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## East Asian International Student Experiences as Learners of English as an Additional Language: Implications for School Counsellors

### Expérience d'étudiants de l'Asie de l'est apprenant l'Anglais comme langue additionnelle : Implications pour les conseillers scolaires

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#### ABSTRACT

In the school counselling literature, little focus is placed on international students who are learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL) and on school counselling support related to their language acquisition. Using the Critical Incident Technique, we analyzed transcripts of 21 international EAL students from China, Japan, and Korea who studied in three Vancouver, BC, public secondary schools. We present four language-based categories that include both facilitating and hindering incidents: (a) learning English, (b) communicating effectively, (c) speaking first language, and (d) performing well academically. Finally, we address school counselling implications, limitations, and future research.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Dans la littérature sur l'orientation, peu d'attention est portée aux étudiants internationaux dans l'acquisition de l'anglais comme langue additionnelle (ALA) et à leur soutien par les conseillers scolaires. Utilisant la technique des incidents critiques, nous avons analysé le récit de 21 étudiants en ALA venant de la Chine, du Japon, et de la Corée qui ont étudié dans trois écoles secondaires de Vancouver, C.-B. Nous présentons quatre thèmes avec incidents facilitant et limitant : (a) l'apprentissage de l'anglais, (b) la communication efficace, (c) l'utilisation de la langue maternelle, et (d) le succès académique. Enfin, nous examinons les implications pour les conseillers scolaires, les limites de la recherche, et les futures directions.

The increase in the number of East Asian international students with English as an additional language (EAL) attending Canadian secondary schools is one of the many results of globalization. Not only are parents in countries such as China, Japan, and Korea investing in a Canadian education—and the competence in English that comes with it—for their children, educational institutions are also fiercely competing to attract full-paying overseas students as a way of increasing revenues (Barron, Baum, & Conway, 2007). With this changing demographic profile, one of the issues facing schools is how best to support students, especially in regard to acquiring a high level of English proficiency, so that they are able

to experience a more positive adjustment to the host country, and to ensure that they are successful in their educational endeavours (Wang, 2007). Unfortunately, a narrow focus on international education without a corresponding strong infrastructure for supporting newly arrived East Asian students in our schools may put these students at increased risk for psychological problems, added transition and adjustment challenges, and leaving their academic program prematurely (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). School counsellors, therefore, have an opportunity to play a key role in supporting international EAL students attending secondary schools in Canada at both an individual and institutional level.

A number of issues are related to providing adequate counselling support to East Asian EAL international students. First, many school counsellors in the North American context do not possess the level of cultural competency needed to work effectively with international students from Asia (Zhang & Dixon, 2003). Even though recent counselling graduates have received multicultural training in their graduate programs, research shows that many still lack the skills and supervision to apply their knowledge to practice in their day-to-day work with this population (Burnham, Mantero, & Hooper, 2009; Packer-Williams, Jay, & Evans, 2010). Second, international students from East Asian countries often hold negative perspectives of mental health issues, see counselling as something reserved for serious psychological problems, and may not understand the Western view of counselling or what it is meant to provide (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Chen & Mak, 2008; Kuo, Kwantes, Towson, & Nanson, 2006; Pedersen, 1991). Thus, these beliefs can hinder international students from using counselling services even when it would be helpful for their adjustment. Considering these issues, it is clear that there is a gap between many service providers' knowledge and skills and service users' help-seeking beliefs and behaviours.

From a research perspective, there is a distinct lack of research focused on EAL adolescent international students in secondary schools and counselling issues. In particular, there is a paucity of Canadian studies that have been conducted with this younger population (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004, 2006; Popadiuk, 2009, 2010), which calls for more studies to better understand the unique needs and experiences of adolescent international students in Canada. Another problem with supporting East Asian international students is the lack of research about counselling EAL students. To highlight the extent of this gap, in a recent literature review, Albers, Hoffman, and Lundahl (2009) found that only 59 (4.8%) of the 1,234 articles analyzed in two school-related counselling journals between 1995 and 2005 addressed English language students and counselling. They noted that 9 articles (1%) were directly focused on counselling and EAL students, while 39 articles (3.2%) provided a secondary focus on the overlap of these two issues. These authors called for more research on EAL learners and counselling, given the paucity of knowledge and the growing numbers of such students in our schools. Taken together, it is clear that more research focused on language, adolescent international students, and school counselling would provide more robust evidence upon which to base individual and group counselling initiatives in schools.

In attempting to address some of these issues in this current study, our aim was to answer the following research question: “What facilitates or hinders the adjustment of international students who attend Vancouver public secondary schools?” Specifically, we wanted to better understand the critical incidents as told by East Asian international EAL students in their own words, and not from the perspective of the adults who observe and work with them. A study such as this may be important in that it can provide school counsellors with concrete data based upon the experiences of international EAL students who have previously made the transition to secondary education in Canada. By inviting school counsellors to consider the results and implications of this study, we hope that we might assist them in continuing to develop their practice at the individual and institutional levels. We envision that our study may provide a foundation for discussion and action between counsellors, teachers, and administrators who want to work toward building a stronger support system for East Asian international students, which will ultimately assist with student recruitment and retention efforts.

#### BACKGROUND

For this study, three secondary schools in Metro Vancouver were selected as sites for data collection for the following reasons: (a) the significant number of international EAL students in the city’s secondary schools, (b) the lack of research on adolescent international students, and (c) the first author’s connections teaching secondary English in the district.

East Asian adolescents who come to Vancouver, BC, are arriving in a city that is already highly multicultural and multilingual, with well-established East Asian diasporic communities. Census figures from 2006 reveal that one fifth of the people in Metro Vancouver reported being of Chinese ethnicity while 41% reported speaking a language other than English and French, the official languages of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008). Despite expectations about cultural and physical similarity, newcomers interact socially with fellow East Asian students who may or may not speak or understand an East Asian language, or who may mix languages with different words in different contexts, and whose social and cultural practices (e.g., the way they speak, interact, or wear clothes) may combine practices that international EAL students associate with both Canada and countries of origin.

Even in diasporic communities like Metro Vancouver, in which the social, cultural, and linguistic practices of the home country are kept alive, East Asian international students are required to negotiate complex and multi-layered processes of social, cultural, and linguistic integration (Marshall, 2010). For international students, these processes are typically negotiated in spaces between the home (often with a Canadian home-stay family or with relatives already living in the city) and the school, where students encounter and often struggle with what is at times an uncomfortable coming together of competing narratives, discourses, and identities of self and other.

The English language is often a double-edged sword in the equation. It is the much-sought-after world language of global and local importance that will bring new social, linguistic, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1994) to international students by facilitating success in their future lives. It is also the language through which society, educational institutions, and peers sit in judgement of newcomers and assess their progress. For example, international students experience high-stakes communication and assignments at school, interactions with English-speaking peers in the schoolyard, and everyday contact with local Vancouverites. In this sense, English plays the paradoxical role as a medium for inclusion and exclusion of newcomers. This coming together is perhaps most noticeable when international students encounter certain situations in their educational and social lives—hindering or facilitating incidents in which language is a key factor: a conversation with a rude/friendly sales assistant, a run-in with or a friendly welcome from a classmate in the schoolyard, or the harsh or kind words of a teacher in class. Often, such incidents serve as critical turning points that students look back on as important relational markers that either smoothed acceptance and integration or marked rejection and exclusion.

### *Migration, Transition, and Learning*

International students attending Canadian high schools go through multiple transitions as they move from schools in their countries of origin to secondary schools in Canada. As secondary school students they negotiate several transitions: from adolescence to adulthood; between learning cultures (e.g., former and current high school, global to local); and in the case of multilingual students, between their first and additional languages and different ways of understanding their positions as students (Marshall, 2010). Another factor to consider in understanding the processes that international students go through in negotiating critical incidents is the complex inter-relationship between language, identity, and migration. Many international adolescent students entering Canadian high schools face immense pressure to conform and to become accepted, and thus previous fixed senses of “who you are” (the most simple sense of identity as described by Joseph [2004]) can become destabilized by shifts to peer-influenced identities of “what we might become” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Critical incidents, therefore, are closely connected to senses of self- and other-identification, and are mediated through language. In this sense, these critical incidents are also highly relational in that they can determine international students’ rejection or integration into groups of friends, romantic partners, and broader social networks (Popadiuk, 2008, 2009).

In sum, the purpose of this research was to better understand the specific facilitating and hindering incidents as related to the transition and adjustment of adolescent international students studying in Western Canadian secondary schools. Given that East Asian international secondary school students face complex and multi-layered transitions, they must learn to negotiate the languages, cultures, and identities of their new lives in Canada. For some, the processes of transition are more problematic than for others as a result of home-

sickness and loneliness, lack of ability in the English language, perceived exclusion and discrimination from peers at school, and the psychological impact that such factors can have on a recently migrated teenager. In encountering critical incidents, which may facilitate or hinder their sense of belonging and integration into Canadian and school life, international students are called upon to interpret events and reflect on them in ways that can have long-term impacts on their social and educational experiences.

In this article, we begin to fill a gap in the literature by presenting the findings from a qualitative study focused on 21 East Asian adolescent EAL international students and their adjustment to studying in Vancouver public schools. We focus on four categories composed of facilitating and hindering incidents that relate to learning English as an additional language: Learning English, Communicating Effectively, Performing Well Academically, and Speaking Own Language. Implications for school counsellors are then discussed.

#### METHODOLOGY

We used the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), an inductive strategy in which the researcher asks questions to elicit responses about specific events or incidents that facilitated or hindered a particular aim (Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009; Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986). Using this methodology, researchers ask participants to provide a detailed account of a facilitating or hindering critical incident that includes the source of the incident (e.g., self, teacher, parent), the incident itself (e.g., what happened and how was it facilitating or hindering), and the outcome (e.g., how this incident impacted the person).

The CIT has been widely and effectively used as an exploratory strategy (Chell, 1998) and has been used in many academic fields including psychology, nursing, education, and counselling (see Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005, for a full history of the CIT). Researchers have used the CIT to study the experiences of healing for First Nations people (McCormick, 1997), cross-cultural transitions of Canadian students and faculty travelling overseas (Arthur, 2001), and the positive aspects of international student transitions (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011). For this study, we sought to better understand the facilitating and hindering critical incidents associated with the adjustment of EAL international students who attended three Vancouver public secondary schools.

#### *Participants*

In this study, 21 adolescent international students participated. They identified their ethnicity as Chinese (14), Korean (5), and Japanese (2), and they reported that they had been born in Hong Kong (10), Korea (5), Taiwan (3), Japan (2), and Ecuador (1). Participants' first languages were Cantonese (11), Korean (5), Mandarin (3), and Japanese (2), and all spoke English to varying degrees. There were 13 females and 8 males between the ages of 15 and 18 years enrolled in Grades 9 to 12 in one of three different Vancouver School District secondary schools.

Although there are many similarities between international and new immigrant students, this study only focused on the international student population who typically leave their families to live and study in Canada, paying \$10,000 CDN or more per year to attend a public school. Participants in this research had been studying as international students from 1 to 5 years with an average of a 2-year stay. We were not concerned with the length of stay of participants, as our goal was to obtain a wide range of facilitating and hindering incidents from any point in the sojourn. This broader spectrum of perspectives allowed some students to include critical incidents in hindsight, while others spoke of issues that were currently active in their lives. This, in turn, allowed us to build a more comprehensive picture of critical incidents that were deemed important and relevant by these adolescent participants.

Before the research commenced, the first author received ethical approval from university and school board ethical review committees. The ethics boards required parental consent and participant assent because the participants were under the age of majority in the province of British Columbia (i.e., under 19 years old) and were not deemed by the ethics boards to be “mature minors” for the purpose of the research (Schulz, Sheppard, Lehr, & Shepard, 2006; Truscott & Crook, 2004). Once the 21 participants were recruited, consent forms were translated into the primary languages of the participants, and then mailed to parents in the home countries for their signatures, which were signed and returned. Student participants signed a form outlining their assent to proceed with the research, which outlined that their participation was voluntary.

While bilingual volunteers from the university (e.g., graduate students and staff) translated the consent and information forms from English into the first languages of the parents (i.e., Chinese, Korean, and Japanese), we began actively recruiting participants in the targeted schools. We focused on the purpose of the study during the recruitment process, which was to develop a broad range of facilitating and hindering incidents as related to the transition and adjustment of adolescent international students at the secondary school level in order to learn specific details about these experiences. Therefore, recruitment focused on finding participants who were studying in Canadian secondary schools as international students, and who were able to discuss in English both negative and positive critical incidents that impacted their adjustment. In order to recruit participants who would be in the best position to discuss these experiences, school personnel helped with the recruitment effort through invitation letters and classroom announcements about the research. Students could choose to let their teacher know that they were interested in participating, or contact the researchers directly.

### *Procedures*

Given that English was an additional language, all participants were given a copy of the interview questions in advance. In this way, they could have time to reflect about specific facilitating and hindering incidents that were important to them. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with the first

author in a private room at the school they attended. At the beginning of each interview, I (i.e., the first author) oriented participants to the research by inviting them to reflect on their time in Canada, and to consider critical events that helped or did not help their transition and adjustment. Then, I asked them to relate the details regarding these critical incidents by focusing on four specific questions: (a) What happened before the incident? (b) What was the incident? (c) What was the outcome of the incident? (d) Is there anything else that you would like to add? During the interview, I asked participants to provide critical incidents about their experiences, which was repeated until participants felt that their responses were complete. The audiotaped interviews, 30 to 50 minutes in length, were transcribed. I debriefed participants at the end of each interview to check in about their experience of sharing these incidents, and, if they were interested, I offered some basic information about cultural transitions if it connected directly with a situation that the participant shared and if it was deemed as potentially helpful to the participant. For example, at times I normalized feelings of homesickness and anxiety as something that many international students experience.

Additionally, information about school and community counselling options were offered to ensure that participants had knowledge about how to follow up after the interview in the event that they wanted to talk more with someone about an issue. This was particularly important given that students shared a number of emotionally laden hindering incidents of racism, family difficulties, or ongoing homesickness, and thus I felt an ethical responsibility to ensure that they had contact information for local services at the school and in the community.

### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis procedure provided a comprehensive and detailed description of student transition and adjustment (Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986). Specifically, we read the transcripts several times and began to organize the data to reflect the following structure: (a) the source of the incident, (b) the event, and (c) the outcome of why it was facilitating or hindering. A total of 352 critical incidents, out of a possible 362 incidents, were used. This process was completed by reading each of the incidents, consulting with a senior researcher familiar with the methodology, and discarding incomplete or unclear events. Using an inductive, thematic analysis, which is a type of pattern recognition, we developed preliminary categories from the data. We continued to sort and refine the categories, sometimes renaming categories, until stabilization occurred, meaning that all the incidents within each category were deemed to be a good fit with the category name, as well as the inclusion and exclusion criteria. By the end of the process, we were satisfied that the data were sound and trustworthy.

We used four validation procedures as outlined by Flanagan (1954) and Anderson and Nilsson (1964) to determine the reliability and validity of the categories. These included independent rater agreement, comprehensiveness of categories, participation rate, and expert validation. In the Critical Incident Technique,

Flanagan (1954) used an independent rater agreement to determine the reliability of the categories by asking an external judge to correctly place at least 75% of the critical incidents in the appropriate categories.

In this research, approximately 50 cards, or 15% of the cases, were randomly taken from each of the categories after stabilization so that an independent rater could check the categorization system according to their individual descriptions and defining features (inclusion/exclusion criteria). The independent rater took 50 minutes to place the random sample of 53 cards into the 17 categories. The results of this reliability test showed that there was a 90.5% agreement between the performance of the researcher and the rater. In the 9.5% of the cases, the independent judge believed that slight adjustments needed to be made to either the name of the category, the inclusion/exclusion criteria, or the incident itself (i.e., some incidents were deemed to be two separate incidents) to ensure clarity of both the incidents and the category names and features.

Another reliability check, “Comprehensiveness of Categories” (developed by Andersson & Nilsson [1964]), was used to check for completeness of the category scheme by withholding approximately 10% of the incident cards at the beginning of the process. In this test, the researchers determine whether they can place these cards in the existing categories with ease at the time the categories are deemed to be stable. We removed 36 of 356 cards (approximately 10%) at the beginning of the categorization process, returning to them later. We easily placed these 36 cards into the existing categories, indicating that the system could be considered comprehensive and complete.

We also conducted a validity check for interpersonal agreement among participants by counting the number of participants who reported incidents that fell into a particular category. For example, if only 1 participant provided critical incidents for a category, the category is not deemed as reliable. However, if 10 participants out of 21 report facilitating and hindering incidents in a particular category, then the category is seen to have significant importance. The frequency of participants included in each of the four categories discussed in this paper are (a) Learning English: 14 (67%); (b) Communicating Effectively: 11 (52%); (c) Performing Well Academically 10 (48%); and (d) Speaking Own Language: 10 (48%). Therefore, the participation rates further confirm the reliability of the categories.

The final procedure we used was “Expert Validation,” which invites one or more experts in the field to carefully examine the categories to see how useful and relevant the categories appear to be in light of their experience and expertise (Flanagan, 1954). For this study, two expert raters participated: a senior university faculty member familiar with the Critical Incident Technique, and an English as a Second Language educator with over 10 years experience working with EAL immigrant and international student adolescents in the Vancouver School District. In separate sessions, both experts examined each of the categories carefully to assess how closely they matched with their professional and academic experience. The experts found a high degree of resonance between this research and their own specific areas of practice and expertise.



## FINDINGS

Altogether we developed 17 categories to answer the main research question about what facilitates and hinders adolescent international student transition and adjustment in Vancouver high schools. From these 17 categories, three overriding themes emerged. Two of those three themes are presented elsewhere: general transition experiences (Popadiuk, 2010) and relationality (Popadiuk, 2009). In this article, we present the third section of the data set focused on Language and Academics that includes both facilitating and hindering incidents: (a) Learning English, (b) Communicating Effectively, (c) Speaking First Language, and (d) Performing Well Academically.

*Category 1: Learning English (20 Critical Incidents)*

We explored the students' initial experiences and realizations in regard to learning a new language and examined the various strategies in learning English. The facilitating outcomes suggested that English skills did improve or would improve in the future with practice and further learning. The range of facilitating events as outlined by participants included being forced to speak English, working hard at learning the new language, speaking to others in English, living with an English-speaking home-stay family, attending English as a Second Language classes, watching TV programs, and practicing new words and concepts. The following quotations are exemplars of facilitating critical incidents:

I wanted to learn more English. I was in class and I forced myself to speak English so I could improve my oral abilities. It was really hard at the beginning to make myself say things, but I didn't want to only know formal English from books. My English started to improve and I felt good about myself.

I started getting lots of homework from school. I stayed up until 4:00 in the morning to finish all my English and English as a Second Language homework because I had to look up so many words in the dictionary. Even though I was exhausted and the work was difficult, it was a positive experience. My English improved and I felt a sense of accomplishment.

My home-stay family was a Canadian family. When I arrived at my home-stay, we spoke English because they were Canadian. They didn't speak Japanese so I was forced to speak lots of English. I gained lots of practice in English and my English improved.

All 3 of these participants link improving their English to practicing, speaking, reading, and listening as much as possible, despite the difficulties. Most participants who worked hard and persevered found that their English improved significantly and they felt proud of their accomplishment. These participants provide evidence that being active agents in learning English was perceived as being key to their success.

Hindering incidents that participants discussed in this "Learning English" category covered aspects such as finding the work too easy, not being called on

by the teacher in class, living with a non-English-speaking home-stay family, not practicing English enough, and discovering the difficulty of learning a new language. Three participants shared their hindering critical incidents:

I was hanging around with a group of people who spoke Mandarin with me all the time. One day I suddenly realized that I only speak 20% English in class because 80% of the time I spoke Mandarin with the other people in the class. Then I realized that I spoke Mandarin 100% of the time outside of class. My English was not improving at all for an entire year and my pronunciation was all wrong.

I wanted to speak English at home. I went to stay with my uncle's family. When they started speaking to me in Korean, I asked them to speak in English so I could improve my English. They refused. I felt very disappointed and worried about being able to learn English and I thought I was wasting my time and money by staying with them. My English did not improve.

I attended my English as a Second Language Level 1 class. The work that we had to do was too easy for me and there was no homework. All of the kids in the class spoke Chinese together. I didn't like how the teacher taught us because we had to work with ourselves. I wanted to work with English-speaking students. My English did not improve. I felt disappointed and thought that the class was a waste of time.

When the first of the three participants above came to the sudden realization that he was not learning English because he continued to immerse himself in his first language, he felt surprised. This critical incident became a turning point in which he became an active agent in developing his language abilities by forcing himself to speak more English, spend time with English-speaking friends, and watch more English television. Interestingly, many participants spoke of "forcing" themselves to learn English, suggesting that it is difficult, is hard work, and requires a focused attitude with an accompanying behaviour change. This may be a reflection not only of the difficult situation that they find themselves in at school, but also the result of coming from East Asian learning cultures that emphasize hard work and perseverance as central to academic success, rather than skills such as critical enquiry, learning process, and reflection that may be emphasized in Canadian schools.

### *Category 2: Communicating Effectively (18 Critical Incidents)*

This category explored the communication process, that is, sending and receiving messages so that the participant both understood and felt understood by others. The focus was not on *learning* English, but rather on the *ability to communicate* through understanding others and expressing oneself in English. Incidents as outlined by participants included being able to understand people who talked more slowly, not being able to think of the words to use, and not understanding idiomatic and slang expressions. The majority of the 18 critical incidents in this

category were hindering, but one of the few facilitating examples included the following:

I couldn't understand much English in my regular classes. Then I went to my English as a Second Language class and my teacher used an easier vocabulary. She also talked slowly so I could understand her. I felt good in that class because I knew what was going on. I also knew that I would feel comfortable asking questions in class in the future. I liked the teacher.

This participant highlights how teacher interactions with new language learners can make a significant difference in self-perception. When participants felt that they were understood, and that someone was making an effort to help them to understand, most felt that they were adjusting well to living and studying in Canada.

As mentioned, most of the incidents in this category were hindering, and these negatively impacted student transition and adjustment. The emotional outcomes as reported by participants tended to be feelings of frustration, disappointment, embarrassment, confusion, and feeling stupid.

I was late for school one day because the bus didn't come on time. When I got to school, I told the teacher what happened. The teacher thought I was talking about my birthday. We kept trying to talk to each other, but he couldn't understand me. Finally I just gave up and sat down. I felt really embarrassed and scared.

My teacher said that I needed a partner in class. I didn't know what the word "partner" meant so I just sat there. I didn't know what to do and my classmates were looking at me and wondering why I was sitting there. I felt confused and embarrassed and thought, "I am so stupid."

It is clear in the first hindering quote that the participant did not have the ability to express a relatively simple, but frustrating occurrence—why the student was late for school. The student, already feeling stressed about his tardiness, felt "embarrassed and scared" when he was unable to express himself adequately. He clarified that he felt scared because he was aware that others did not understand him when he spoke English, which kept him separate and alone. Feelings of confusion, embarrassment, and stupidity are expressed in the second participant's example. Such feelings affect individuals' self-esteem, confidence, and sense of acceptance among peers, and can have a negative effect on international EAL students' transitions to school life in Canada.

### *Category 3: Speaking First Language (13 Critical Incidents)*

This category contained critical incidents in which participants spoke their first language with other people who were also fluent. In most cases, the first language was spoken because it was easier to express one's thoughts and understand others. Although there were a smaller number of incidents reported for this category, it is an important one, given that critical incidents were not double-coded in this

study. This is worth noting, because in many incidents participants mentioned speaking in their first language as an aside while emphasizing something else, such as making friends from their same cultural group and speaking in their first language in the group together. In these cases, the incidents were coded according to the dominant storyline, rather than the secondary storyline of their language use with other native speakers.

The facilitating events as reported by participants in this category included receiving a translation of a teacher's lesson, communicating problems and feelings to friends, talking and having fun with friends of the same nationality, and enjoying living in a home-stay where everyone spoke the first language. Facilitating emotional outcomes included confidence, being understood, a sense of belonging and connectedness, and ease in expressing oneself.

I was speaking a lot of English at school and even at home in order to practice. Then one day, I went home and just started speaking Chinese with my relatives. It was so much easier and natural, and I was really scared that if I talked too much English, I would forget my Chinese and I wouldn't be able to talk it anymore when I went home. I continued talking Chinese at home from that day forward. I was able to maintain my first language.

I hung around with a group of Chinese friends. My friends and I were together and we just talked and talked. Since we were talking together in Cantonese, it was lots of fun and we were able to express ourselves properly. I felt a sense of belonging and connectedness because of speaking my own language with my friends.

These quotes provide evidence of language as a relational performance in that it was through language that participants connected with friends and relatives: it was "easier and natural" and they felt a "sense of belonging and connectedness." Both this category and the previous one suggest the importance of balancing out the new English language learning (difficult, but rewarding) with maintaining the primary language (easy and natural, but interfered in acculturating to the host country).

The predominant type of hindering event in this category was when other people from the host culture, often strangers, told the participant to stop speaking in their first or primary language. Emotional outcomes included feelings of surprise and disappointment, as well as anger, shame, and embarrassment. The following two incidents were related with much emotion:

I was talking to my friend in Chinese while we were walking down the hallway at school. A Canadian girl was walking beside us and she told us to "shut up and stop speaking Chinese." She told us that we should speak English because we're in Canada. I felt very angry and embarrassed. I didn't say anything to her. I kept talking Chinese anyway.

I went to the supermarket to buy some food. A Chinese lady came up to me in the store and just started talking to me in Cantonese. She asked me what

one of the English signs meant so I took some time and explained it to her. I thought that there are too many Chinese people here in Vancouver, which made me angry because I can't practice my English very much.

In the first instance, the participant chose to resist the Canadian student's racist comments by taking a moment to think about what just happened and then choose to continue speaking in her language. In the second incident, an East Asian international student is, to some degree, buying into the same exclusive discourse by stating that there are too many Chinese people in Vancouver. However, the participant is buying into the discourse through the instrumental need to get as much practice as possible speaking English outside of school rather than through any sense of duty to speak English in Canada.

*Category 4: Performing Well Academically (15 Critical Incidents)*

In this category, the incidents highlighted by participants ranged from academic performance and, in particular, receiving marks, to participating in class, helping others with their work, and passing and failing courses, tests, and assignments. In each incident, competence in the English language was a key contributing factor: It allowed international EAL students to "perform" an identity (Butler, 2000) of competence and success associated with being a successful student who is a Canadian speaker of English. The outcomes emphasized a confidence and pride in one's own abilities and a desire to continue to do well, such as shown by these participants:

I studied very hard in my classes. When I got my first report card, I saw that I had got good marks in all my classes! I felt so proud of myself. I was more confident and happy.

I was unsure of my English abilities at school. I wrote an essay for my English class. When I got it back, I saw that I did very well. I was pleased with my mark and felt more confident in my ability. I knew that speaking English at home had helped me.

Although the second participant acknowledged that speaking English at home helped her succeed academically, the event itself focuses on the shift in her perception of self. She felt unsure of her English, wrote an English essay, received a high mark, and felt more confident in her ability. This chain of events demonstrates the importance of feedback loops in assisting students to integrate new conceptions of self as they navigate the transition and adjustment of their stay. This experience allowed her to more accurately estimate her academic growth and development, and to feel pleased with that progress at the same time.

On the other hand, hindering incidents led participants to feel disappointed, pressured to do better, and angry at themselves, which turned into sadness or depression. In the end, they often wanted to give up, which is important to know in terms of both student success and institutional retention. Two participants expressed their feelings about doing poorly and failing:

I handed in my first essay. When I got the essay back, there was red pen all over my paper. I got a bad mark. I felt upset and disappointed with myself. I also doubted my ability.

My English was very poor. I failed the first term in Social Studies, which was about Canadian history. When I saw my mark, I knew that I had tried hard, but it was too hard for me. I felt disappointed in myself and I felt pressured to do better.

In the first hindering incident, a “bad grade” and “red ink” led to disappointment and doubt. In the second hindering incident, the participant “tried hard” but it was “too hard, resulting in a bad grade.” Unfortunately, the feedback loop (i.e., comments on the assignment) in this case did not help the participant learn what to do next time, but rather created a context of disappointment and pressure to do better. Other participants reported how negative feedback about their academic work could also impact their feelings or the outcome of the event in a positive way, if presented constructively.

In other words, when teachers made an effort to sit down with the students, help them understand the problems in their work, showed them what they needed to do to strengthen it, and then reassured them for the future or allowed them to rewrite the assignment, participants generally learned more and were very appreciative that the teacher had taken some extra time to help them. Again, these examples provide support to the assertion that language is a relational act, and that these positive and negative relational encounters as mediated through language (with teachers and peers) impact sense of self/other and psychological well-being.

#### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand specific facilitating and hindering incidents as related to the transition and adjustment of adolescent international students studying in Western Canadian secondary schools. Specifically, our findings provide evidence of the importance of language and academics for East Asian students in negotiating this transition. What our study adds to the existing literature is a focus on students’ own experiences of language and academics, and the detailed description that highlights how and why a particular critical incident was facilitating or hindering in this process.

Two major findings from our interview data provided more in-depth knowledge about the processes and experiences associated with language and academics in the lives of East Asian secondary students. First, the findings from this research strongly suggest that language is a relational act in its communicative role, rather than something that is simply pragmatic or a tool to be learned, practiced, and mastered. Similar to other research, we found that language is an important issue in determining the experience of a student’s transition (Benzie, 2010; Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001; Jacob & Greggo, 2001; Lin & Yi, 1997).

Going beyond previous research, however, our study suggests that language is a relational act that often carries a positive or negative valence in terms of relationship to self, others, and society. For example, “practicing” English with the home-stay family means so much more than just practicing English. It can be seen as an act of building connections (e.g., feeling accepted, belonging to an important group), deepening relationships (e.g., feeling cared about and known by home-stay parents and siblings), enjoying the company of other people (e.g., feeling relaxed and at ease with yourself and those around you), and creating a context for having fun (e.g., playing games after dinner or sightseeing on the weekend).

Within this relational aspect of language, our data also revealed the importance of feedback loops in respect to language and academics. In terms of our participants, feedback loops were seen to be interactional and relational: related to family and friends back home, host family, peers, and teachers. Where this factor was most evident was in critical incidents related to Performing Well Academically; within this category, success was seen to be mediated via teacher to student feedback: the teacher as the authority or mentor in terms of knowledge, language, and power, and the international EAL student as a novice or mentee lacking knowledge, language, and power. Teacher feedback was described by participants as both facilitating and hindering with specific incidents that highlight the impact. Participants’ descriptions illustrated how poor grades and red ink on a page can have effects beyond those envisaged by the teacher: disappointment, anger, sadness, and depression.

Of prime importance, therefore, is for school counsellors and teachers to strive to “close the feedback loop” (Walvoord, Bardy, & Denton, 2009, p. 65) by better understanding the potential impact of their words and actions on students, by checking in to see how information or interactions were perceived, and by encouraging and making space for an open dialogue about arising issues. Like others in the field of assessment in education, these authors stress the need to close the feedback loop to enhance student learning first at the level of the classroom, and then at the institutional level (p. 66).

In the context of international EAL students in secondary education in Canada, we need to similarly think of closing the feedback loop at many levels: (a) teacher-student feedback related to tasks and broader learning issues; (b) counsellor-student feedback about how students are adjusting and what incidents may be related to the emotional ups and downs; and (c) institutional reflexivity and transformation via a coming together of educators in the broader school system to enhance the cultural, linguistic, and learning experiences of international EAL students. Thus, examining these results from a relational theoretical framework (e.g., Miller & Stiver, 1997) by using a perspective of relational connections and disconnections (and how these positively and negatively impact mental health and wellness) may refocus counsellors on how key interactions with others, not just the language learning in and of itself, strongly influence the experiences of adjustment.

The second major finding in this research as related to language and academics is that participants did not discuss the concept of culture shock as a way of naming or

interpreting their experiences. This is significant in that much of the international student literature highlights culture shock as one of the primary transition and adjustment issues (Hung & Hyun, 2010), despite the fact some scholars believe that culture shock is an outdated concept that needs to be rethought and replaced (Moodley, 2007).

In our study, participants clearly provided evidence of critical incidents throughout their stay that helped them to build the kinds of social relationships they wanted (e.g., connections with English-speaking peers to enhance language abilities and connection, living with English-speaking home-stay families to enhance language and cultural competencies). Building language competencies, and concurrently relational connections, led to participant outcomes of acceptance, belonging, and fitting in, which then led to positive perceptions and experiences of their transition. Participants also demonstrated that their sense of emotional health and well-being was based predominantly on critical incidents that occurred throughout the sojourn, demonstrating a fluctuation in their adjustment rather than a stage or phase process. Therefore, our findings tentatively suggest that the dominant discourse related to culture shock may be obscuring other processes, particularly the relational process that is mediated by language.

#### *Implications for School Counsellors*

There are some important ways in which school counsellors might use the information from this study to facilitate more positive international student transition and adjustment in their schools. First, the examples of specific hindering and facilitating events provided in each category may enable school counsellors to reflect upon their own practice, the type of teacher engagement with students, and school policies and procedures. Specific areas that could be highlighted and supported across the school domains (e.g., classroom, extracurricular activities, informal connections) include, for example, using easier vocabulary, speaking more slowly, listening with intention to ensure understanding, facilitating translation of key information, supporting first language use, providing individual attention to ensure comprehension, reassuring and encouraging student efforts and intentions, providing only as much feedback as can be integrated, and setting up English-speaking home-stay families.

Recognizing the kinds of hindering critical incidents that arose in this research and working to mitigate these kinds of situations is also essential. Specific negative examples include work that is too easy, not being called on by the teacher in class, living with a non-English-speaking home-stay family, not practicing English enough, discovering the difficulty of learning a new language, people from the host culture telling them to stop speaking in their first or primary language, receiving too much negative feedback on assignments, and the like.

Counsellors who understand and take action to increase critical incidents related to language and academics that are deemed to be facilitating while, at the same time, decreasing potentially negative incidents may bring an overall positive shift in the experiences of international students, the attitude of teachers and other



school personnel, and the overall school culture. School counsellors can also teach coping strategies to students to help them deal with such incidents.

Finally, school counsellors can use this research to expand their awareness of the complexities related to language and academic success that many international students face on a daily basis. The findings from this research can provide a sense of deeper knowing of how these daily experiences of language acquisition can profoundly influence students' experiences of themselves (e.g., identity, agency, self-esteem), their relationships (e.g., inclusion or exclusion and in what contexts, who they are and who they are becoming), and their academic experiences (e.g., ability to navigate the new contexts, to move forward and overcome moderately challenging situations, to increase confidence and further success). International EAL students need to understand that many others experience the same process: that learning the language is very difficult, much hard work is required, and this work is on top of regular academic demands, as well as that making additional effort is exhausting, lacking the skills to adequately express oneself is frustrating, and speaking one's first language is a way to feel connected to home, identity, and competence.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

Some strengths of this study include its focus on adolescent international EAL students, using participants' own experiences and voices to explore the topic, and linking the findings to school counselling practice. Uniquely, we provide an increased understanding of typical transition issues found in the literature (i.e., learning English, struggle with academics) by using a qualitative Critical Incident approach. Furthermore, we have evidence for some promising findings related to language as a relational act, feedback loops, and a new look at experiences often referred to as "culture shock." A few limitations of this study include the fact that the sample of international students volunteered to participate (self-selection bias), the interviews did not specifically focus on language acquisition and counselling, and the participants were not interviewed in their first language.

Future research may include an analysis of conversations between international EAL students, peers, and teachers. Interviews directed specifically at language, relationality, and adjustment would be helpful. Furthermore, videotaped analyses of counselling sessions between EAL students and school counsellors, interviews with students who returned home early, and interviews in students' first language are further suggestions for additional research.

### CONCLUSION

Overall, the purpose of this qualitative study was to add specific and nuanced knowledge to the few studies that focus on learners of English as an additional language, adjustment, and school counselling. The findings from this research are consistent with the larger body of international student literature that suggests that language and academic concerns are contributing factors to adjustment

problems when studying abroad (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). However, this study also contributes important knowledge about the specific kinds of critical incidents that positively or negatively impact adolescent student adjustment, and provides us insights from the students' own perspectives.

Given that East Asian countries, especially the People's Republic of China, are the fastest growing source of international students in Canada (Institute for International Education, 2008), it is imperative that school counsellors better understand how international students' linguistic abilities and experiences reciprocally influence their adjustment. This knowledge can then provide the foundation for school counsellors to be leaders in their schools and allies to East Asian international students who come to Canada to live and learn.

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