Article

Exploration EAL Learner Identity: Understanding Language-Related Challenges of Chinese International Students at University of Saskatchewan

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore the relationship between English language learning and identity of language learners. Most of the research related to language and identity began with Bonny Norton (Norton & Peirce, 1995; Norton, 1997; Norton, 2000). Norton (1995) noted a comprehensive understanding of social identity with integration of the language learners and the language learning context. This research investigated how six Chinese international students at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S) constructed their own identities as EAL (English as additional language) learners. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) of participants' ideological and linguistic choices was applied to interviews and written responses concerning their challenges and frustrations regarding language learning and use in Canada. The study shows that the construction of Chinese international students' EAL learner identities is influenced by both their prior English learning experiences in China and the practical experiences of learning and using English in Canada. It also shows that despite challenges and struggles, Chinese international students are striving to build a positive EAL learner identity instead of allowing themselves to be marginalized.

The number of Chinese students coming to Canada has been estimated at 10,000 annually (Han & Zweig, 2010). Even though most Chinese international students have studied English for at least six years, living and learning in an English-speaking country might be their first exposure to an authentic English-speaking context. What are these Chinese international students' prior English learning experiences? How do prior English learning experiences in China influence their construction of EAL learner identity? How do Chinese international students perceive their practical experiences as EAL learners and users in Canada? How do their practical experiences in Canada shape their construction of EAL learner identity? These research questions facilitated the exploration of how six Chinese international students at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S) constructed their own identities as EAL (English as additional language) learners. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was applied to their responses regarding lived experiences in Canada learning and using English in both oral and written forms. Critical discourse analysis provides a way to study power relations and the embedded ideologies that

shape how EAL learners construct and position themselves when language learning contexts are changed.

Most of the contemporary research related to language and identity began with Norton's (1995) pivotal work. According to Norton (1997), language learning takes place not only within classrooms but also in social, historical, and cultural contexts. Thus she proposed that identity is socially constructed in inequitable relations of power, and is complex and changing across time and space.

Concerning the relationship of power between Chinese international students and native speakers, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a suitable choice of methodology to examine social practice and attempts to reveal connections between language use, power, and ideology. CDA holds much promise for educational research because it is a sound theory and method to describe, interpret, and explain the relationships between language and important social, cultural and educational issues. The aim of CDA is to explore "…hidden power relations between a piece of discourse and wider social and cultural formations" (Corson, 2000, p.95). Discourse includes language, but it also includes the identities and meanings that go along with ways of speaking (Gee, 1996; Gee & Rogers, 2004). Therefore, CDA helps to unpack ideologies and relations of power embedded in language-related difficulties of Chinese international students.

It is also significant to understand the prior English learning experience of Chinese students. In CDA research on English taught in a Chinese High School EAL textbook, English in present-day China was considered to enhance personal opportunities in social and economic status (Xiong & Qian, 2012). That is, it is widely believed that English, no mere *lingua franca*, functions as cultural capital with symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991).

Researchers interested in EAL and the identity of international students found that language barriers were the greatest difficulty for international students studying abroad (Jochems, Snippe, Smid, & Verweij, 2010). Language, as a basic and essential ability and skill of overseas life, exerts great influence on both academic performance and social life of Chinese international students in North American universities. The interaction with an additional language and its cultural context must necessarily change one's prior identity (Guiora, 1983). There is much research relevant to identity construction and reconstruction of Chinese students in an additional language context based on cross-cultural contact and changes in values. This qualitative study strives to explore the self-constructed identity of Chinese students based on

their own lived stories and their way of sharing their stories. It will do so through an examination of social identity in a context of the relations of power that interface language learners and native language speakers.

Methodology

This research is focused on the relationship of language learning experience and identity construction based on the methodology of CDA. From one perspective, CDA helps reveal how language positions people in society and how language choices are shaped by a variety of conventions. From another perspective, critical analysts believe that "discourse" is tightly connected with representing, believing, valuing, and participating with language, and includes not only language but also the identities and meanings that go along with such ways of speaking (Gee, 1996; Gee & Rogers, 2004). By closely examining choices or uses of discourse in both spoken and written text, this interdisciplinary approach provides researchers with systematic and critical techniques for exploring how Chinese international students as EAL learners position themselves, are positioned by, construct, and are constructed by the linguistic and ideological choices they make within the larger socio-cultural context in which the texts are created.

A questionnaire (See Appendix) was designed as the instrument to explore the EAL learner identity of Chinese international students at the U of S. The questionnaire included two parts. The first part was a semi-structured interview. The interview was conducted at the university campus and was audio recorded. Each interview took approximately 15 to 30 minutes. Participants received the questions before the interview and were encouraged to bring into the conversation their ideas related to the topic. The interviews were conducted in English because I assumed that it would be possible to better gather the participants' perspectives on language acquisition and construction of themselves as EAL learners by examining closely their expression in the target language as well as their choice of discourse. Also, since communicating in English can arouse stress in Chinese students, I hoped that this emotion would inspire participants to recall the challenges of their experiences and help them to reflect deeply and completely about who they are as EAL learners. The second part of the questionnaire included four topics and participants were asked to write short responses to them. Writing on similar questions would not only provide participants opportunities to deepen their thinking, but would also enable researchers to analyze participants' choices of discourse from both spoken and

written perspectives. The written responses also provided with a deeper understanding of the participants' struggles and efforts they have been making to overcome them.

Presentation and Microanalysis of the Data

The narratives of the six Chinese students' language-related challenges and confusions are presented here. To protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms were utilized for all of the participants, so they are referred to as Jun, Liang, Kang, Huan, Hong, and Lin.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all of the participants. Even though their experiences regarding learning and using English in Canada differed significantly, their stories will be presented in the sequence of their prior learning experience of English acquisition, the practical experiences of learning and using English in Canada and their self-constructed EAL learner identity depending on the microanalysis of their choices of discourses.

Experiences of English Acquisition in China

Like the majority of Chinese international students, the six participants were first exposed to English acquisition in China. While talking about their English learning in China, all six participants regarded English as a subject and tool for communication with repeated expressions including "grammatical rules", "English exams" as well as "a tool to communicate".

As the first participant of the research, Jun reviewed his English-learning experience in China: "I started learning English in China when I was in middle school, so that was back to 1998. It's really long time ago. I took those English classes as a subject in the school, and I don't think I learn it very well because I don't get …em…very high marks on the exams." (February 1, 2013)

The influence of standardized testing and the ideology that learning language equals to learning linguistic rules was deeply rooted in Chinese students' minds. It is easy to find some clues from Jun's choice of word, "subject", to draw out the idea that the standardized test selectively addresses language as a subject including merely rules and norms. Also, Jun's underlying judgment of his English learning ability merely based on the marks on the exams reflected that Chinese students have been instilled with the mind-set that English competence should best be represented by test scores.

An ideology that provides a shallow explanation of English, and views English merely as a vehicle for transmitting information, is embedded in present-day China's EAL textbook discourse (Xiong & Qian, 2012). Since the first day Chinese students were exposed to English, they have been under the ideological influence that language is just a tool for communication. In

order to make good use of this tool, students were required to accumulate as much vocabulary and understand as many grammatical rules as possible.

When sharing his thinking on English acquisition, Jun drew parallels between learning English in China and learning certain skills. For Jun, he couldn't understand any other aspects of language except learning and practising English mechanically.

"I think learning English in China is basically like learning a skill, and you learn the trick of the skill perform this language how to make your pronunciation sound better, and learn the grammar, and learn little bit culture from the textbook or some English reading materials, like a skill." (February 1, 2013)

Another girl, Hong provided a unique perspective on English education in China:

"For a Chinese, I don't think English is necessary course for us. Because I think, we just learn Chinese and live in China and nothing…nothing to do with English. Because English is world-wide language, so we learn English, but for me I don't think English is a necessary language…sorry!"(March 1, 2013)

Hong opened the conversation with a simple declarative sentence, taking a position on English learning that it was enough for Chinese people to speak Chinese within China. In her opinion, language is merely a tool for communication, so there is no necessity for Chinese people to learn English as we could understand each other in China; as for English, only those who go abroad need to acquire it. Thus Hong separated the world into two circles: China and the rest of the world. From her construction of the world based on language, it is evident that English plays a dominant role all around the world. The dominance of English was deeply rooted in the mind of this young Chinese girl.

After expressing her unique point of view, Hong quickly apologized, typical of students who have been raised to be shy and humble. A "Sorry" commonly prefaced the perspectives of Chinese students. Since the first day of their schooling, they have been introduced to the authority of teachers and the importance of obedience. In China, different voices are discouraged and regarded as disrespectful and rebellious against authority, so Chinese students are fearful of expressing their own critical thinking and are used to apologizing for speaking out against the

authority of teachers and exams. Hong's apology reflects the chains of Chinese education embedded in her EAL learner identity.

Speaking of the authority of exams and teachers, Kang, from Hong Kong, also expressed similar attitudes while he was asked his opinions toward English acquisition:

"Em……my opinion about that was very shallow because I am not teacher, so probably I recommend people read more and listen more as much as they can."(February 17, 2013)

Kang thought about this question a for long time and ended with some recommendations on linguistic proficiency. He made a comment on his assessment as shallow just because he was not a teacher. According to Kang, there seems to be an underlying relationship between "shallow" and "not being a teacher" and that opinions not given by teachers must necessarily be lack of depth and authority. Teachers in China are usually regarded as an authority and erudite so that students rely on their knowledge. Influenced by teachers' authority, Kang looked down upon his own understanding of English acquisition. It's also interesting to notice that in terms of recommendations Kang's tone was quite like that of a teacher.

Additionally, Jun shared his experience on English learning in the university:

"…but I would concern my serious learning of English starts in the university. In the university, I, em, chose some optional class for English in different areas, like tourism, computer science, and I think... yeah I started learning English seriously in the university because the English teacher was really supportive. So I felt it was interesting and I was encouraged to learn English better, and besides I practiced a lot because lots of students prepare for some language tests." (February 1, 2013)

Jun attributed his enthusiasm towards English learning to his college teacher. However, Jun mentioned that he chose English courses for tourism, computer science, and the like. The fact that many other of his peers were preparing for various language tests also motivated him to vigorously study English.

A point of interest here is that there are many optional English courses specializing in various fields in Chinese universities. For instance, if students wanted to be tour guides, they

would attend an English course for tourism that would equip them with basic vocabulary and expressions related to tourism in English. Also, there are many English language tests in China required for college students to obtain certificates and demonstrate the linguistic proficiency necessary to apply for decent jobs. Various language tests and certificates have high popularity and sustain a huge linguistic market (Bourdieu, 1991) in China. Therefore, there appears to be an underlying causal relation between Jun's becoming an active English learner and the various specific English courses he had chosen. The huge linguistic market is promoted by an ideology in which English proficiency is regarded as cultural capital with symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) that will enhance individual opportunities in economic and social status. Jun, under the influence of the circulation of linguistic capital and the market, automatically strove to equip himself with more linguistic capital.

Current Struggles and Challenges in English Learning and Usage

In understanding the construction of EAL learner identity of Chinese international students, it was also remarkable to listen to their stories concerning struggles and challenges while they are studying and living in Canada. There were so many experiences and stories that the six participants wanted to share. No matter how much they told, the stories merely revealed the tip of the iceberg of Chinese international students' life in Canada as non-native speakers and could hardly be fully explained in the given frame.

As international students studying on a Canadian campus, Chinese students as EAL learners are inevitably confronted with a number of challenges on the acquisition of academic literacy. Huan, a twenty-year-old girl, acknowledged how hard her life was when she came to Canada on her own, especially the frustrations that occurred in her academic life.

"I think when I have class with my classmates, and when we are having a group discussion, I need to encourage myself to speak. I think it's very tough. Because I can speak Chinese very good, but English….I found if I speak some wrong sentences, and give them very bad first impression like lose face."

Huan moved to a deficit perspective when speaking of group discussions in class and indicated that she had to "encourage" herself to speak English in class. That she said she could speak Chinese very well confirmed a strong pride in her Chinese identity that conflicts with her

frustration with an EAL learner identity. Meanwhile, her mention of her proficiency in Mandarin when talking about group discussion was her assertion that the reason she had to be encouraged to take part in group discussion was on account of her language incompetence rather than her lack of capability in academic learning. Huan seemed illustrative of a typical Chinese girl: shy, and afraid of "losing face." She was anxious and worried about others' judgments merely based on her language competence instead of academic ability. Thus she described the situation during group discussion as "tough."

The following quote was Hong's narrative of her frustration on English in her life in Canada:

"The grammar of my mother language and English is very different, and sometimes I should use more words to explain the words that I don't know. And the speed of speaking English is slower than native speakers, so they may not listen to my words carefully. When I speak English, I feel not confident. Sounds compared to I speak Chinese when I speak English is lower than that, so it's hard to..em..hard to talk with the native speakers. I sometimes cannot catch up with their words, and, em, eh… yeh, and I cannot understand their words and meaning of their sentences."

There was a recurrence of vocabulary related to linguistic rules and forms, such as grammar, words, sentences and meanings. The Anglo-centric language ideologies which assume the "sociolinguistic neutrality" and grammatical "uniformity" of English still exert predominant influence on present-day English acquisition in China (Xiong & Qian, 2011). At the very beginning of their exposure to the foreign language of English, Chinese students are packed with such ideology that language is just a tool for communicating. Thus the only way they can improve their linguistic proficiency must be equipping themselves with tons of linguistic rules and forms, and they are accustomed to attributing most of their language-related barriers to their own incompetence. Under the influence of such ideologies, Hong constructed herself as a deficient EAL learner who was struggling with language.

Aside from academic life, the experiences of participants also illustrated their barriers and struggles in social discourse. Liang shared his challenge on his first day in Canada, which explained why he began to reconstruct his understanding and identity of EAL learning.

"I still remember the first day when I was in Canada; the most frustrated thing is what I said they didn't understand, so they often replied to me "Pardon me" ,"Could you please say that again?"

The phrase "pardon me" aroused my curiosity, so I couldn't help but ask "Did this expression give you pressure?" He said, "Yes, it's a pressure and kind of challenge. Like, what I said, they can't understand. In my deep heart, I think it's kind of lack of confidence to speak English." For most native speakers, "pardon me" is a polite and elegant language form to express their apologies for missing part of the conversation and ask for a repetition. However, from a perspective of Liang, an EAL learner, the power embedded in this expression switched. In other words, if "pardon me" emerged in a conversation between a native speaker and a Chinese student, it would become a judgement of the Chinese student's linguistic proficiency instead of a polite apology for missing part of the conversation. Regardless, Liang was a sensitive EAL learner to feel the embedded power in such a casual expression.

Active and positive as Jun was, like many other Chinese international students, he had experienced unforgettable, embarrassing and challenging moments as well. The following was his recall of an unforgettable experience:

"I'll say the first day was very unforgettable. I was in the plane, flying from Vancouver to Saskatoon. I was talking with the lady sitting next to me. Then the…flight attendant made an announcement, just the regulation about the plane. Then she came to me and asked me some questions about emergency exit, cuz I was sitting at the emergency exit. I wasn't sure about it and I didn't listen carefully to the instruction, so I said "when the plane was in trouble, I will open the exit." She became very nervous but just went away. After half a minute, she returned and was like "Oh, I feel uncomfortable if you sit here." So she arranged another seat for me. I feel it was a "wow" unforgettable experience. ..This was the first time I was considered as a threat to the other people's safety. That's the reason why I feel uncomfortable, 'cuz usually I'm usually harmless.

Jun owed his embarrassing experience on the plane to his English incompetence, for he didn't catch the instruction, nor did he express himself clearly. However, when telling me this story, he asserted seriously that, "Usually, I am harmless." Apart from shock and resentment, he

felt and rebelled against the power that unfairly judged his linguistic incompetence as a threat reflected by his choice of a pair of antonyms, "threat" and "harmless". Transferring from the prior English learning environment which views English with sociolinguistic neutrality (Xiong & Qian, 2012) to the authentic English-speaking context invoked Jun's feeling of rebelling against the power and inequity embedded in the English language.

It seems that many stressful stories related to flight and airports, since the interactions of different languages and different backgrounds happen during travel all the time. Huan also shared her unhappy experience at the airport:

"I remember when I just get off the plane, I'd like to give someone else to give them my passport to them, and they put stamps on…and they asked me some questions about what is in my package. Oh yes, it was when I came back from Cuba to Canada, and I have nothing to…em…I don't need to declare, because I just had one bottle of wine, but he asked me this question, 'Do you have wine?' I think I don't need to declare, so I just told him, 'maybe no.' He thinks I cannot speak English, and he asked me, 'If you don't understand, ask me. Don't give me this kind of answers, like maybe no.' I felt very bad at that time."

Huan felt inadequate as an EAL user when she experienced dealing with a customs declaration. Due to a lack of knowledge of customs declarations, she hesitated about whether one bottle of wine should be declared so she replied "Maybe no" to the customs officer. However, the reflection of the customs officer offended her because she was concerned that the bottle in her package was only a matter of customs regulation rather than her linguistic proficiency. Speaking in the same language, Huan's ability to speak English was doubted, and so she lost her power in this foreign language.

Even though most of their experiences were stressful and frustrating, the six participants have also been striving to explore their own approaches to overcome language barriers and make their intelligence and capability visible to the rest of the world in case of being marginalized. For instance, **i**n Liang's writing excerpt, he shared his unforgettable experience. Contrary to his other experiences, which he interpreted as challenging or stressful, Liang provided me with a positive story:

"…This course (GSR 981) requires each student to do a 10 minutes presentation on their research field. I prepared part of my master's degree thesis for it and rehearsed 6 times. With familiar content and full of confidence, the presentation was good and got high opinion from teachers. At the beginning of last year, I suddenly would like to make more foreign friends. Therefore, I use my interest to create chances talking with them and cultivating friendships. For example, I like hockey. When there is somebody in hockey playground, I would go forward to discuss different hockey skills or skating skills with them. Obviously, I have to speak English during our communications. It not only develops my oral English but also increases my confidence in speaking."

GSR981 is a course about Canadian academic acculturation and literacy for international graduate students. Taking this course reflected that Liang was actively prepared to integrate into the language inner circle (Kachru, 1985). Speaking of his presentation, Liang used many positive words and phrases, such as "familiar content", "full of confidence", "good" and "high opinion from teachers", which indicated that he was gaining confidence and pride in his identity as an EAL learner so that he turned the topic to making friends with more native speakers. The underlying logic here seemed that he was more confident to integrate into the local community due to his increasing language competence. When expressing his desire to make friends with native English speakers, he used an adverb, "suddenly". It seemed obvious how confident Liang was in terms of getting rid of the negative aspects of being an EAL learner and blending with the native speakers by the accumulation of discourses specialized in various fields like music and sports.

There was also something distinctive in Lin's writing response to her most unforgettable experience when using English in an academic field:

"In my first class of graduate study, the professor encouraged us to hand out the first assignment in a small group. So we decided to write a paper about Confucius, we began it very early, consult with the professor many times and rewrite it twice. Even though we think our article should be considered well- structured, the professor still thought that we had too many focus in the article. I think the reason might lie in the differences of writing habits between China and western culture. In Chinese perspective, a good article should be able to cover more related aspects and structured

in a comprehensive way. While in west, one article with much focus might be superficial from academic perspectives."

The experience of Lin's first academic writing assignment revealed her struggle between written forms in English and in Chinese. The sentences describing how much effort Lin had put into preparing the article were an assertion that she was not an incompetent writer. According to Lin, the fact that her article was not approved by her professor resulted from the different characterization of writing between English and Chinese. Lin did not question her ability to write. On the contrary, she spoke highly of the writing style in Chinese culture and rebelled against the dominant form of writing within an English-speaking context. This writing assignment made the imbalanced power relations between languages visible to Lin. Lin constructed her identity as an independent EAL learner who strived for acknowledgement of her own cultural and linguistic variations.

Self-Constructed EAL Learner Identity

Too often EAL learners accept the judgements of native speakers as truth and are labelled as an "incompetent" language learner and user without awareness of the EAL learner identity they constructed for themselves. Using Fairclough's (1992a) method of CDA, I looked for the discourses that the participants focused on, resisted or neglected in their oral and written responses to the construction of EAL learner identity. Thus the image of Chinese international students as EAL learners became more evident and vivid.

On the questionnaire Liang first shared his English learning experience in China, saying, **"**I think I've learned for a long time, because I learn English from my sixth grade. Actually I think it's more than ten years of English learning in China, but I still think it was a very slow step for me to learn English in China. Not only because of the English teachers, their English is not so good I think, but also that because I didn't find the correct way to learn English fast."

He cast doubt on his English acquisition in China by describing it as a "slow step". The causal sentence showed he thought his "slow step" in English was triggered by his incompetent teachers and his incorrect way of English acquisition. I was curious about his definition of a "correct way" of language learning. He thought for a while and said,

"Correct way. I think the priority is to communicate more. The second is to write more. English acquisition is kind of a way, a bridge for you to communicate with other native English speakers,

but also because English is more and more popular around the world, so it's better for you to master this skill."

Two simple declarative sentences of his definition concerning a correct way of English acquisition illustrated that since studying in Canada he had acquired his own understanding of and strategies to learn English as an EAL student. There is no judgment about whether Liang's "correct" way is correct or not, but it is evident that Liang reconstructed his identity as an EAL learner in Canada by altering his learning strategies. For Liang, English was part of his capital as well (Bourdieu, 1991). Liang's use of words to describe English as popular and a skill, identified him as an EAL learner who was also under the influence of the symbolic power of English.

Even though Liang was constructing a positive and strategic identity as an EAL learner, his writing excerpts concerning the self-exploration of his own EAL identity were shocking. He wrote, "When speaking Chinese, I think I am a normal physical healthy person. When I am speaking English, it seems I am a handicapped person…Sometime I could feel what I expressed is not native enough. Sometimes I could feel I am treated as "handicapped". There are several aspects I could feel the native speakers viewed me as a foreigner. First of all, most of native speakers speak a slower speed when they talk with me compared to their normal speaking speed. Also they would pronounce clearer when they speak with me instead of speaking randomly with others. Although they might not notice this tiny change, I could still feel it." Liang's metaphor likening his EAL identity to a "handicapped person" presented an image of a powerless, helpless, and desperate language learner. When analyzing the implications of "pardon me", Liang's sensitivity was observable. According to this excerpt, Ling felt he was viewed as a handicapped person by native speakers because of his linguistic incompetence. He was sensitive about his "slower speed" and "unclear pronunciation" compared to native speakers. For him, it seemed that he felt he was receiving a judgement of incapability due to his lack of English proficiency.

It is notable that except from the experience he mentioned regarding others' use of "pardon me", the rest of Liang's recall of language-related experiences were positive. He wrote a successful presentation in GSR981, and his thesis publication was written in English. If Liang had not shared his negative stories, it would be confusing that these positive memories resulted in a self-construction of being handicapped. In order to make sure what he wrote was accordant with what was in his mind, I asked him to provide his definition of "handicapped person" in his writing response. He wrote back:

"The difference between this handicapped person and others is that the former could improve and maybe finally become a physical health person in the end while other handicapped people do not."

According to Liang's own definition of "handicapped person", his story as an EAL learner in Canada seemed to make sense. Sensitive to the native speakers' voices, tones and use of words, Liang lost his confidence in English competence. Liang, with the determination that he could overcome all language barriers, explored his own correct way to language acquisition and then actively practised and tried his best to construct a healthy and strong self as an EAL learner among native English speakers. The whole process of Liang's adaptation to the English-speaking context illustrated his image as an intelligent and active EAL learner.What follows was Jun's writing in response to the EAL identity prompt:

"Generally, I feel I was not the person I used to be. I experienced similar feelings when switch my speaking environment from 'dialect' to 'Mandarin' and 'Mandarin' to 'Chongqing dialect' and then 'Chinese' to 'English'. This feeling for the last case, Chinese to English, is very deep. I am not mature as I used to be. The language is a loader of all the thinking and emotion. A new language just gives me another side of me. For this side of me, I feel I lose intelligence comparing the other side of me- experienced me capable of thinking meaningfully and articulate clearly. Some times when speak in English to native speakers, I feel that I was "lowered"; this is like losing confidence when an 8 years old talking with a 20 years old. I want to grow up in the English side of me so I keep learning. (Feb 1st, 2013)

According to Fairclough (1992a), metaphor is one of many important linguistic devices that may be used to designate ideological intent. Jun used a metaphor when he compared his identity as an EAL learner to that of an eight-year-old child. The lived experiences in an English speaking country, for instance, where he had been labelled a "threat" as a result of a judgement of his English competence, reshaped his perception of English acquisition and his English competence. Lacking confidence in English resulted in his powerless and struggling EAL learner identity; what he described as innocent and fragile as an eight-year-old child. From another perspective, however, this metaphor of an eight-year-old illustrated the positive aspects of Jun's

EAL learner identity as well. The well-known fact that a boy must finally grow up to be an independent adult reflected that Jun made up his mind to grow up in his EAL learner identity by striving to integrate into an inner circle (Kachru, 1985). He was deeply convinced that he would gain his own power in English.

In Huan's writing excerpt in response to the question of the construction of EAL learner identity, she wrote:

"I become not confident when I speak English. When talking about the differences between Chin ese and Canadian, my Canadian friends told me that Chinese are really good at study but not as mature as them in social situations.However, it is not the case. Many Chinese are shy because of language disadvantages rather than their communication skills. Therefore, Chinese need to overcome this language disadvantage to make a better life.

It is interesting that Huan provided an image of herself from the perspective of her Canadian friends. Huan's identity as an EAL learner was not only constructed by herself and the context around her but also by her Canadian peers. It is evident she was moving from the marginalized space to the circles of native speaker. She was proud of her Chinese identity which was to be proficient in an academic field, and yet she was against the label of "not mature in social life" merely based on English competence. Shy and humble as Huan was, she constructed a strong-minded EAL learner identity which said "No" to the judgment from the power of dominant native English speakers who claim that Chinese students are not as able as native speakers in both academic and social life.

Results and Discussion

This qualitative research investigated how six Chinese international students at the U of S positioned themselves and were positioned by, and constructed and were constructed by, the linguistic and ideological choices they made. This study thus explored the relationships between English language learning and the construction of EAL learner identity. After carefully analyzing and synthesizing the data from the microanalysis of six participants' selected oral and written responses to the questionnaire, three major findings were compiled to answer the research questions.

First, Chinese international students' prior English learning experiences in China play a significant role in the construction of their EAL learner identity, at least within the limitations of the small study sample here. Anglo-centric language ideologies which assume the sociolinguistic "neutrality" and "grammatical uniformity" of English are predominant in the EAL education of present-day China (Xiong & Qian, 2012). The fact that six participants—with no exception—likened English to a tool or a skill illustrated the ideology of the sociolinguistic neutrality of English. Meanwhile, the grammatical uniformity of English is best represented by various English tests. Students instructed through such techniques concentrate merely on the acquisition and accumulation of linguistic forms and norms while ignoring other perspectives of language; namely, cultural, political, and economic perspectives. Innumerable English tests in their school years did not help them to regard English learning as pleasant and enjoyable. Therefore, when talking about English learning or communicating in English, Chinese students often feel stressed, as if they will be judged or measured by their vocabulary or grammar errors. For example, four participants in my research took a few days to return their written response to me. When asked the reasons for their delay, most of them admitted that they were afraid that their writing was not good and that they would make structural or grammatical mistakes. Chinese students under the influence of their prior English learning experience construct themselves as serious and diligent language learners because they are meticulous with their linguistic knowledge of English.

A "market orientation" seemed to motivate the participants of this study to acquire English with the subconscious ideology that learning English is a possible way to access capital and gain power so as to move to higher economic, political, and social status. Chinese students go to various institutes to improve their English, attend to English tests in various fields and get different language certificates to pursue a higher level of education, study abroad and find better jobs. Thus, during the process of English acquisition, Chinese students are instructed that English is neutral in sociolinguistics, while they are manipulated by the symbolic power of English. The conflicted ideologies are deeply folded into the EAL learner identity of Chinese international students.

Secondly, the practical experiences of learning and using English in Canada promoted Chinese international students' construction of who they are as EAL learners. After landing in Canada, Chinese students realized that their stressful or embarrassing moments in using English in both academic fields and in social life challenged their original opinions of English

acquisition. Their perception of their linguistic competence was part of their identity as EAL learners affected by their transferring from the "expanding circle" (Kachru, 1985), in which English plays no historical or governmental role, to the authentic English-speaking context. The six participants lost their confidence more or less as soon as they landed in this English-speaking country. The challenging experiences of Jun, Liang and Huan all happened when they first came to Canada and illustrated how soon they realized that their linguistic knowledge of English could not necessarily help them in everyday situations. Meanwhile, they started to realize and experience the power embedded in language and interaction with English speakers. Their embarrassed or frustrated moments when they were unfairly judged by their linguistic proficiency rather than their intelligence or academic competence made the power in language visible for them and resulted in their identities being pulled between deficient and confident. Liang's concerns about the expression "pardon me", Huan's comment that Chinese students are incapable in social life, and Lin's insistence on using a Chinese writing style revealed that these Chinese international students not only felt unfairly judged for their ability in the dominant form of English, but also reconsidered the relationship between their English proficiency and competence in other matters.

Confronted with such "inferior" labels, these Chinese international students actively sought possibilities to rebuild their positive identity as EAL learners with self-reflection and other strategies. The six participants realized the unfair judgment of their academic performance and intelligence in social life on the basis of their English competence and strove to explore their own approaches to overcome language barriers to avoid being marginalized. There were two questions concerning the proportion of time participants were spending with native speakers. The result revealed that all six participants spent most their time in a regular week with Chinese peers. However, while they did not often socialize with native speakers, six Chinese students adapted to Canadian life by developing their own strategies. For instance, Liang adjusted his English learning strategies after he came to Canada and realized the way he used to learn English could not help improve his proficiency. Kang categorized himself as employing different roles to acquire different sorts of discourses in specific fields. Lin accumulated discourses from different events, such as when seeing a doctor, or speaking with bank managers. Also, instead of being marginalized, the participants showed a strong desire to adapt to and integrate into English-speaking communities. Jun's making use of music and sports to start a conversation with native

speakers and Liang's exploring of correct ways of English learning best illustrate this point. In short, despite not being outgoing, the participants had been trying to get rid of the negative aspects of EAL learner identity and constructing positive attitudes to make them better accepted in Canada.

Last but not least, the challenges and frustrations with which Chinese students are confronted in an English-speaking country provoked and confirmed pride in their Chinese identity within a foreign-language speaking country. The students all contrasted their proficiency in Mandarin with their self-perceived incompetence in English. However, aside from linguistic proficiency, Kang and Huan confirmed their competence and pride in their academic performance and social lives as Chinese EAL learners. What is more, Lin's rebelling against the dominant form of English writing made visible how she tried to acknowledge and fight for her Chinese discourse style.

All in all, the six Chinese students' stories concerning their English learning and academic lives at the University of Saskatchewan provided a vivid picture of who they are, their struggles, and achievements. Communication is always a two-way street, where both the listener and speaker share the responsibility to make their communication successful (Kubota, 2001). Therefore, I hope this research helps those researchers who are interested in Chinese international students' English language issues to learn more about Chinese international students and truly understand their voice so as to help them improve language proficiency and construct positive identities as EAL learners.

Limitations and Implications

The major limitation was time and scale, in that I could only interview six Chinese international students. I do not assume that six participants at the University of Saskatchewan are representative of EAL learner identity in the overall population of Chinese international students because the population is diverse in linguistics, culture, and socioeconomic status. However, these six participants' experiences of their interaction with authentic English-speaking contexts provided the evidence that the construction of identity of language learners is deeply influenced by sociolinguistic contexts and how language positions people in society.

Second, during the process of research, I, rather than the participants, decided on the language used in semi-structured interviews and journal writings. It was entirely possible that the participants did not express themselves completely or there were deviations when they were

speaking and using English resulting in a potential bias of the research. However, to ensure the validity of the research, I re-checked the interview data and writing responses with all participants both in English and Mandarin to make sure I conveyed the participants' authenticity and spontaneous responses to the questionnaire.

Additionally, there might be other possible factors which exerted influence on the construction of six Chinese international students' identities as EAL learners. I only viewed identity in relation to their choice of discourse when sharing their unforgettable and challenging experiences. However, there are more opportunities for researchers who are interested in this issue to investigate other possibilities.

This research might pave the way for researchers in the field of English as an Additional Language (EAL) to hear voices from non-native speakers. I hope this research will draw more attention to the fact that language acquisition is not merely a matter of accumulation of linguistic forms, but is also tightly connected with the ideologies embedded in the language and its teaching.

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Appendix 1
Questions for semi-structured interview:

Context Questions:

- Briefly tell me about your English-learning experiences before you studied in Canada.
- What are your opinions concerning English acquisition?
- Why have you chosen to study in an English-speaking country?
- Do you feel challenged or stressed as a foreign language learner in an English-speaking country?
- How much time do you spend with native speakers during a regular week?
- How much time do you spend with Chinese peers during a regular week?
- What is the most unforgettable experience related to language when you studied in Canada? Can you describe it?
- What is frustrating about using English in your daily life? Can you describe it?

Topics for writing samples:

- What's your most unforgettable experience when using English in an academic field?
- Can you share some of your stories about using English as social language?
- Who are you as an English as foreign language learner and user?