Rethinking “Cultural Adjustment”: Language Learning, Career Choice and Identity Construction of Chinese International Students in a University Preparation Program

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Many studies on cross-cultural adjustment focus on a person’s degree of psychological comfort and behavioural adaptation into a new cultural environment. Since Lysgaard (1955) developed a four-stage process of cultural adjustment, a large number of studies have examined the cultural adaptation process of international students in English-speaking countries. In this paper, as international students in Canada, we challenged previous ideas about cultural adjustment as merely a “cultural adaptation process” involving students’ psychological and behavioural change, which usually views students as the study objects. We reflect on our experiences and case studies of Chinese international students’ participation and perceptions of “cultural adjustment” by adopting both psychological and sociological approaches. Our argument is that cultural adjustment should be understood as a complex psychological and social activity that significantly impacts students’ identity construction, career choice, and language learning practice.
Keywords: cultural adjustment, English as a Second Language (ESL) learning, international students, identity construction

Introduction

With modern technology breaking geographical barriers, the world has developed into a global community. As a result, an increasing number of people are migrating from one country to another to pursue higher education or to seek personal enrichment. Approximately 260,000 international students were studying in Canada in 2012 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) News, 2013). Over one quarter of these people were Chinese students who represented the largest group of overseas students in Canada. In accordance with this trend, cross-cultural adjustment, especially in relation to Chinese international students, has recently become a very important issue attracting a number of researchers’ foci (e.g., Andrade, 2006; Smith, Nayda, & Rankin, 2011).

The most commonly used measurement for cross-cultural adjustment has been the degree of an immigrant’s psychological comfort and behavioural adaptation into a new cultural environment. In fact, previous studies in socio-psychology have provided a framework for examining the degree of cross-cultural adjustment. Lysgaard (1955) distinguished a four-stage U-shaped curve to describe the cultural adjustment process of three groups of Norwegian students who were living in the United States. According to Lysgaard (1955), the first stage is called the Honeymoon Stage, in which newcomers are fascinated by and driven to explore the stimuli presented by a new culture. The second stage called the Culture Shock period is a time when they are confronted with the reality of having to adapt to day-to-day life in the new culture, including learning a new language and adapting themselves to foreign social customs. This dark period is often marked by confusion, disorientation, and even disillusionment. Some newcomers might have difficulties adjusting to the new cultural and situational demands, often leading to bewilderment, alienation, and depression. Clearly, the culture shock stage is a critical period for an immigrant, being closely related to their ongoing psychological well-being and, thus, their identity development and maybe future career choices. The third stage, Recovery, is a learning period distinguished by an increased sense of confidence in coping with cultural discrepancies, an improvement in personal flexibility, and the mastery of new skills. In this stage, individuals feel less tension and frustration than in the culture shock stage, although still intermittently experiencing emotional and psychological fluctuations. In the final Mastery stage, they are able to function effectively in the new cultural environment, with limited incremental increases, and can freely switch back and forth between their primary culture and secondary culture, depending on which cultural context that they are experiencing (see Figure 1). As for psychological comfort and behavioural adaptation, the Norwegian students, in Lysgaard’s study were reported being the most comfortable and adapted during the honeymoon stage and the mastery stage (Lysgaard, 1955). These feelings and behaviours were less evident in the middle of the cultural adjustment process particularly during the culture shock phase.
Recently, a large group of scholars examined the culture adjustment of international students from diverse approaches. Andrade (2006) compared the cultural adjustment of international students as well as domestic students and discussed the challenges these students faced, students’ insights about their adjustment experience, and student services. Smith, Nayda, and Rankin (2011) investigated international students’ cultural adjustment strategies in their everyday lives in order to understand students’ needs and assist them to easily adjust to the new culture and environment. Jackson, Ray, and Bybell (2013) examined cultural adjustment from a socio-psychological approach and discussed the role of self-esteem, hope, optimism, coping, acculturative stress, and social support on international students’ depressive symptoms or sociocultural adjustment. Although many researchers had used this framework of cultural adjustment to examine international students’ cultural adjustment processes in English-speaking universities, most of them mainly focused on the investigation of the pattern of adjustment. Sewell and Davidsen (1961) examined the U-shaped curve by having students participate in a structured interview, and confirmed the pattern of Lysgaard’s cross-cultural model. However, Davis (1963) reported a J-curved cultural adjustment pattern with no *Honeymoon Phase* appeared by having 286 Turkish students in the United States participate in his study to recall their adjustment to the American way of life. Additionally, other studies (e.g., Kagan & Cohen, 1990) on cultural adjustment of international students merely focused on their psychological and behavioural changes that were one of the major consequences of experiencing the cultural and environmental change.

In this paper, we reflected that the previous understanding of cultural adjustment merely from a psychological perspective is not sufficient enough to fully understand international students’ experiences in a new cultural environment. We investigated the concept of cultural adjustment specifically looking at the re-definition of identity.
construction, career choice, language, societal behaviours, cultural standards and the level of adjustment between their cultural identities or self-perceptions. Therefore, we adopted both psychological and sociological approaches to unfold international students’ cultural adjustment as non-linear and complex processes. This new perspective, commonly in institutions in English-speaking countries, further reflects a purpose for improving student services that is also one of the goals for this study.

In this paper, we explored two research questions: 1) How the cultural adjustment process influences Chinese international students’ career choices, language learning and identity construction in Toronto?; and 2) How students’ participation in the Green Path Program (GP) contributed to their ability to manage cultural experiences in their everyday lives?

We begin this paper with our personal stories as former Chinese international students in Canada and the rationale for selecting this complex issue, followed by a brief introduction of the research background and an analysis of the interview data. In addition, we provide cases of two Chinese international students’ personal life stories and explore how we rethink the notion of cultural adjustment based on Chinese international students’ experiences. Finally, we discuss how the understanding of international students’ cultural adjustments from their language learning, career choice, and identity construction may contribute to scholars, educators and policy makers work in the field of education for international students.

Where We Located Ourselves in this Study

Eight years ago, we came to Canada—a country on the other side of the globe from our homeland China—to pursue higher education. Upon arrival, we found ourselves thrust into a completely foreign society. In retrospect, we acknowledge that we experienced long periods of uncertainty and melancholy during that time. Today we cannot say with confidence that we have completely adjusted to the Canadian culture and society. As is the case with many other international students, we came to this country with a sense of naive optimism for the future. Later, we recognized that the personal strength and self-assurance that we took for granted in our native country was a result of the subconscious knowledge that we had the love and support of a complex social network of family, relatives, and friends. From the day of our arrival in Toronto, we felt that we were very much alone, and on our own. The language barrier, one of the most fundamental difficulties, made the smallest of tasks a challenge, and the subsequent feelings of disappointment and shame served to mentally discourage or intimidate us.

When we were socializing at the University of Toronto, we witnessed behavioural changes including depression, anxiety, and eating disorders in a number of our fellow Asian international students, perhaps in part due to culture shock and maladjustment. We will never forget the profound sense of ineptitude that struck us upon learning that a Japanese student who had previously been seeking support was admitted to Centenary Hospital from harbouring thoughts of suicide. This incident inspired us to start thinking about how we should understand cultural adjustment from an international student’s standpoint rather than from the point of view of the host institutions in English-speaking countries that treat international students as others or foreigners who received services. We came to the realization that, despite the numerous difficulties we faced, we had a
relatively healthy cultural adjustment process. This was due to the values and lessons our families instilled upon us, as well as a healthy relationship with our parents in China. They were the secure foundation upon which our feet were firmly planted—wherever we traveled, we felt strongly connected to our families, and were confident in the knowledge that they would always be supportive. Also, we were fortunate to meet many thoughtful and considerate friends in Toronto who were willing to guide us through the adjustment process. Other individuals we knew were not as lucky, and we recognized in ourselves a profound desire to assist other international students in circumstances similar to those that we had faced.

The Study

The Green Path Program (GP) is an English as a Second Language (ESL) summer school program offered at the University of Toronto, Scarborough campus (UTSC) for Chinese international students prior to beginning their undergraduate studies in Toronto, Canada. It is a joint project between selected top Chinese high schools and UTSC. We conducted in-depth interviews with seven Chinese international students from the GP program, from which we chose two stories as case studies to examine Chinese international students’ experiences of cultural adjustment. The way we selected the participants was based on their adjustment experiences in Toronto. Specifically, we selected Chinese international students who experienced the following: a) formerly participated in the GP Program when they first arrived in Toronto; and b) were in fourth year of their program; or c) had graduated from UTSC and have been working.

Data collection

In this study, we distributed a mass email and flyers to all former GP students, inviting them to participate in individual in-depth interviews. In addition, the GP Association advertised the study on Renren website, a Chinese social network website asking for their participation. A total of seven Chinese students (one male and six female participants) took part in the individual in-depth interviews. Participants were selected for this study based on the two inclusionary criteria. 1) They are Chinese international students who came immediately upon graduation from their high school in China. 2) They have participated in the GP programs at UTSC since they first arrived in Toronto. Most of them were currently in their fourth year in the university, and some of them had graduated from UTSC and were currently working in Canada.

The fourth-year international students and recent graduates were selected as the participants of this research, since they are more familiar with the Canadian culture and were open to sharing the valuable cross-cultural experiences in Toronto. In addition, they were regarded as role models, insofar as they have successfully overcome the “culture shock stage” although reflecting on their adjustment experience could remind them of unpleasant memories. In order to protect participants’ confidentiality and privacy, pseudonyms have been used for this paper as well as for the transcripts of the individual interviews. Any other information that may leave the participants vulnerable to being identified was eliminated.
Participants

This study was based on seven in-depth individual interviews conducted at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto during a six week period starting February and ending in March 2013. Among the seven participants, six people were female participants and only one participant was male. At the time of the interview, only one out of the seven participants had a full-time job in the financial field; the other six participants were all upper-year undergraduate students with various academic backgrounds (e.g., physics, mathematics, psychology, and sociology).

Seven participants were interviewed in English with most interviews lasting approximately two hours. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. In addition to the interview, we also kept a journal throughout the process of data collection noting the following: participants’ responses during interviews; thoughts about emerging themes connecting participants’ experiences; and additional observations or lessons from our own research experience that were related to this study.

To explore the aforementioned cross-cultural adjustment related topics for Chinese international students, eventually a phenomenological case study was decided to be utilized. The purpose of using the phenomenological research for this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the students’ personal thoughts, ideas, and experiences while living in another cultural environment. We attempted to capture their in-depth reflections regarding the cultural adjustment process, and to evaluate how the GP program helped them adjust to both their academic and social life at the university. Among the seven individual interviews, two of them were more comprehensive and almost represented the complexity of the problems encountered by all other participants with each interview lasting for at least 5 hours. Therefore, a qualitative research approach was utilized to explore and analyze these two particular Chinese international students’ cultural adjustment processes in terms of their language learning, career development and choices, self-perceptions, cultural identities, relationship with other people in this new cultural society.

Data Analysis

The interviews were guided both by the interviewers and interviewees and most closely resembled a conversational dialogue. Data collection and analysis informed each other in a process that includes questioning, reflecting, and interpreting. Thematic analysis was used to conduct a subjective examination of Chinese international students’ life experiences in Canada, including but not limited to their career choices, emotions, and relationship with family, self-perceptions, and evaluation of the GP program. Initially, 16 codes were generated: 1) academic preparation; 2) culture shock, 3) recovery; 4) cultural/behavioural standards; 5) perception of new culture; 6) career choices; 7) relationship with parents; 8) self-perception and cultural identity; 9) honeymoon stage; 10) language preparation; 11) preparation of life skills; 12) cultural interaction; 13) being misunderstood; 14) loneliness; 15) drifting apart from Chinese peers; and 16) substantial amounts of university course reading. Therefore, this study is organized and analyzed by the aforementioned codes.
Rethinking “Cultural Adjustment”

Stories of Chinese International Students in the Green Path Program in Canada

Amelia’s Story

Amelia was born in Tianjian, a Northern city in China very close to Beijing. Before she came to Canada in May of 2010, she was an excellent student at her high school that was also one of the top international high schools in her hometown. Amelia attended a four-month GP program in the summer of 2010, immediately after graduating from high school and before starting university. She is a third-year student in the Department of Psychology and is currently in her co-op term. Amelia seems to be the most culturally adjusted of the participants in terms of the academic and social environment, despite being the youngest. She found a volunteer job in a hospital setting in her first summer term at university. In her career, she was regarded as a successful role model for other Chinese international students. Therefore, learning from her story would help us achieve a profound understanding of a “successful” cultural adjustment experience in the GP program.

Pre-departure preparation: In the data analysis of the interview with Amelia, the theme pre-departure preparation emerged from her experiences of language preparation in China and preparation of life skills in Canada. Pre-departure preparations can be very important for international students—a thorough preparation prior to starting studies in a different cultural environment is comparable to the establishment of a solid foundation. Amelia discussed how language preparation was very important for her so that she never confronted any language related barriers. She stated:

I knew I was going to go abroad to pursue my undergraduate degree. I decided that since my middle school after I came back from a trip to some European countries. So I practised my English on my daily basis. I never had any problems with my English.

When Amelia committed herself to improving her English skills during high school by reading English novels, it is likely that she indirectly learned some culture-related manners and behaviours. Amelia believes that this is the reason for her to well integrate in the local society.

Preparation of life skills: The international students believe that another important aspect that international students should learn before they embark on a journey to a new country is the preparation of necessary life skills. Amelia mentioned during her interview that as an only child her parents took care of everything for her in the home. She was not required to do housework, her only responsibility was to study to achieve academic excellence. After arriving in Toronto, however, she found that she had to learn basic living skills such as cooking, laundry, and grocery shopping. She did not state that these tasks presented a substantial challenge for her. If she had learned some basic life skills at home the process of her cultural transition might have been a smoother one.
The cultural adjustment process: The cultural adjustment process was another prevalent theme that surfaced as a result of the data analysis. We learned from Amelia’s statements that her *honeymoon stage* had occurred during the first two or three months after her arrival in Toronto. The *culture shock* period began as her undergraduate career started and continued its escalation until the beginning of her third year. At the time of the interview, she regarded herself to be still in the *recovery stage*, or in transition from the *recovery stage* to the *mastery stage*. It appeared that the perception of having culture shock was closely related to her level of stress. In the first couple of months when Amelia was still participating in the GP program, she closely associated herself with her Chinese peers. “We lived together, studied English together, leaned how to cook and do grocery shopping. Although there was some pressure, it wasn’t very intense. I could handle it pretty well,” she said.

When the first year of university started, however, Amelia had to take some psychology and sociology courses without her fellow GP participants, having made the decision to specialize in psychology—a stark contrast to approximately 95 percent of GP students who choose to major in programs such as management, economics, mathematics, computer science, or engineering. She was the only GP student in most of her psychology and sociology classes. She still had interactions with other GP students, however, due to taking such courses as economics and management. According to Amelia, the full impact of culture shock affected her in her second year when she had to manage her studies and her co-op job simultaneously. Hence, the fact that the most severe period of culture shock for Amelia started from her second year may be closely related to the number of stressors and the level of stress in her life at that time. This finding is markedly different from other scholars’ results of cultural shock in certain quantitative studies (Dunbar, 1992; Lysgaard, 1955; Torbiorn, 1982), in which periods of culture shock usually begin around the second half of the first year of life in a foreign country.

By conducting qualitative and phenomenological research, we had an opportunity to explore the process of cultural adjustment on an individual level, allowing us to gain a deep understanding of possible external factors that trigger the period of culture shock for individuals.

Cultural identity: Throughout the interview, we found Amelia was more easily to adapt to the Canadian culture than that of other Chinese GP students. Examples included finding a volunteer job in a hospital while she was settling in her first summer in Toronto and starting her co-op work term in her second year. During the interview, she stated that she did not consider herself as belonging to any particular culture. She had two friends at her workplace, neither of whom was Chinese. She lived in downtown Toronto, in the vicinity of the St. George Campus of the University of Toronto. She behaved in a Chinese manner when socializing with her Chinese peers but switch to her Canadian identity when she was with her colleagues or Canadian friends. A large number of her Chinese peers, she observed, seemed unable to step out of their comfort zone and interact with peers outside of their cultural group: “They usually live in University of Toronto, Scarborough (UTSC), very far away from where I live.”

Amelia used “they” when referring to her Chinese peers, seeming to be highly disengaged from them. She also mentioned that the GP culturally, ethnically and
linguistically homogenous social group hindered individual students from trying to adjust to Canadian culture; being a part of the group initially offered great comfort, confidence, self-identification and hence members of the group became reluctant to put forth effort to “fit in” with a foreign culture/society. “But they are in Canada,” she wondered. “If they want to stay with Chinese, why did they choose to come here?” As demonstrated by her interview, Amelia appeared to be open to embracing her new culture/environment in contrast to her Chinese peers. Such a difference in perspective would equate to divergent opinions and behaviours that resulted in her feelings of loneliness and growing distant from her Chinese peers.

**Relationship with her parents:** Amelia’s relationship with her parents was one of the few rare topics that brought a smile to Amelia’s face during the lengthy interview. “I think I had the most secure attachment with my parents when I was young,” Amelia said with pride. “I know that my mom misses me a lot but she never says: ‘I miss you so much, please come back home’.” She also mentioned her father, a computer programmer/engineer—and a very hardworking man. “My dad is a computer program genius. He loves physics and computer science. He works 15 hours a day and seven days a week.” She said that she always models herself after her father. She stated:

> He is my idol in that way; the older I get the more I admire him on that… I never felt that I could not say anything to my parents. Now I don’t want to burden my parents with worry. I can express different opinions to my parents. If I have an opinion, I will just voice it out and my parents will respect my opinions…and if they have different thoughts from mine, we will sit together to discuss rationally and logically.

Emotions such as trust, confidence, love, care, and pride were clearly evident through Amelia’s expressions and tone of voice when discussing her family. It is worth noting the possibility that her parents may have influenced her career choice, especially her father who served as a positive role model. The reason she chose the psychology program may be her belief—passed down from her father’s worldview—that the most important factor in choosing a career path was personal interest and enjoyment.

Amelia also talked about other Chinese GP students’ career choices. She said:

> I know why they chose accounting, according to what I learned from my friends. It was because they didn’t know what they like and their parents probably encouraged them to do accounting since they can get a MBA in the future—and probably will get a good paying job with the MBA. Jobs in mathematics related fields do not require higher level of English proficiency so it would be easier for them go get a job in those fields.

Chinese students do not usually emphasize their own vocational interests when choosing a career path (Reynolds & Constantine, 2007). For those student, having a job that their family is seen as an important milestone from childhood to adulthood. Solely considering personal interests while pursuing a career would be considered selfish and egocentric, two values that are highly dissonant with Chinese culture. This phenomenon would have a stronger influence on male students’ career choices because the male is still widely regarded as the sole breadwinner for the family (Creighton, 1996). It is possible
that Amelia, being a female gender, may not realize this point; this may be a major
difference between her and other Chinese students. Interestingly, when we asked her the
type of career she would pursue if she were in a Chinese university, she stated, “Probably
a lawyer.” She is aware of the need to compromise on the type of careers available for her
in Canada. The difference between Amelia and her Chinese peers, however, is that she
has struck a good balance between her abilities and her interests.

From Amelia’s cultural adjustment experiences, we found that the process of
cultural adjustment influenced some of the international students’ lives in a variety of
ways. When arriving at a foreign country, international students felt both excitement and
trepidation towards a new, completely foreign cultural environment. The GP program
offered the students an opportunity to stay with a group of peers who shared the same
cultural background and spoke the same language. This is undoubtedly a psychological
buffer for their sudden exposure to a new cultural environment and society. The GP
program placed the students in a family structure where they are able to understand and
support each other, where they can understand and support each other. The GP classes
prepared them for academia at the university level.

When the university term begins students feel the culture shock because they must
deal with difficulties such as language barriers and unfamiliar cultural norms. Their
foremost long-term goal would be starting a career in the field of their undergraduate
study. The language barrier is a major professional roadblock for these international
students; so they would have to somehow compromise their vocational interests in order
to survive and thrive in this society. The type of relationship the students had with their
parents played a very important role in the decision-making process regarding their
undergraduate and professional career choices. We believe not every student would be as
fortunate as Amelia, who was able to pursue any field she desired. Thus, they would have
to achieve a compromise between their interests and their realistic expectations in regards
to their English skills and the job market.

Yingqiu’s story

Yingqiu is a fourth-year student in the Department of Physics at UTSC. She enrolled in
the GP program in the summer of 2009. She was particularly interested in the language
learning practice in the program.

Language learning and identity construction: Yingqiu stated that the writing and
speaking courses in the GP program were very helpful to prepare her for the academic
work as well as enhance her language communication abilities and skills. Specifically,
the speaking class taught her how to socialize with people in this country using
appropriate manners and customs, so it was more than a language class for her.
Additionally, over the four-month summer period, she stayed with classmates who came
from different cities, spoke different dialects, and thus shared different cultures.
Consequently, the ESL summer school served to improve her interpersonal skills and
contribute to the development of her identity construction. The following is what she
mentioned about her language learning experience in the GP program. She stated:
For me, the most I gained is not only about the English listening or writing skills but also the friendship between students because we all came from China although we were from different cities and high schools. I think the relationship [between Yingqiu and other Chinese international students established through this program] will be with us for the rest of our lives. The ESL program was helping us get involved in the university as well as prepare us to be ready for the environment. It was not just teaching us the language. It also taught us the culture as well as the differences between us and people here.

More likely the teacher taught us that the ways the native speakers think are different from the way we usually think.

This brief extract from the interview with Yingqiu suggested that the summer ESL program serves like a psychological soft landing for Chinese international students who are, like Yingqiu, going to a foreign country with the dream of pursuing a rich future. The friendships established among these Chinese students can be compared with a strong social tie—a secure base—where they can seek aid and support whenever they encounter difficulties. Furthermore, the experience of interacting with each other shapes their self-identification and ethnic identity because of the association with their own people in addition to the culture in such a different social context and environment. As a consequence, they may have a healthy perception and image of their own culture. Therefore, there is less confusion about their identities.

Career Choice: When discussing her career choice, Yingqiu said:

I am girl but I still need to be responsible for my life. I don’t want my life career to be something I don’t really enjoy. That’s why I want to combine my career with a joyful life. But I still need a job, so I have to combine these two things and think of them together simultaneously. My parents are different from other parents because they let me make my own decisions. That’s why I got to choose physics because some parents won’t consider physics as a good choice as an undergraduate program. My parents believe that you should make your own decisions. I was thinking of becoming a lawyer for some time. But because some of the cases here involve the cultural background, when you are dealing with people or arguing with people on certain points, some of them require your cultural knowledge about North American. That’s the main problem for me to choose a career here.

In order to explain what affected her career choice, Yingqiu said that critical thinking and the practice of teamwork might be the most important factors affecting her career choice in Canada:

Because I had 18 years of studying in China and most of my knowledge was taught by my teachers; that is something unrelated to your creative and critical thinking. That’s what I found these four years study in this country. For my first and second year of physics study here, I did really well because of what teachers
told me to do. Sometimes when there were some problems that were very original and creative, I just don’t have any clue or idea towards a solution. When I studied with students here, most of them are local students and very few Chinese students study physics here. They are really good at critical thinking and they are open to new experiences. A problem they never encountered before, they can always think of many solutions in several different ways.

I don’t really think I have a strong critical thinking ability. I am trying to change myself and improve myself in this part because it’s very important for this career. But because of the long time background experiencing studying in China, it has been really hard. Sometimes it’s not how you to gain the knowledge, it’s about changing the way that you think. That is the hardest part.

Teamwork could be another one. It’s not a big problem but I am a person who enjoys studying and working alone. Usually it’s more efficient for me to do so but I can also be a very good team member. I enjoy doing work by myself. Here people are more encouraged to do work together. Maybe that’s a part of the cultural difference. I don’t have any problems working with people but just prefer working alone.

From the interview above, we can see that Yingqiu discussed the elements that affected her career choice including her life experiences, identity construction and learning experiences in China and Canada, her parents’ role in her decision-making, in addition to the social and cultural impacts.

**Conclusion and Implications**

We find two things that are very interesting for examining cultural adjustment. First, we find that knowledge of culture plays a significant role in international students’ cultural adaptation. Two different kinds of knowledge of culture in China and Canada affected Yingqiu’s career choice: learning experience and identity construction. Canadian knowledge of culture is deeply rooted in the Western philosophical tradition, critical thinking and history, such as the critical thinking, teamwork, and creativity mentioned by Yingqiu in her interview. The knowledge from China, which she learned mostly from her parents and high school, deeply shapes her identity (e.g., gender identity) and learning style. When she came to Canada to study and live in the local environment, Yingqiu found there were tensions between what she experienced in China and what she learned in Canada. The knowledge of culture in her cultural adjustment and learning process was no longer the knowledge from Chinese culture or from Canadian culture. The knowledge of culture became mixed, fluid, and hybrid. In this way, Yingqiu both learned and produced new knowledge from a culture. Therefore, Yingqiu’s knowledge of culture needs to be recognized in the local society. Second, we find that the cultural adjustment process from Yingqiu’s experience was not only a shifting of behaviour and emotional changes but also a fundamental change in terms of how she represented herself as an international student and saw other people in the local society. This perspective impacted her learning strategies, career choice, and everyday life in Canada. Third, the learning
practice in GP affected Yingqiu’s cultural adjustment in terms of reconstructing her identity and relearning the local culture, knowledge, and language. Thus, international students’ cultural adjustment is an on-going process, which is not easily achieved through short-term courses or trainings, but rather should be understood as a long-term shifting associated with identity reconstruction, cultural and language learning, and life planning.

Recently, a large number of university preparation programs with an ESL program have emerged in Canada to help international students or students who speak a different language to quickly adapt to the local higher education system. In our research, we found that these programs made many contributions towards the success of foreign students in education and careers. For instance, the GP program offers students a psychological adjustment period. Some ESL programs, unfortunately, placed their focus solely on improving students’ academic English. Through our examination of cultural adjustment from Chinese international students’ experiences, we find that the cultural adjustment is not simply a “process”; rather, it is a hybrid experience associated with students’ identity shifting, emotional changes, career choices, and learning practices. We identify that it needs additional supportive services that consider students’ social and psychological needs. For example, these programs could provide courses based on psychological, social and cultural aspects, such as providing psychological counseling for students’ emotional support, teaching international students about local culture and social norms, and organizing social activities for international students to interact with local people and businesses.

In addition, in this study, we established a dialogue with the previous theory of cultural adjustment that divided the process into four stages. We examined each stage in relation to Chinese international students’ different experiences in the GP program and later in post-secondary education. We also argue that their experience in each stage can be fluid and can differ depending on the individual. Our aim was to provide valuable information for school administrators, language teachers, educators, and school policymakers from ESL or bridging programs. We recommend that cultural adjustment should be understood from the international students’ perspectives.

References


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