth conversations to check with participants if her interpretations of their intended meaning were correct. Then the first author transcribed the interviews and translated them into English. Although the translation process was inevitably influenced by the first author’s subjective interpretations,



she endeavoured to convey participants' original meanings as accurately as she could from the recording, always keeping in mind that the exact meaning may be altered or lost in the translation from Chinese to English.

Data analysis was divided into within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998). For the within-case analysis, the data of each single qualitative case was described using narrative analysis (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), the essence of which is "the ways human experience the world" (p. 2) since "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (p. 2). At the same time, analysis made use of the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Once the within-case analysis of each case (i.e. each participant) was done, cross-case analysis was used to examine multiple cases. While the within-case analysis helped to understand each participant's unique experiences, categorisations of common themes across participants were generated from cross-case analysis to identify participants' trajectories before and after arriving in Canada. Since the themes related to integration strategies emerged as an essential factor, below, we introduce two different types of integration strategies participants used during their transition trajectories from China to Canada and explore participants' (in)ability to claim ownership of English in their lived experiences.

FINDINGS

As participants transitioned to learning and living ESL in Canada, they mobilised their linguistic repertoires in ways that suggest they sought to achieve selective acculturation. Soon after arriving in Canada, sociocultural adjustment generally relies mainly on behavioural competence (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). We observed that, for our participants, this adjustment included an open-mindedness to the Canadian host culture, including learning English and communication etiquette, which participants filtered through their Chinese cultural perspectives. As the participants continued to be immersed in Canada, intercultural transformations occurred in conjunction with linguistic improvements. Psychological adjustment, the other main acculturation outcome (Schwartz et al., 2010), was developed in their integration trajectories, as seen in reduced anxiety around speaking English and reclaimed confidence in contributing to the multicultural Canadian society.

All participants in this study developed ways to cope with the host culture along with their existing home cultural repertoire, and this helped them cope with learning and living in the second language and culture. As such, their trajectories resemble an integration strategy that leads to biculturalism (Cabassa, 2003; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). However, different from some understandings of biculturalism, which suggest a seemingly 'balanced' maintenance of the home culture and connection to the host culture (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005), there were clear differences among participants, with some placing more value on a Chinese cultural identity, and others placing more value on a Canadian cultural identity. Below, we explore these integration strategies and experiences through individual participants.

First, we present cases of openness to the host culture that led some participants quickly through the process of loss-transformation-reclamation and on to a more fluid integration. We then contrast this with one participant who



adopted Chinese-dominant biculturalism, in which he maintained 'silos' of skills and perspectives in the host and home cultures. Following this, we explore the impact on language-learning experiences.

In sum, some participants who adopted Canadian-dominant biculturalism described a fluctuating process of loss-transformation-reclamation of their identity. On the other hand, participants with Chinese-dominant bicultural strategy simply acquired a new set of behavioural skills without deep identity transformation. At the same time, we want to stress that, in both cases, there were common but different degrees of feelings of loss when transitioning from home culture to host culture.

Canadian-Dominant Biculturalism: Mary and Vera

In the second-round interview, the first author asked participants how they dealt with issues of cultural identities, specifically regarding a Chinese cultural identity (of being a Chinese person) and a Canadian cultural identity (as a student in Canada). Here we introduce two participants, Mary and Vera, whose answers were representative of this topic. Mary, in particular, showed a clear change across the two interviews. During the first interview, she shared the following:

I don't think there's conflict [between Chinese and Canadian identities] at all. I think I am Chinese; that is an identity rooted in me, I don't want to change it. As for Canada, I also think Canada is good; while maybe a lot of people think that Canada is better than China, but I don't think that way. It doesn't matter to me no matter how good it [Canada] is because I am very clear about this. I just study here as an international student. I don't feel I have anything [related] to Canada, like saying that I am a Canadian kind of person. I think it's unnecessary. I am Chinese; that's the way it is. I am just here studying temporarily. (Mary, first interview)

In Mary's comments, we can see that although she aspired to use English to communicate fluently in the host culture from the start, this was primarily from a linguistic sense rather than a cultural sense. Seeing herself as culturally Canadian was not a priority to her student identity. She viewed herself as more of a temporary resident of Canada who was there to complete her studies.

Later, in the second interview, she explained that she felt as though she could not 'blend in' during the process of developing her English language skills. As a result, she chose to remain in the comfort zone of her Chinese social circles. In turn, connecting to her Chinese identity gave her a sense of security rather than jumping entirely into the host culture. As her English improved, she developed a more positive social identity that extended beyond her original view of herself.

So I felt I was a full Chinese person [back then], but I don't mean it in a good way; I was saying that I didn't dare to speak to foreigners when I ran into them. I didn't dare to integrate into their circles. But now I feel much better; I know that I am a Chinese person and I am in a Chinese circle, but I dare to step out and



participate in local people's circles. If you ask me my identity now, I am Chinese, but meanwhile I am also an international student who speaks English. (Mary, second interview)

Reflecting back on her second language socialisation trajectories, Mary was able to utilise creative bicultural strategies with characteristics of selective acculturation (Schwartz et al., 2015) and stated that there was a change in her identity from "Chinese" to "an international student who speaks English." Her account demonstrates that she experienced a loss-transformation-reclamation in switching back and forth in her multiple identities and was able to claim her "sense of ownership of English" (Norton & Gao, 2008, p. 111) through her lived experiences.

Another participant, Vera, shared comments that differed from Mary's in that Vera did not describe herself as a "full Chinese person" when it was difficult to integrate. Instead, Vera thought that Chinese culture is "not very much needed here." This may be the result of already being in the process of relocating herself in the second culture and society, having already begun processing her feelings of loss. Thus, by the time the first author did the second-round interview, Vera was already figuring out how to transform her somewhat conflicting identities:

To adapt to the environment, if I want to work here, I need to slowly integrate into this society. I try my best to adapt to life in Canada, have contact with their culture if I want to live here permanently. But I didn't grow up here; I won't forget Chinese culture, although it's not very much needed here. More importantly, for now, [I need to figure out] how to try to integrate in Canadian society. (Vera, second interview)

At the time of Vera's second-round interview, she had not yet identified any transformation or reclamation of her identities. Therefore, we assume that she was still in the loss stage during the time we observed. According to the four-stage acculturation (Ministry of Education, 2001), some, like Mary, may experience different stages at the same time while others, like Vera, may remain and repeat the stage of "loss" if the process has not been resolved.

Chinese-Dominant Biculturalism: Tom

Tom was one of two participants who started their degree streams after only one semester in the EAP program. Tom was initially placed in Tier 2 of the EAP program and was supposed to spend two semesters in the EAP program before officially beginning his degree. However, he took another International English Testing System (IELTS) test and was exempted from finishing Tier 3 because he met the language requirements. In this study, Tom was among the most successful ESL learners of the ten participants. During the second-round interview, the first author asked Tom if he identified feelings of loss when he first came to Canada:

Interviewer: Did you have feelings of loss when you first came to Canada?

Tom: At the very beginning, people will have this [feelings of loss], more or less. It's a different country, after all, to see these barren views...

I: Barren, how?



T: More or less [me] being reminiscent.

I: Can you describe it?

T: [Here it's] sparsely populated and heavily forested [compared to home].

I: And you are unfamiliar with the language and culture. Did this affect you?

T: Yes, but I will find myself again when I spend more time here. It is I who chose this path, so I will make a way to adapt.

I: Right. Have you experienced this process already?

T: Not yet.

I: So you haven't had the feelings of loss?

T: No, I don't think I ever lost myself. I've been wanting to go abroad since I was younger. I think I adapted quite well to this environment. I don't need to find myself because I was never lost; maybe I will lose [part of my culture] in the future.

Although Tom denied having feelings of loss, there is still some evidence that he was experiencing some of this when he first came to Canada as he reminisced on the desolate views and feelings of being in a "different country." When answering how he balanced the two cultural identities (Chinese and Canadian), Tom said,

Tom: "Seek to find common ground while preserving your differences" (translated from a Chinese idiom), Chinese culture comes first, it is fundamental, and it is something that can't be discarded.

Interviewer: For example?

T: Confucianism. However, Canadian culture is founded more on freedom and openness, while Chinese culture is more euphemistic, and which is the opposite of open [directness]. I feel like I am in the middle of the two, in the very middle of the two extremes... so I can put myself in someone else's shoes which is a key point... and deal with things using different methods and switch back and forth. Maybe that's the purpose of studying overseas; you can bring with you, for example, your way of seeing things, but not the degree.

Unlike the other female participants in the small sample in this study, Tom did not mention his experiences using English to communicate outside of the classroom. Despite little contact with the target language communities, he seemed to adopt a Chinese-dominant bicultural strategy, relying on his Chinese identity as he said, "Chinese culture comes first" and remaining distant from the host culture. Aided by his higher English proficiency, he seemingly felt less marginalised in his experience, and thus, his adjustment proceeded more smoothly.



Tom's answers reveal that he did not perceive any transformations in his identity; instead, he isolated the Canadian cultural values he acquired from learning English in Canada. Although he was one of the most representative examples of participants who adopted Chinese-dominant biculturalism during the interviews, he passively responded to cultural and linguistic social situations in his postsecondary experience; this approach contrasts with examples seen from the other participants with Canadian-dominant bicultural strategies, who were taking initiatives to integrate into the host culture through the loss and reclamation of their identities. However, Tom was also able to construct positive viewpoints of the two cultures and still showed characteristics reflective of selective acculturation in the later interview.

Claiming Ownership of English: Mary

In the larger study (Lin & Roy, 2019), four of the five female participants were observed to have experienced an initial loss and a subsequent reformation of their identities. We noticed that an increase in engagement with Canadian values corresponded to the female participants' developing language proficiency. They conveyed a shift in their attitudes from reluctantly using English to proactively speaking it. Initially, they doubted themselves due to their lower English proficiency and therefore felt at a disadvantage when accessing the target language social networks outside the EAP program. For these participants, being at a disadvantage was a source of considerable stress. Compared to the male participants who more rigidly adopted Chinese-dominant bicultural strategy, their female peers revealed a greater tendency to change themselves with the movement from home culture to current host culture, which we labelled Canadian-dominant biculturalism. This strategy tended to have one of two acculturation outcomes: they either reclaimed their identity and confidence (Mary) or were in the process of confidence-reclaiming (Vicky) as time progressed. In the latter case, we suspect that the process will most likely predicate further integration into the Canadian sociocultural world.

Mary was placed in Tier 3 and completed the EAP in only one semester. In the initial stage of feeling loss, Mary expressed a 'fear' of frustration, seemingly related to her low self-esteem. She elaborated:

I avoided talking to them [Canadians] as much as possible. Maybe I am the kind of person who is afraid of feeling frustrated. When I said the wrong things or if other people could not understand me, no matter how they viewed me, I would blush and feel ashamed...that was the predicament back [when she first came to Canada]. (Mary, second interview)

However, looking over her broader trajectory, Mary noted an early experience which seemed to be formative in shaping her later attitudes. When she first arrived in Canada, Mary was unable to understand what the Visa Officer (VO) said. According to Mary, he immediately asked for an interpreter, and she noted that he never looked at or talked to her during the process. Then she received a one-year study permit from that VO while classmates who landed with her all received 2 or 3 years permits from other VOs. That made her feel anxious about her English abilities and future life in Canada. The negative reactions from the officer challenged Mary's perceptions of her English and herself; she felt "inferior" as a result. This feeling haunted her until she successfully graduated from the EAP program and started her degree stream after only one semester. Mary described claiming her ownership of



English by amending her expectations of academic success with regard to the language. After starting her degree courses, she regained confidence through forming relationships with the local community – she developed good relationships with her Canadian classmates, and an undergraduate Japanese instructor assumed that she was a Chinese-Canadian who had grown up here.

Now I am enrolled in undergrad courses, I don't have the feeling of being less qualified than those who have spent a longer time here than me or speak better English than me. . . I don't care whether you speak English or French, because I am taking Japanese and Econ. [With improved English] I feel I can communicate with other people who speak English. It doesn't matter if I am bad at it [English] as long as I can pass the required courses. I don't experience the same huge psychological pressure I felt before. (Mary, second interview)

Thus, we see the importance of claiming ownership of English in Mary's acculturation trajectory. This ownership contrasts Vicky's sense of legitimacy in her use of English.

Seeking Legitimacy in Speaking ESL: Vicky

Vicky reflected on an experience she had while attending an event with another participant, Vera, who was her roommate in the university undergraduate residence. When they first moved in, they attended one of the regular events held for residents. However, Vicky found that they were the only Chinese students there, while others were either native speakers or proficient English speakers who, according to Vicky, were "definitely not in the EAP program." In Vicky's interview, she revealed that due to the fact that they could not understand the people who organised the event, they had to talk to each other because "no one speaks to either of us."

Vicky: When I first came here, I was homesick and in a bad mood. I didn't want to speak with foreigners. I remember at a residence event, my roommate and I had to talk to each other.

Interviewer: You and Vera?

V: Yes. They - the good English speakers - talked to each other among themselves, and we talked between us two. At that moment, I felt it's difficult to integrate. But things got better now with the improvements of my language.

Vicky's trajectory was therefore impacted by experiences where none of the people she perceived as more 'legitimate' speakers (i.e., native Anglophones and non-native speakers with higher English proficiency) were willing to speak to her. When Vicky tried to interact with the Canadian postsecondary social world, she found similar issues of rejection, which led to Vicky's initial ambivalence towards speaking with Canadians. Vicky's concern about "making many mistakes" created a perceived power imbalance between herself and these "native speakers." Her concern was eventually alleviated with support from her instructors in the EAP program. At the time, Vicky thought she would never be able to match the linguistic competence of these "good English speakers":



I hope to get to know more Canadian classmates when I start my degree stream in future, I don't want to know only my Chinese classmates. And I don't want to always do group work with Chinese; profs won't like that. I may make more [Canadian] friends, but I think I absolutely cannot compete with them academically. They are native speakers; there will still be huge disparities when I finish the language school [in the future]. I think that it's much easier for them to study. (Vicky, second interview)

It took several months before she could see that it was “okay to make mistakes” and before she dared to practise her English outside the EAP program. Regardless of whether her claim that “no one spoke to us” was due to the fact that they did not talk to others because of Vicky's initial lack of confidence or because more advanced speakers were actually ignoring her, we can see that Vicky was experiencing some culture shock in the initial phase of acculturation. There were concrete internal and/or external challenges that Vicky needed to overcome to successfully integrate in the way that Mary and Tom did.

DISCUSSION

In this study, there were two representative participants who made the fastest progress towards integration in their transition trajectories. Mary and Tom both started their degree streams after spending only one semester in the EAP program: Mary started her degree stream because she successfully graduated from Tier 3 of the EAP program, and Tom was exempted from having to finish the rest of his EAP program. Mary and Tom were the most successful ESL learners compared to the other participants, who spent multiple semesters in EAP before officially moving to their academic journeys in Canada. Hence, we devoted much of this article to describing how these two participants progressed during the program and what integration strategies they applied. Our aim in doing so was to summarise some common traits of their acculturation experiences for future research implications in the field.

We also examined those less successful cases, such as Vera and Vicky, who were still developing their strategies and were perhaps stuck in or repeating certain stage(s) in the loss-transformation-reclamation integration process model. It is possible that Vera and Vicky experienced a paradoxical situation where immigrant language learners needed English to access social networks but were unable to develop fluency without access to those networks, similar to findings described by Norton (1995, 2000).

Mary's case supports Norton's (1995) observations that the types of investment and social relationships available to language learners can influence their decisions to invest in communicating with the target language communities rather than investment being solely the result of personal and internal motivations to practise the target language. At the beginning of the study, Mary did not feel that she belonged to the English-dominated academic community because she did not speak English well enough. Mary's identity transformation is made up of two layers of meaning. One is her self-perception of “good grades” in the EAP, which she took as recognition from the Canadian educational authority of her English competency. The other is the reduced power imbalance owing to the relationships she created with Canadian communities. While her initial friendships with Anglophone Canadian girls were rather



shallow due to her still-developing English competency, an instructor later assumed that she was raised here, which she took to mean that she had legitimate language skills.

Gender differences observed in participants' acculturation processes similarly reflect prior research, where successful integration was "weakly but significantly related to gender, with immigrant boys having a slightly better psychological adaptation score than immigrant girls, while immigrant boys scored lower on sociocultural adaptation" (Berry, 2009, p. 59). Tom took on a Chinese-dominant biculturalism integration strategy because he felt he was confident identifying solely with his Chinese identity and would, therefore, not lose himself in the second culture. He did not identify transformations in his identities; instead, he saw himself as a person with a stable identity 'core,' compared to his female counterparts, who experienced or were experiencing fluctuating changes in their self-perceptions or identities. Other male participants in the study exhibited similar strategies. For more on this point, see Lin and Roy's (2019) article, which describes gender differences among these study participants.

Additionally, asymmetrical power relations between speakers with different proficiencies outside the language classroom need to be addressed. Contrary to Mary's view that she "won't get lower grades than [Canadian students]," Vicky thought she "absolutely cannot compete with them academically; they are native speakers." It may be that Vicky saw herself that way because she had not adjusted to the new language like Mary was. Rather, Vicky was still in the process of reclaiming her identity that was associated with her language learning. As Grosjean (2008) maintained, a monolingual view of bilingualism - the siloing of languages into two simultaneous monolingualisms - leads to negative self-judgments among bilinguals. Challenging the belief that bilinguals need to master both languages to be part of a community may support students in their transitions upon arrival in a new host country.

In addition, the question of legitimacy in language ownership reflects Roy's (2010) research, which investigated the notion of legitimacy in relation to French immersion students. Participants in Roy's study did not consider themselves to be "entirely" or "truly" bilingual simply because they could not speak French at the same level as native speakers. Roy (2010) suggested that bilinguals are people who use their languages in different contexts with different competencies; taking Mary, for example, as someone who has experienced her own linguistic improvement, her growing sense of legitimacy was accompanied by the fact that she did not "feel the intense psychological pressure she felt before." The fact that other participants, such as Vicky, did not feel like they were a part of the Canadian society may be based on the belief that, in order to be part of a community, language learners have to speak like members of that community. However, this notion grants power to native speakers. Thus, Vicky and Vera's limited English competences put them in a less powerful position compared to others around them.

Due to the existing asymmetrical power relationship between the interlocutors, English learners in Canada with limited command of the official languages are often subjected to various kinds of exclusion and marginalisation, as observed by scholars such as Norton (1995, 2000) and Roy (2010). Developing ownership of English was an important strategy for participants in this study to deal with marginalisation as language learners and second language speakers. Yet, it may take time to hone a sense of legitimacy during the ESL learning process. This one-



semester research study only depicts a small part of newcomers' transition trajectories. Future research might conduct follow-up interviews over longer intervals to observe a more holistic picture.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the cultural and linguistic lived experiences of Chinese student newcomers in a Canadian postsecondary EAP program and considered how they reflected on their interactions with the social world throughout the transition from the home to the host community. Being able or unable to claim ownership of English and achieve their desired integration, they applied different biculturalism strategies while investing themselves in English learning inside and outside the EAP program. Selective acculturation, whereby participants select and utilise positive aspects from both cultures, served as a creative strategy in their integration trajectories. Participants who adopted a Chinese-dominant bicultural strategy acquired a separate, Canadian cultural identity for dealing with target language communities, while participants who adopted a Canadian-dominant bicultural strategy went through loss-transformations-reclamation in their identities. By describing Chinese students' transition processes, we hope to raise awareness and increase understanding of how to ease the psychological adjustment experienced by this rapidly growing group of Chinese students who will complete their studies internationally. Regardless of their bicultural strategies, we suggest that training newcomers requires a more comprehensive overview of the realities of living and studying abroad. This training could involve resources to promote understanding of language ideologies, identity development, and language ownership; social engagements like discussion groups; and opportunities for guided self-reflection. We believe that purposefully building these opportunities into pre-departure (home university) and after-arrival (host university) planning can serve as a means to encourage conscious awareness and peer support for these students.

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