


THE ROLE OF PEER INTERACTION AND SECOND LANGUAGE  
LEARNING FOR ESL STUDENTS IN ACADEMIC CONTEXTS: AN  
EXTENDED LITERATURE REVIEW

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## **Abstract**

This literature review explores the relationship between language proficiency and ESL students' experiences in higher education contexts, with specific reference to the role of conversational peer interaction. The two major concerns that guide this review are (a) the academic challenges faced by students from an ESL background in relation to conversational interaction, and (b) the impact of conversational language proficiency on their overall academic experience. The studies reviewed in this project suggest that insufficient language proficiency results in several challenges for ESL students, most notably the inability to share their expertise and knowledge with their peers and participate successfully in classroom oral discussions. In addition, however, the literature suggests that language proficiency has a strong impact on the overall experiences of students and their abilities to navigate the social structures of the academic community and establish their own identity.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The number of international students studying on English-speaking campuses in Canada is increasing each year (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2014). Although many of these students have passed an internationally recognised English proficiency exam in order to be accepted into an academic program or have taken formal language lessons in their home countries, they may still lack the necessary academic language proficiency that would allow them to perform successfully in their academic studies. Academic language proficiency includes oral proficiency which can be developed through socialisation and interactions, but opportunities to develop this proficiency are not always equally available. Learners of English who study abroad in English-speaking environments can enhance their second-language acquisition and oral proficiency by exposure to everyday socialisation contexts, unlike those who experience only formal classroom language instruction in the home country (Kinginger, 2009). These everyday socialisation contexts include interactions in service encounters, homestays, contact with professors, and within student peer groups (Kinginger, 2009).

Research has predominantly examined the role of classroom *instruction*, in the traditional language classroom in the home country (e.g. Huebner, 1995a) and in language classes outside of the home country (e.g. Brecht & Robinson, 1995). As for outside the classroom, studies originating from study-abroad research – research that examines language gains in learning contexts abroad (Freed, 1995) – have focused specifically on second language acquisition through conversational interactions of international students with their homestay family members (Tan & Kinginger, 2013) and, when inside the classroom, through mediated interactions of international students with their instructors (Gibbons, 2003).

In contrast, there is less research exploring how peer conversational interaction in the classroom contributes to second language development, despite the potential for this environment to support the development of complex academic language. Therefore, it is still not clear what kinds of language development (e.g. idiomatic, socio-cultural, and phonological) international students will experience when interacting conversationally with peers and how this interaction enhances second language development and the student experience.

This review addresses literature relevant to this line of inquiry, with a specific interest on exploring the *relationship* between peer interaction in the classroom and ESL students' experiences. The review aims to understand how peer conversational interaction plays a role in developing language proficiency and how the diverse experiences of ESL students in higher education contexts (e.g. educational, social, academic) are affected by their level of English language proficiency related to conversational interaction. The questions that guide this review are the following:

1. What are the challenges faced by speakers of English in peer interaction in academic contexts?
2. How does language proficiency related to peer interaction have an impact on ESL students' academic experiences?

Situated within the broader context of second language acquisition and conversational peer interaction, this review explores the implications of the relationship between ESL students' insufficient language proficiency and the linguistic demands of the academic environment, particularly the academic classroom. The studies I have reviewed provide particular insight into how ESL students perceive their classroom interactional experiences and what mechanisms ESL students employ in order to cope with the language as well as educational demands of their

institutions. However, the focus is on literature relevant to an understanding of the impact of oral proficiency on the overall experiences of ESL students when in interaction with their peers.

This review is organised as follows: Chapter 2 describes the literature search. Chapter 3 provides an overview of theoretical frameworks and perspectives that commonly underpin the relevant literature. Chapter 4 describes research that has examined the role and benefits of peer interaction for second language learning. Chapter 5 reviews the literature concerning the relationship between language proficiency in peer interaction and learners' experiences in higher education contexts. Chapter 6 concludes this review with a discussion of the findings and offers insight for future questions in the theme of peer interaction and language proficiency development in the higher education context.

## Chapter 2

### Finding the Literature

In order to find relevant research for this review, two major electronic databases were searched: Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Linguistic and Language Behaviour Abstract (LLBA). These databases were chosen because of their comprehensive education index, providing access to the latest research in Education and Applied Linguistics.

This review draws on both pedagogical and academic journals to include literature with a focus on classroom applications as well as relevant research. The following journals were consulted because their articles explore the themes investigated and reviewed in this project: *TESOL Quarterly*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, *Canadian Modern Language Review*, *TESL Canada Journal*, *Higher Education Research & Development*, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *International Journal of Educational Research*, *English for Specific Purposes*, *Language Teaching Research*, *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, *Cross-Cultural Communication* and *Language Learning*.

Additionally, edited books, book chapters and course books related to the key words used in this review were also consulted. The following key words were used to find and filter articles: *needs of ESL students*, *ESL peer interaction*, *academic ESL classroom*, *ESL higher education* (e.g. college and university), *academic ESL students*, *college ESL students*, *university ESL students*, *ESL student oral participation*, *intercultural communication*, *classroom participation*, *international student experience*. Some of the research articles utilised in this review were obtained through recommendations generated by the database searched based on the key words used or on the theme of the article accessed.



The focus of this review is on the relationship between English language proficiency and the academic experience. As such, the review is limited to articles which address the needs of ESL students in the higher education context in English-medium classrooms. It does not include studies which examine the experiences of ESL students in the academic context that are not directly linked to language proficiency. Therefore, studies that examine the acculturation processes and experiences of ESL students from a non-language-focused perspective are not within the scope of this review and have been excluded.

## Chapter 3

### Theoretical Frameworks and Perspectives Related to Peer Interaction and Second Language Development

In this chapter, I provide an overview of theoretical perspectives and frameworks that inform much of the literature that examines the relationship between peer interaction and second language development. These studies are concerned with processes of second language acquisition and the social context of learning and development.

#### 3.1 Input and Interaction in Second Language Acquisition

A number of theories in SLA have drawn attention to the role of input: when students interact in the classroom, they produce language but also acquire new linguistic material from their peers as input. A key theory addressing the role of input is Krashen's *Input Hypothesis* (1985). According to this theory, *comprehensible input* is necessary for second language acquisition. Comprehensible input is defined as language input that is just beyond the learner's actual level of linguistic competence. If the learner's linguistic competence is  $i$ , then comprehensible input would be  $i + 1$  in which 1 represents the next level of linguistic competence. Second language learners would not necessarily be able to produce language at that higher level; however, they would still be able to *comprehend* it. Input that has already been acquired by the learner (too simple) or input that has not been acquired but is too advanced ( $i + 2, 3, 4$ ) will not be useful for language acquisition, according to this hypothesis. The focus on comprehensibility supports the value of peers as interlocutors during interaction.

The *Interaction Hypothesis* (Long 1981, 1983a) extends the focus on input by shifting the focus to *interaction* in which second language learners are engaged. According to the Interaction

Hypothesis, interaction is a principal source of language input when negotiations taking place between learners and interlocutors allow them to co-construct the meaning of input. When engaged in conversation, interlocutors make use of tactics such as repetitions, confirmation checks, comprehension checks or clarification requests so that the input may be refined and become more comprehensible. The negotiations around meaning improve the comprehensibility of the input for second language learners and individualise the meaning of the input to better fit the learners' needs.

For the ESL students in the studies explored in this review, conversational interactions in the academic environment become the primary source of academic language acquisition. These interactions allow ESL students to negotiate, provide and acquire meaning from their peers. However, issues concerning identity and competence in the academic context, which are based on adequate language proficiency, can prevent ESL students from engaging in conversational interactions. Moreover, when the learning environment does not provide meaningful opportunities for interaction, such as when classroom discussions are dominated by native-speaker peers, ESL students are unable to work together with their peers with the use of discursive tactics which would assist in the co-construction of meaning of the input.

### **3.2 Community of Practice**

Another theory that is relevant to second language acquisition but concerned with the social dimension of learning and development draws on the notion of *communities of practice*. According to Wenger (2006), "communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 1). Therefore, members of this community engage in activities together, helping each other and sharing information. Wenger (2006) explains that communities develop their

practice through a variety of activities (e.g. problem-solving, seeking experience from others, re-using assets). For instance, international students may become legitimate and competent members of their academic communities through a process of discourse socialisation in which the students' ways of knowing, speaking and writing develop through ongoing participation in academic practices (Morita, 2004).

However, in order for new members' participation and integration to be realistically possible, *peripherality* and *legitimacy* must be present in the given community (Wenger, 1998). Lave & Wenger (1991) define peripherality as "an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement" (p. 37). As for legitimacy, Wenger (1998) explains the concept in relation to the presence of newcomers: "only with legitimacy can all their inevitable stumblings and violations become opportunities for learning rather than for dismissal, neglect, or exclusion" (p. 101). In the classroom context, however, learners may not be granted the same degree of legitimacy in the community of practice to which they seek to gain access (Morita, 2004). Different degrees of legitimacy are granted to potential members based on how a given community of practice is organised in terms of power and social relations. Having access to a community of practice does not necessarily mean complete acceptance of the potential member because potential members still must navigate through the structure of power in place in that community. In addition, in the higher education context, the classroom is not an isolated community of practice for it interacts on various levels with different communities within the general higher education context. Therefore, the experiences had in the classroom can help or jeopardise international students' negotiation of their membership and acceptance in the overall higher education context.

### **3.3 Sociocultural Theory**

For some researchers, social interaction is integral to learning. Learning is not seen as a process achieved only individually, but also socially. Sociocultural theory was proposed by Russian developmental psychologist Lev Semeonovich Vygotsky and has since then been elaborated by researchers in the field of both Psychology and Linguistics (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Based on this Vygotskian perspective, it is through language that we can mediate human mental activity. For instance, we can use language to direct our own attention to important features in the surrounding environment. In addition, language is a tool used to transform and articulate our thinking.

According to Swain & Deters (2007), “traditional approaches to the study of mental behaviour focus on the individual and what the individual is doing” (p. 821); however, sociocultural theory takes into consideration the complex roles that both interaction and the sociocultural context have in contributing to the construction and comprehension of meaning. Sociocultural theory argues that language is a tool of the mind that “contributes to cognitive development and is constitutive of thought” (Swain & Deters, 2007, p. 822). Learners’ cognitive activities are therefore developed through the use of language.

A central concept of sociocultural theory that has had an impact on education is Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Kinginger (2002) describes the ZPD as “capturing the emergence of cognitive development within social interaction, when participants are provided assistance from more-competent others (teacher or peers) as they engage in learning activity” (p. 240). Within this concept, learning is made possible through interaction, between peers of the same or higher levels of competency (Swain, Brooks, Tocalli-Beller, 2002). Furthermore, Kinginger (2002) explains that this construct “is seen not as a fixed attribute of learners or settings themselves” (p. 246) but is instead a space

which offers potential for numerous transformations “of individual identity, of the culture’s toolkit, and/or of the activity setting” (p. 246).

ESL students’ continuous language development may occur when these students participate in interactions in linguistic, cultural and historically-formed settings, such as in conversational peer interactions taking place within institutional contexts (e.g. the academic classroom). During peer conversational interactions, ESL students may acquire language (e.g. through imitating their peers’ context-specific language) and re-use it to give meaning to their social interactions.

## Chapter 4

### Second Language Acquisition through Peer Interaction

I begin this chapter by defining peer interaction and by characterising its occurrence in the classroom context. Next, I explain the importance and benefits of conversational peer interactions that have emerged from the research.

#### 4.1 Definition and Role of Peer Interaction

In the SLA literature, peer interaction can be defined as “any communicative activity carried out *between learners*, where there is minimal or no participation from the teacher” (Philip, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014, p. 3). Peer interaction may involve two or more participants, and when engaged in such activities, participants work collaboratively toward a common learning goal. The word *peer* in peer interaction may be defined based on the equivalency of one or more factors (e.g. age or skill) pertaining to the participants. In this review, *peer* is based on the factor of participants being academic students, and when in *interaction*, at least one participant in the interaction is a student for whom English is a second language.

Activities which require participants to work together can vary in nature. For instance, in language classrooms, the most common of these are collaborative learning, cooperative learning, peer tutoring and peer modeling. Philip, Adams and Iwashita (2014) explain that collaborative learning “involves a strong sense of mutuality and joint effort” (p. 3). That is, the task at hand can only be completed if students depend on one another. Cooperative learning is sometimes used interchangeably with collaborative learning. However, Philip et al. (2014) explain that cooperative learning “does not always involve mutuality to the same degree” (p. 3). As for peer

tutoring, it occurs when one participant – often having more proficiency – assists another of lower proficiency in achieving a desired goal.

Significant research on foreign language acquisition has shown that the learning environment must provide opportunities for meaningful social interaction between learners and users of the second language in order for linguistic and socio-linguistic rules to be properly acquired (Krashen, 1981, 1982; Long, 1981, 1983a, 1996; Pica, 1996; Swain, 2000). Pica (1987) argues more specifically that the type of social interaction most appropriate to the development of language is “that in which learners and their interlocutors share a need and desire to understand each other” (p. 4). In order to comprehend and produce language successfully, learners must re-structure their conversation so that the mutual, intrinsic desire to understand each other can be used to help achieve language acquisition (Pica, Doughty, and Young, 1986a, b).

The re-structuring of a conversation may happen through requests for clarification as well as confirmation, and checks on the comprehensibility of the language productions between speakers (Long, 1980; Doughty & Pica, 1986). Therefore, it is necessary that the learning environment allow for opportunities in which learners can employ modified and re-structured conversational exchanges, consequently promoting second-language acquisition more naturalistically. These opportunities emerge when participants in the conversational interaction both have information that the other wants, as well as the right to request it and the responsibility to share it (Pica, 1987). Although participants may be fully aware of their unequal language proficiency – which will then require language re-structuring and modification – they are of equal status when it comes to sharing knowledge and information, therefore promoting a meaningful social interaction.



Doughty & Pica (1986) provide excerpts of two-way conversations which demonstrate how unfamiliar material becomes comprehensible to second-language learners after they interact conversationally with native speakers where both speakers make use of modified and re-structured language in order to understand each other and make meaning of the discursive exchanges in their interactions. It is argued that when native speakers assist second language learners in understanding new linguistic material, the learners may then be able to better receive meaning and express themselves in the second language. For example, in a conversational interaction between a learner and a native-speaker, the learner may request that native speakers repeat or re-word their language until the meaning of the unfamiliar material becomes comprehensible to the learner and a response can be provided.

In this light, we can argue that conversational peer interactions are of real linguistic value to students in non-language academic classrooms. The social interactions stemming from structured classroom activities that take place in language learning classes may not always require that learners re-structure their language productions, especially because of the evident unequal power, corrective and evaluative statuses that instructors and students possess. However, interactions that take place in content classes may be significantly less controlled, and may require participants to exchange more information in order for meaning to be made instead of engaging in pre-designed activities which only invite students to exchange information and sometimes even have more correct answers that will meet the expectations of the instructor.

#### **4.2 Benefits of Peer Interaction**

Some early work in second language acquisition investigated the linguistic benefits gained from peer interaction specifically in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

Allwright (1984) argues that learning also takes place through peer interactions that involve bringing personal value systems to the surface in the classroom. When learners engage in conversational interactions in which they share ideas that matter to them, learning is more likely to occur because this type of interaction engages learners more meaningfully. Allwright (1984) does acknowledge an important point that depth of learning is not necessarily achieved as a natural consequence of activities that have communicative interaction as their focus. However, oral communication among peers remains a major element in classroom activities that aim to promote students' involvement with learning, and through oral communication students engage collaboratively in the co-construction of meaning.

In addition, Allwright (1984) proposes that peer conversations in the classroom are important based on the idea that "learning may be enhanced by peer discussion" (p. 157). When learners discuss their learning and share their understandings, better comprehension is likely to follow. Peers may learn from one another or learn "from the very act of attempting to articulate their own understanding" (p.158). This view is most relevant to content learning since the topic of group discussions itself can be the goal to be learned. In non-language classes, the topic being examined in peer groups is learnt more deeply through conversational interactions. When in language classes, this goal may also be achieved in addition to the practising of discussion skills by second-language learners

Kohn & Vajda (1975) argue that group interaction inside the ESL classroom is important because it allows students to manipulate and modify language to understand one another, fostering language acquisition more naturally even if students' proficiency levels are different. Students can help and learn from one another as group interactions require them to use "greater self-expression, real self-expression" (p. 381) to achieve meaning. Besides linguistic benefits,

Kohn & Vajda (1975) argue that group interaction can help create a positive environment for the students which can help them overcome their “feelings of inferiority” and develop a “more positive self-image and identity” (p. 381). Therefore, since peer interaction is linked to both linguistic and psychological benefits, students may perform more meaningfully in the classroom when interactions are encouraged.

Additionally, Kohn & Vajda (1975) stress the value of small-group interaction and peer-mediated instruction in academic ESL classes as these activities help capacitate students in becoming more communicative learners. These activities provide students with various opportunities for oral, auidial, written and reading language development and acquisition.

More recent research has examined how peer interaction in ESL and EFL classes helps learners acquire language forms. In a study with Chinese students, Wang & Castro (2010) report on how classroom interaction, especially through group work, may help learners to notice the target form in English. Fang (2010) proposes that classroom interaction can have positive effects on the development and facilitation of second language learning as it can set the scene for potential learning and allow form-focused input to become salient and hence noticed by learners. In addition, Loewen & Basturkmen (2005), from analysing small group interactions in ESL writing activities, conclude that students paid considerable attention to language forms in general and to discourse in particular while engaged in the activity with classroom peers.

In activities in which peer interaction is present, experimentation with language becomes possible as learners utilise learning strategies to achieve their goals. For instance, experimentation with language can occur “by repeating, resorting to knowledge about the form, correcting, and suggesting alternative form” (Philip et al., 2014, p. 25) according to the type of activity taking place in the language classroom. Working together means that learners can offer

their individual resources into the group task being tackled, and in doing so, learners try out different alternatives until they can reach their objective. Therefore, when learners work together, they assist one another in developing better control of the language.

In content-specific classes, other researchers have focused on the complex relationships that exist between peer interaction and linguistic ability in higher education contexts. More specifically, some of the more recent research analyses how an international student's communicative competence in the English language – or the lack thereof – maximises or minimises the possibilities for conversational interactions in academic classrooms and in the overall higher education setting (Hung & Hyun, 2010; Lee, 2009; Tatar, 2005; Li, 2004; Morita, 2004). Studies of this nature reveal that interacting with highly proficient peers and participating in classroom oral activities (e.g. in pairs, small-groups, whole-class discussions) are a major challenge faced by students whose English is a second language, compromising their experiences in the higher education context abroad.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Interaction and Participation in the Higher Education Context**

International students whose first language is not English studying at English-speaking universities may encounter several challenges in the new educational contexts. Adapting to the new academic community and culture can be problematic and conflicting considering international students' diverse cultural, educational, social and linguistic backgrounds. More specifically, in the university classroom context, participation is generally understood to be active oral participation and is encouraged by instructors – if not expected – when classroom discussions take place. However, international students who lack adequate oral proficiency to engage in conversations with their peers are unable to participate actively in the classroom. Though this issue originates mostly from a linguistic barrier, other factors in the environment may also play a role in contributing to this problem (e.g. different educational system, classroom dynamics, teaching style) (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Burke & Wyatt-Smith, 1996).

In this review, I have chosen to focus on a number of studies that examine these factors and highlight how they interact with language proficiency to have an impact on the student's experience and academic engagement. In this section, the studies are summarized in Appendices A and B. In this chapter, I discuss the studies in light of how they shed light on several issues related to language proficiency.

#### **5.1 Language Demands of the Academic Context**

A number of studies have explored the demands made by the academic context on international students' language proficiency, from the perspective of the student. In early work on this subject, Ostler (1980) conducted a survey of 131 advanced level ESL undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Southern California, and concluded that the students surveyed were confident in using English for casual communication; however, when it came to speaking proficiency in effectively conducting conversations with professors and their peers in the academic context, their ability was insufficient. These findings point to the fact that ESL students are expected to possess not only an advanced level of control of the English language, but also communicative competence in academic English to engage in academic oral activities with peers and instructors.

In a survey conducted by Kim (2006), 70 East Asian international graduate students at a U.S. university in non-science and non-engineering fields expressed their perceptions concerning the necessary academic listening and speaking skills levels in their university courses and their challenges faced in trying to meet these expectations. Kim (2006) reports that the students in the study identified *participating in whole-class discussions*, *raising questions during class*, and *engaging in small-group discussions* as the three most common activities that took place inside the academic classroom. Out of these activities, the students reported being most concerned about leading class discussions as well as participating in whole-class discussions.

Kim (2006) further reports that over 78% of the international ESL graduate students surveyed expressed that they were *always* or *frequently* expected to participate in whole-class discussions. Additionally, 69% of the same students reported being *always* or *frequently* required to participate in small-group discussions as well as ask questions related to reading materials during class. Kim (2006) also reports that leading class discussions was the major challenge for

international ESL students in the study. These numbers demonstrate how proficiency in academic language is absolutely necessary for international ESL students to be able to actively participate in graduate classroom oral activities. The survey yielded an interesting finding that the two factors of *higher age* and *lower language proficiency* contributed to students having more difficulty participating in academic oral activities inside the classroom.

Based on these findings, Kim (2006) argues that, for international ESL students, speaking in front of peers and instructors when in the classroom environment can be an intimidating and stressful task to undertake. Indeed, the various relations of power based on language *inside* the academic classroom may become ongoing obstacles for international students to overcome when considering both their level of subject-specific knowledge and their linguistic capacity. However, over 80% of the ESL students in Kim's study (2006) reported *never* or *rarely* having difficulty in asking their instructors questions *before* or *after* class. Furthermore, interacting with their peers *outside* the academic classroom in order to complete group projects was carried out with little difficulty, as reported by 95% of the students surveyed. This finding indicates, again, that the environment of the graduate academic classroom may be motivated by complex academic language which may grant classroom members (dis)proportional power in the classroom community.

In this view, in order for international students to be able to participate in academic classroom oral activities, they must have an adequate level of academic English and knowledge of the content being taught. However, the level of academic discourse used and expected in content-specific classes tends to be a real challenge for ESL speakers to follow and respond to. Indeed, international ESL students taking content-specific classes express "feelings of inadequacy and frustration" (Kim, 2006, p. 480) when attempting to participate in classroom

activities in which oral language is the primary means of participation (e.g. in whole-class and small-group discussions) (Leki, 2001; Liu, 2001).

Although the findings in Kim's study (2006) with East Asian ESL graduate students indicated that interacting conversationally with peers outside the academic classroom in order to complete group-based projects was a significantly less difficult task for the students, a study conducted by Wright and Lander (2003) with undergraduate students at an Australian university provides us with a contrasting finding on the subject. Their study participants were 72 first-year male undergraduate Engineering students, 36 Australian-born, Anglo-European students, and 36 foreign-born, South East Asian ESL students. They investigated differences in rates of verbal interaction during a collaborative group activity outside class time, and concluded that the "South East Asian students were inhibited in terms of their verbal participation when with Australian students" (p. 237).

The study measured how the Engineering students worked in groups in two arrangements: first, in mono-ethnic groups and second, in bi-ethnic groups. Each group had 4 participants who worked together on a problem-solving task. Wright and Lander (2003) report that both Australian and South East Asian students produced *fewer* verbal interactions when working together in bi-ethnic groups in comparison to when working in mono-ethnic groups. However, the difference in number of verbal productions was significantly higher for the ESL students. In other words, even though both ethnic groups produced fewer verbal interactions when working with members of the opposite group, South East Asian students' verbal productions showed a substantial decrease in frequency.

The crucial finding in Wright and Lander's study (2003) is that interacting in bi-ethnic groups impacted the South East Asian ESL students much more than it impacted native-speaker



Australian students. The low frequency of verbal interactions on the part of the ESL students shows that they were inhibited in the presence of the Australian students. The authors argue that language proficiency alone cannot account for the great difference in frequency of verbal productions because the South East Asian students produced verbal contributions in English when in mono-ethnic groups. In addition, the authors argue that the Australian students' mode of operation may have been taken as the default and dominant one during the interactions, since the Australian students had the native-speaker advantage over the ESL students, and were likely to be more comfortable in the local social-academic setting.

Cheng, Myles and Curtis (2004) investigated the perceived linguistic and cultural challenges of 59 international ESL graduate students at a Canadian university using a survey and follow-up interviews. The study revealed that *leading class discussions* was rated by the international students as the most *important* skill to have based on their academic experiences. Then, the same students were asked to rate the most difficult skill. *Leading class discussions* emerged again as the most *difficult* skill for the international ESL students in the study. Since leading class discussions requires students to have proficiency in academic English and knowledge of subject, the researchers argue that inadequate language skills, combined with socio-cultural factors, directly result in weak academic performance for international ESL students.

Through a survey administered by Pawanchik, Kamil, Hilmi and Baten (2011) to 17 international ESL students at the University of Otago, New Zealand, researchers examined the students' perception of the most important skills to have in order to succeed in their academic studies. The results revealed that the international ESL students ranked *speaking* as the second most important skill necessary for success (*reading* being the first). However, only 41.2% of

students reported speaking skills were important for participating in class discussions with peers. Although the researchers did not follow up with the international students for clarification on the results, they assumed that the low percentage attributed to participating in class discussions is a result of students being passive or shy, which could have stemmed from students fearing making mistakes or being able to consult with peers after class.

From her 12-month-long ethnographic study with 13 international post-graduate students at a university in the south of England, based on interviews and observations, Brown (2008) concluded that the students in the study experienced a damaging level of anxiety over their level of proficiency in the English language even though all students had commenced their studies at the host institution with passing marks on IELTS. Brown (2008) reported that the majority of students perceived themselves as inferior and also experienced feelings of shame. These students encountered challenges in academic reading and writing; however, their greatest anxiety originated from the inability to communicate orally with confidence and ease in face-to-face encounters with their peers.

In a case study conducted at a university in the southernmost part of the United States, Wu, Garza and Guzman (2015) interviewed 10 international ESL students, both undergraduate and graduate, to gain insight into the academic challenges faced by the students and their adjustment strategies. The students reported that the lack of language proficiency imposed barriers to their academic success. In addition, one of the students commented that she was left out when group work was assigned because she found it hard to follow her peers' conversational exchanges and therefore felt her peers would not want her to join their group. The researchers in the study argue that all students faced "a number of difficulties when they had to communicate orally in an academic setting" (p. 7).

Students' insufficient academic language skills affect their participation in class, and consequently, how the students perceive themselves and are perceived by their peers in the academic classroom. An international student's identity in the new academic community may be then constructed as one of a less competent member, affecting the student's intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences and requiring the student to constantly negotiate their identity, competence and membership through the dynamics in place in the new academic community with both instructors and peers. Therefore, it is paramount that these ESL students receive support to develop the appropriate academic language required to engage in the academic community and succeed in their studies.

These studies show that students perceive the demands of the university as specific linguistic challenges but that there are complex social factors involved as well. In the remaining sections of this chapter, the studies reviewed in this project illustrate the complexity of language-related challenges in the students' experiences as they attempted to adapt to and gain membership in the new academic culture. These themes explore: how students perceived their oral participation in academic classes, the complex negotiations of identity and competence around language, silence as a voluntary or involuntary response mechanism, and transformation and agency motivated by the realisation of the importance of language proficiency.

## **5.2 Perceptions of International Students' Classroom Participation**

Morita (2004) illustrated how challenging it was for international students to be recognised as legitimate and competent members of their classroom communities, negotiating not only competence but also identity and power. In her study with a group of six female international graduate students from Japan at a Canadian university, Morita (2004) focussed on the discourse socialisation experiences of the students in order to examine the complex relations

of participation and integration of these international students into the academic classroom community.

Morita's study (2004) employed a multiple case-study approach in order to gain a holistic understanding of the lives of the international students at a large research-oriented university in Western Canada, focusing on their experiences, perspectives and feelings throughout an extended period of time. Morita utilised student self-reports, interviews and classroom observations to identify trends and patterns related to competent participation, classroom membership, legitimacy, negotiation of identity and power, and personal agency. The observations focused on whole-class and small-group discussions that took place in a seminar-style class and provided valuable insights into both verbal and non-verbal behaviour, formal and informal interactions with both peers and instructors. One conclusion from Morita's study is that the students in the study did not perceive themselves as relevant members of the classroom community because their linguistic abilities were insufficient to grant them access to an identity of competent members in the classroom context. Competency was constructed around language proficiency, and because their peers possessed much higher language proficiency, the ESL students perceived themselves as inferior and were unable to take part in the interactions in the classroom.

Similarly, Tatar's (2005) qualitative, descriptive multi-case study examined the experiences and perceptions of in-class participation of four Turkish graduate students who were attending a university in the U.S. The students in this study – two doctoral male students and two master degree female students – faced ongoing issues with participation and membership in their seminar-style classes. These difficulties demonstrated how educational and cultural issues, along

with insufficient academic language skills for classroom oral discussions, can form a major impediment to international students' successful adaptation into the classroom community.

Tatar (2005) argues that in addition to the linguistic difficulty, students who come from teacher-centered educational cultures may not see oral participation as a valuable component of their new classes. However, these international students are perceived as graduate students rather than as ESL learners, and so they are expected to participate in class as equally active as their native-speaker peers. Although some may try to meet this expectation, they “worry about sounding competent and intelligent in a foreign language” (p. 338) while interacting with students who may be “dominant in classroom discussions” (p. 338). Tatar's findings support the finding that classroom participation is complex and influenced by various other aspects which are underestimated in the literature (Ferris & Tagg, 1996).

In a study that examined the experiences and perceptions of four female Chinese students transitioning from high school to university in Canada, Li (2004) explores the various challenges faced by these students in order to adapt to and succeed in the new learning environment. Through e-mail messages, face-to-face conversations and social activities, Li was able to better understand how these students perceived themselves in the higher education context, with stories of frustration, confusion and anxiety which originated from the students' prior acculturation with traditional Chinese methods of learning and teaching, initial homesickness and lack of academic language skills as the students constantly attempted to successfully transition into the higher education life-style. All these factors affected the Chinese students' integration into the classroom community to a great extent.

Although the students in Li's study (2004) had already obtained their high school diploma in China, they decided to repeat high school in Canada specifically with the objective of

improving their language abilities as much as possible in their first year of studies in Canada. Their hope was that repeating high school would help ease the transition into university. Li's 2004 study participants had all passed the minimum TOEFL score requirement for university admission but realised shortly after that the kind of English needed to participate in academic classes was much different. One of the students, Magnolia, explains her difficulty to the researcher: "it's impossible for me to listen to the lectures effectively because I can't understand the professors at all" (p. 34). Li reports that "the students could not and did not take part in class discussions" (p. 34).

In addition, the students in Li's study (2004) reported facing difficulties in interacting specifically with their instructors. For instance, the students were not able to understand their instructors during lectures due to their insufficient listening skills, resulting in the students falling behind in terms of following the class material and therefore having to understand the content on their own when outside the class. Also, one of these students, Rose, expressed that she once went to her instructor for help, and had to write her questions to the instructor on the board so that he could understand her questions better; she could not communicate with the instructor effectively only through oral language. The lack of proper academic language was a significant issue for the Chinese students when trying to participate in classroom interactions at their Canadian university.

Lee's (2009) one-semester-long qualitative study with six Korean graduate students attending an American university in south-west U.S. mirrors the previously addressed findings thus far. Lee (2009) identifies the ongoing challenges faced by the Korean students in the classroom context in their attempts to participate orally both in whole-class and small-group discussions. The study participants perceived the lack of proficiency in the English language as

the most critical factor affecting their oral participation in class. All study participants had exceeded the minimum score required to study in this university in both the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Graduate Record Examination (GRE); however, they still faced significant challenges, similarly to the participants in Li's (2004) study. The students' inability to participate fully in classroom discussions demonstrates that passing these proficiency level tests does not ensure international students may have the competence required in academic language for graduate-level studies, "particularly the ability to organise and share ideas in dynamic classroom situations" (p. 143).

Lee (2009) reports that "all students repeatedly cited English language ability as having the strongest influence on their oral participation in classroom discussions" (p. 147) even though most of the students had already been studying in the U.S. for three to six years. More specifically, the students' singular linguistic challenge was speaking English; their ability to listen and comprehend oral language was not an issue for them, but having the need to translate back and forth between Korean and English stood in the way of their contributing orally in dynamic whole-class discussions.

Although Lee (2009) suggests that lacking adequate English proficiency may be the biggest barrier for international ESL students' achievement of academic success, through classroom observations and interviews, the author also identified ongoing challenges that stemmed from different socio-cultural values, the educational practices between the two cultures, individual differences and the classroom environment. The classroom experiences of the students in Lee's study (2009) illustrated that, for some ESL students overall, challenges in achieving academic success and classroom engagement may not originate from linguistic differences *alone*

but rather in combination or indirectly with other language-unrelated factors present in the host environment.

In their qualitative study with five international ESL students from Korea at an American University, Seo and Koro-Ljungberg (2005) concluded that “communication difficulties contributed most to the adjustment problems older Korean students experienced” (p. 179). One of the study participants, Helen, often expressed in the interviews that she felt frustrated and uncomfortable talking with Americans because of her limited proficiency in English. Because of this, Helen reported not participating in classroom discussions, leading her professor to doubt her capability to successfully complete the course. Not being able to participate in class discussions made Helen feel pressured, stressed and nervous, and eventually drop the class.

Another participant in the study, Jamie, felt her classmates looked down on her due to her language difficulties. She described how her peers had little or no patience listening to her oral contributions. Jamie was able to orally express her opinions by speaking slowly so that she could translate her ideas from Korean into English. However, due to her language difficulties, she was ignored by her peers and not allowed to get involved in classroom presentations and discussions. This experience resulted in Jamie feeling bad toward her peers as well as herself because she could not speak English well. The researchers report that all students’ self-confidence decreased as a product of their communication difficulties.

In a study with 18 international students enrolled at the Graduate School of Education at an American University, Beykont and Daiute (2002) examined the students’ perceptions, experiences and perspectives on inclusiveness in higher education courses with American English-speaking peers. Similar to Lee’s findings (2009), the students in Beykont and Daiute’s study commented in interviews that some students – typically North Americans – “just talk” (p.



38) during class discussions without offering relevant and reflective contributions, often in incomplete ideas or based solely on personal experience. In addition, the students reported that classroom discussions were dominated by mostly North Americans, “voicing their opinion too often and at the expense of other students” (p. 38). This theme was also identified by the Turkish students in Tatar’s study (2005). Finally, Beykont and Daiute’s students were concerned about following the fast-paced discussions in which students often interrupted one another – a theme also present in Morita’s study (2004).

Zhou, Knoke and Sakamoto (2005) conducted interviews with 10 ESL students from mainland China at a Canadian university in order to understand their academic experiences as graduate students. A commonly discussed theme by these ESL students was their minimal class participation. The students were often silent and inactive in class; however, “such ‘passivity’ and reticence in class was far from what Chinese students desired” (p. 293). The authors report that the students felt upset and frustrated from their inability to participate in class. As many other studies in this literature review have similarly exposed, the low level of participation created in the ESL students feelings of anxiety, frustration, depression, isolation, inferiority and loss of confidence (p. 293). In an interview, one of the students said: “I kind of feel myself inferior, feeling I cannot survive here in such an English-speaking environment” (p. 293).

The Chinese students associated positive feelings with the ability to participate in class. All students acknowledged in the interviews that taking part in class discussions was helpful and important, and even though all had a strong desire to engage in classroom oral activities, the authors argue that several factors acted as impediments to these students’ participation. All students identified insufficient language proficiency as the primary impediment to participating in class; however, other inhibitors, as reported by the students, were “unfamiliarity with

Canadian/Western culture and the content and norms of Canadian education, perceptions of interpersonal interactions in the classroom participation” (p. 294) among other factors. Similar to Lee’s findings (2009), although ESL students may identify language as the most significant factor influencing their classroom participation, the authors concluded in their study that unfamiliar socio-cultural and educational aspects of the host environment can also contribute to the challenges ESL students experience in their attempts to participate in classroom oral activities.

Insufficient language proficiency equalled students having difficulties “understanding class content, taking notes, understanding and responding to questions, joining discussions, and so on” (p. 294), as reported by the students. The Chinese students reported feeling nervous when they had to engage in classroom activities. Several students explained their first presentation experience meant an accelerated heart beat and one student specifically explained he was “sweating a lot” (p. 294). A great deal of pressure followed students’ engagement in classroom activities because these students anticipated their peers would not be able to understand their English, feeling awkward for having to repeat “I beg your pardon” in class (p. 294). The authors report that one male student always hesitated to join classroom discussions as he was constantly concerned he would be unable to cope with any potential conflicts or misunderstandings originating from the discussions with his peers in English.

For some ESL students, classroom participation is affected by the support (if any) offered by their peers, TAs and instructors. One student in the study by Zhou et al. (2005) expressed during an interview that she felt de-motivated to participate after her instructor denied her a 2-minute extension to finish her in-class English writing assignment. On the other hand, another commented that one of their instructors was aware of the student’s language-related challenges

and for that reason, deliberately chose to speak slowly and to tell fewer jokes. This attitude which involved understanding and consideration on the part of the instructor motivated the student to participate more in class as he found the classroom to offer a safe environment. However, another Chinese student expressed frustration that her peers were often impatient and rarely waited for her to finish sharing her ideas orally. This attitude inhibited the student's subsequent participation.

Along with linguistic issues, these students experienced challenges particular to the educational system of their host institution. Unfamiliar with the Canadian way of teaching and learning, these students faced challenges with presenting in class, participating in discussions and interacting with peers and professors because they did not know “how to do it” (p. 295) or how to do that adequately according to the local norms. Some of the Chinese students found it difficult to interact in discussions because they were “not sure to what extent you should discuss, whether they [peers] would like [to be] asked questions in that way, or whether they have time to discuss questions with you” (p. 295). The authors argue that every time the Chinese students did not know the adequate norm for participation, they would opt for distance rather than taking the risk.

### **5.3 Negotiating Competence and Identity in the Higher Education Context**

As Wenger (1998) points out, different communities of practice may value different situated abilities and constructs. Therefore, the international students in Morita's study (2004) were part of a community of practice which valued *competence* and *identity*. The students constructed their identities around competence. Due to a lack of appropriate communicative competence in academic English, these students' identities were of less competent members than others in the classroom community. This inferior identity stemmed from challenges with not

fully comprehending the reading materials, lectures, class discussions and not being able to contribute to in-class discussions as much as their peers could – both native speakers of English and other non-native speakers. Furthermore, this identity was particularly problematic for some of the Japanese students in the study because they worried constantly about how their *peers* might have viewed them – perhaps as less intelligent, from sounding stupid or illogical when speaking in class, as reported by one of the study participants.

Because this identity was constructed, it oscillated to being either of a more or a less competent member depending on the class and on the task in which the international Japanese students were involved. One of the students in Morita's study (2004), Shiho, re-constructed her identity to a more competent member of the community after receiving positive feedback on her attempted contribution in class, which consequently enhanced her participation in subsequent classes and generated in her a positive feeling of being a valuable and active member of the class. However, other Japanese students employed *contrasting* identities when in different courses (e.g. the same student employed different identities in different contexts), which may have directly related to the different degrees of peripherality and legitimacy available in the different classes they took or, in other words, the different communities of practice to which they wanted access.

Some of the linguistic challenges faced by the students in Morita's study (2004) were accompanied by psychological issues as well. For instance, Lisa, a 29-year-old who taught English as a Foreign Language at a Japanese high school and who was highly motivated to learn about language education and access Education research, experienced linguistic challenges such as difficulty in listening for comprehension and fear of making mistakes in English, and also feelings of anxiety, insecurity and inferiority. The negotiation of competence and membership

was interwoven and prevented students, such as Lisa, from contributing to classroom discussions, even though her motivation to contribute was present. Failing to meet the high expectations in place in that community – especially the academic language one – was a constant concern and fear for these students which could potentially result in them being judged as (even) less competent participants.

Although Lisa was trying to construct an identity of a competent member of the community, simultaneously she was also consciously constructing her identity for her classmates as one of a member with limited English abilities, an identity that was beneficial and important for her at times. Lisa thought her peers could maybe help her with her linguistic challenges, and as a consequence, presenting herself as a speaker of English as a second language could relieve to a certain extent the ongoing pressure that she experienced. Being able to participate in and contribute to class discussions were the major obstacles which Lisa experienced in trying to overcome the sense of inferior identity and low competence in the classroom.

In Tatar's study (2005), the Turkish students perceived North American academic in-class participation as unimportant due to educational and cultural differences. Since oral participation is not encouraged in Turkish educational culture (Turgut, 1997), the students tended to regard oral participation as a "presentation of formally acquired academic knowledge" (p. 343) rather than sharing personal, individual ideas freely without much collective applicability. Therefore, the students perceived themselves differently from the rest of the class at times. Additionally, classroom dynamics played a significant role in the international students' identity construction and their perception of themselves as being less competent members. The students always viewed themselves as the non-native speakers or the outsiders of the class.

The Turkish students expressed that there was always a divide between the *non-native* and the *native* speakers in class. This distinction was always evident and could not be mended, regardless of how proficient the Turkish students were in English. Indeed, the identity imposed upon these international students, as perceived by them, was one characterised by having “insufficient language skills and unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational culture” (p. 347). The native and non-native English language status seemed to automatically separate the Turkish students from the other members of their classroom community. These students were assigned outsider status, creating a feeling of exclusion in the classroom for them.

Another interesting finding in Tatar’s study (2005) is that the Turkish students had to negotiate their identities as international students not only among their native-speaker peers, but also among themselves. Linguistic challenges faced by the Turkish students involved fear of making mistakes or not being able to speak English well in front of their co-nationals. This was a reason for anxiety whenever trying to participate orally in discussions in which their co-nationals were present. However, the same students who reported feeling uncomfortable participating in discussions when their Turkish peers were present actually did participate when they perceived their English language skills to be *better* than those of their Turkish peers, therefore changing their perceived membership to an elevated one and re-constructing their identity to one of more competent English speakers.

The Korean students in Lee’s study (2009) reported they lacked adequate content knowledge in their classes, which made their experiences difficult when it came to talking in class. One of the students explained that when the topic was unfamiliar, he could not contribute to the discussions because he had nothing to say, resulting in a “very depressing experience” (p. 150) for him. Overall, the students were very aware of their positionality in the classroom given

their non-native-speaker status. They avoided speaking in whole-class discussions because they felt all other students would listen in judgment to what they would say. The students reported that talking in class equalled a high level of anxiety, nervousness, dizziness and discomfort even though they all acknowledged and recognised the value of participating in discussions as a way to consolidate knowledge and interact with their peers. One of the students in Lee's study (2009) reported avoiding making eye contact with the instructor so that the anxiety-provoking experience of having to talk aloud in class could be avoided.

Lee (2009) explains that the Korean students felt comfortable talking in class when they could prepare and plan what to say before-hand, thus giving them some degree of control over their participation. However, when one of the Korean students was asked by the course instructor in class for his personal opinion on the presentation about post-modern methods that he had prepared and summarised in advance, the student lacked the communicative competence to articulate his opinion *on the spot* in front of the class, looking "frozen" (p. 151) and standing still without a response to provide to the instructor. Along with their inadequate communicative competence in English, the Korean students also expressed that their personality affected their oral participation in class because they were introverted, which could have been perceived as a negative factor for classroom participation. The students generally perceived themselves as incompetent and introverted, connecting their inability to communicate clearly what they meant to say with their shy and quiet personalities.

Li's study (2004) with the four Chinese students also exemplifies how insufficient academic language can prevent students from perceiving themselves as competent classroom members. In their academic ESL course, the Chinese students with whom Li worked did not feel that they could contribute meaningfully to classroom discussions due to their lack of academic

language skills. In order to cope with the language issue and present themselves as more competent members in their classes, the students would try to prepare themselves before and after class by reading the textbook so that they could be on the same page as everybody else in the class. However, this attempt at changing their classroom experience did not work when employed alone as the students still struggled to understand the content when studying on their own and still needed to seek further help with either their instructors or teaching assistants.

Hung and Hyun (2010) conducted a study to examine the experiences of seven female East Asian international students enrolled in a Ph.D. Curriculum and Instruction program at an American University. The study focused on the students' ongoing experiences which revolved around two factors: lack of academic English literacy – i.e. “knowing particular content, language, practices [and] strategies for understanding, discussing, organizing and producing texts” (Johns, 1997, p. 2) – and subject-specific knowledge. At the commencement of their graduate studies, the students in the study experienced feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness, especially in the academic classroom, since one's identity of a knowledgeable and powerful student was constructed around the affordances provided by language.

Since an international ESL student's identity of a competent member of the academic community may be constructed and transmitted through the use of (English) language, these international ESL students may be then at disadvantage from the very beginning of their studies. Hung and Hyun (2010) explain that expressing themselves in English is already in itself a major challenge for international ESL students when studying in Western institutions of higher education, and to make matters worse, when students try to negotiate membership into the academic community, they must do so using “appropriate and sophisticated academic English” (p. 343) which is an ability international ESL students often do not possess.



As another example, in a qualitative study by Liu (2011), the author used her own experience as an international ESL student at a university in Canada to explore her frustrations and challenges in adapting to the new English-speaking environment. Prior to her graduate studies in Canada, Liu had passed three language proficiency examinations, two of which were the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). However, in her first three months of study in Canada, Liu simply could not understand what her professors and peers were talking about in graduate-level classes. Liu explains that even though she had good ideas to share with the class, she could not express herself clearly in English, and in comparison with her fluent peers, she perceived herself as stupid.

As a result, Liu's self-esteem lowered, and she decided to avoid speaking and interacting with her peers in class which only worsened her overall experience as the avoidance strategy impeded her from making friends and getting to know other people. Liu's communicative competence in English could not be easily improved at first even though she made every effort to adapt to the new language environment, especially when communicating with professors and peers. Finally, Liu (2011) clarifies that reading and writing papers were not an issue for her as an ESL student. However, the lack of English language skills in general affected even her simplest daily tasks, such as asking for directions and taking the correct buses.

#### **5.4 Silence in the Classroom**

In the context of the academic classroom, Morita (2004) found that most of the Japanese students were passive participants. Though this passiveness originated primarily from language anxiety, there were also other factors in play which the Japanese students identified for their relative silence: the students had limited knowledge of the content being discussed, personal

tendency and preference for quieter participation, learners' goals, identity as less competent members, outsider status, role as individuals with limited English imposed by others, among other factors. Morita (2004) notes that it was not the students' gender (all being female), culture or language alone that interfered with their active participation. Rather, passiveness varied according to the specific contexts from class to class, and even when the students remained quiet or withdrawn, they were still negotiating their identities.

In one of her courses, Nanako, a 23-year-old graduate pursuing her Master's degree for the first time in Morita's study (2004), was silent because following the fast-paced discussions on mostly new topics was a real challenge for her, and jumping into a discussion to express herself on a given topic was almost impossible. In addition, Nanako felt frustrated at times when she could not understand the jokes or playful comments made by others. From not being able to participate in class, Nanako felt as if her personality had been denied in class, which also resulted in feelings of irritation, frustration and depression, as she stated in her personal journal. Another factor that contributed to Nanako's passive participation was the fact that she was the youngest in the class, which made her develop a sense of a less knowledgeable and less experienced member in the classroom community.

Besides lacking content knowledge in class, Nanako felt that in another course, her race, ethnicity and institutional status also played a part in her constant silence and isolation. Nanako's classmates – who were all undergraduate and Caucasian – did not invite her to participate in class discussions even though the discussions concerned gender-related issues in education as the class topic was Gender and Education, and all her classmates (and instructor) were female. As a result, we may argue that a student's passive participation or relative silence in class may be the product of different contextual aspects of the classroom community, including complex

language, race, ethnicity, and social and power relations that are in place in the classroom environment in which international students are involved.

Likewise, *silence* also emerged as a theme in Tatar's study (2005). In the study, the Turkish students were silent during class discussions every time they felt their contribution was solely based on personal experience rather than on careful thinking and preparation, which to them was the most valuable and meaningful type of contribution. The Turkish students' silence was a result of failing to meet these particularly high, culture-specific expectations upon themselves for they did not feel their *opinions* were acceptable in academic discussions. Although these students had come from an educational culture where interaction with peers as a form of learning was virtually non-existent in the classroom, they quickly realised the value of the interactional approach in the American classroom. However, Tatar reports that they felt rather anxious from not being able to succeed completely in the new educational context, in which discussions were dominated mostly by native speakers who possessed a linguistic advantage.

Lee (2009) reported that none of the Korean students in the study initiated topics in whole-class discussions. The students nodded and made eye contact to signal attentiveness, but rarely spoke. The Korean students' view on oral participation differed due to their up-bringing in Korean culture. They valued saying fewer, but more important things than saying too many things just for the sake of participation and interaction. For them, based on their culture, an individual who speaks too much is seen as "light" or sometimes uneducated, which is a negative association to have. The Korean students saw the instructor as being more knowledgeable than their peers, and based on their experiences with classroom practices in Korea, they normally

waited for the instructor to invite the students to raise questions after the main point had been concluded.

From this perspective, Lee's (2009) study participants understood classroom participation to be accomplished differently. For them, participating in a discussion did not necessarily mean having to contribute orally to the conversation, but could be done by listening to their peers and reflecting on the comments shared. This was also one of the reasons for the Korean students' silence in the classroom. Plus, this silence was sometimes motivated by the degree of support provided by their peers during class discussions in the form of further individual comments or elaborations added to the international students' original comment. For example, one of the students expressed feeling too nervous to talk in class, especially when her comments were "cut off or ignored" (p. 152), prompting her to remain silent from that moment on. In contrast, when her comments were acknowledged and expanded by others, she felt motivated to contribute more and had her anxiety eased.

The level of anxiety Brown's (2008) ESL students experienced became detrimental to their overall academic performance and experience. When ashamed of their inability to converse with their peers, these students would opt to associate with co-nationals. As a coping mechanism whenever inside the classroom, these students refrained from participating in classroom oral activities. South-East Asian students in Brown's study (2008) not only employed silence as a response to fear of speaking in the classroom, but also avoided eye contact with the instructor (Brown herself) unless their names were called upon. Whenever invited to answer questions, Brown describes that "the looks that crossed their face included panic and anxiety, and in extreme cases, students sat silently, squirming in their seat" (p. 85).

During an interview, a Korean student admitted she wished she could participate in classroom discussions because she had ideas to share. Her only option was to remain silent, however, because her feelings of anxiety over her insufficient language proficiency were stronger than her willingness to contribute orally. Moreover, as Tatar (2005) identified, saving face among co-nationals is a continuous preoccupation for ESL students, which may lead them to withdraw from peer conversations when their co-nationals are present. The same Korean student once spoke about her linguistic inadequacy and then felt she had jeopardised her status of a competent speaker among her co-nationals, causing her to feel displeased with herself. On the other hand, the ongoing prominent silence from the South-East Asian ESL students made their European peers feel uncomfortable about how much they spoke, leading one German student to speak to the instructor after class about the unwanted feeling that she was dominating discussions.

Support in the form of acknowledging and expanding a student's comments was also found to be an important constituent in motivating international ESL students to participate in university tutorials in Marlina's qualitative study (2009) – although support not from peers. Marlina (2009) worked with 4 Asian undergraduate students at an Australian University to investigate the numerous factors which influence a student's active participation in class. Some of these students expressed that when their tutors skipped, interrupted or ignored their comments during a tutorial lecture, they would choose not to continue to participate because their oral contribution had been de-valued. On the other hand, when their tutors or instructors nodded or used small phrases (e.g. *that's good* or *I see*) to acknowledge the students' oral contribution, they felt better and more comfortable to participate.

## **5.5 Agency and Transformation**

Although the international students in Morita's study (2004) faced major challenges in the classroom environment, it is important to note that the students were motivated to re-shape their learning and participation by actively negotiating their positions within the classroom community and by exercising personal agency. Morita's (2004) approach to agency stems from a neo-Vygotskian perspective, which emphasises that an individual's agency emerges from engaging with the social world. In this light, Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) explain that "agency is never a 'property' of a particular individual" and is instead "a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and re-negotiated with those around the individual and with the society at large" (p. 148). Another perspective in Morita's study (2004) was based on critical discourse, particularly on resistance theory (Canagarajah, 1999), which proposes that individuals employ agency to resist inferior positions in dominant discourses and to create positions in which their goals and purposes can be achieved.

Some of the strategies employed by the participants to mitigate both participation and membership issues in the classroom community were interactional: speaking in earlier stages of a discussion, introducing new perspectives, preparing a few points to say before each class and expressing to their peers and instructors that they wanted to participate and speak in class. Through agency, some of the students confronted their challenges and experienced personal transformation. Even though these processes progressed slowly for the international students at times, they were still valuable in developing a positive feeling of confidence in the students and a sense that they were contributing adequately to the discussions as newcomers.

As for the international Japanese students' ongoing attempts at *resistance*, though they seemed to work for the students themselves in isolation, the attempts did not work in actually changing the classroom community's treatment of the international students. Some of the

resistance strategies were, for example, withdrawing completely from participating in discussions and avoiding speaking in front of the instructor when the same had assigned negative roles onto a student. These resistance strategies were employed by the international students every time they felt other members of the classroom community marginalised, silenced or imposed negative roles or identities on them. Both agency and resistance strategies were employed by the international students as ways of responding to the various power, social and cultural relations in the community. Morita suggested that to some students, the strategies brought about successful personal transformation of identity, learning, teaching and socialising within the academic classroom community.

To illustrate further with another student in Morita's study (2004), Rie, a 27-year-old third-generation Korean born and raised in Japan, took two seminar-style classes in the first term of her graduate studies. Morita describes Rie as an active member in one of the classes, participating in class discussions by offering her own perspectives on the issues of multi-cultural education discussed with her peers. She had been constructed as a valuable member based on personal experience, knowledge and insight from being a minority student in Japan. Contrastingly, in her second course, Rie had marginalised status and faced difficulty with the course readings, class discussions and videos shown in class which included theories and discourses that were mostly foreign to her.

Rie's agency into changing her marginalised position in the classroom community involved vocally expressing her needs as an ESL speaker to her class instructor and peers. She requested that her peers speak more clearly and slowly on more than one occasion and sent an e-mail message to her instructor asking for special adjustments (i.e. providing background information to international students on the matters discussed as well as speaking in shorter

sentences). The instructor informed Rie that her challenge originated from a language barrier and that adjustments had already been made in the course although it was difficult for the instructor to make course-content modifications for a non-native speaker without slowing down the rest of the class. Therefore, Rie's identity to her instructor was one of a student with a deficit that needed to be solved by the student herself, even though Rie was doing well in her first class despite her English language limitations.

The Turkish graduate students also made use of different strategies in order to minimise their outsider status and disadvantaged competence in Tatar's study (2005). Some of these students employed actively participating orally as a strategy to negotiate their identities with their peers. For instance, a couple of the students made efforts to communicate orally when completing group work assignments as their perception was that oral participation would then "project their equality" (p. 347) with the native-speaker peers. They recognised how much of a powerful tool oral participation was and used it to present themselves differently with fresher identities. This suggests international students may often be fully aware that they can try explicitly to have their membership statuses re-assigned by using the same tools valued by the dominant group.

Furthermore, Tatar (2005) notes how the students employed new strategies in order to increase their active participation, such as preparing questions before-hand to ask in class and taking notes during the lectures. Although the international students could prepare work in advance, this strategy did not guarantee oral participation in discussions because of the very dynamic nature of the classroom but it did help alleviate anxiety. Additional behavioural strategies employed to change the sense of general participation in class were: maintaining eye contact with the instructor, smiling, nodding, flipping through books or notes and answering



trivial questions asked by the instructor. Finally, out-of-classroom interactions with instructors were valuable as they increased the students' motivation and comfort in class but did not necessarily mean higher participation.

As the academic year progressed, the Chinese students in Li's study (2004) became "more independent and more mature learners" (p.37) and experienced a change of perspective toward their experience in the Canadian higher education context. The students became self-disciplined about their study habits and study schedule since they could rely mostly only on themselves in order to see change. The students substituted their old learning styles and strategies acquired while studying in China (e.g. cramming and memorising information before exams) with alternatives developed to better cope with their language-related challenges in Canada. The students would sometimes ask their friends and classmates for help, tape-record lectures and seek help from the instructor. The students had become their own agents in coping with each day's challenges.

Hung and Hyun's long-term study (2010) with East Asian ESL graduate students at an American university showed that, as the academic years progressed, the students' academic English literacy was enhanced, which afforded them to feel less excluded in the academic community, minimising their outsider status. Furthermore, their academic English literacy competence augmented and consequently allowed these students to accumulate more discipline-specific knowledge. As the students progressed in their doctoral program, they employed more assertive learning attitudes which were possible due to the improved English communication competence along with some other factors that varied by each individual.

Moreover, as the East Asian ESL graduate students gained more competence in academic English and were able to improve their overall academic experience, their attitudes toward

classroom participation also evolved. One of the students, Joching, upon reflecting on her classroom oral participation, expressed shifting her learning focus to discussing her own ideas with the class more naturalistically rather than feeling concerned about her English language skills and *how* to share the ideas when communicating with others. Overall, the students in Hung and Hyun's study (2010) became "more assertive about their learning needs and explicitly proactive" (p. 348) when participating in class.

After some time, the Chinese students in the study by Zhou et al. (2005) gained more confidence, felt more comfortable in class and experienced improvement in language proficiency, as reported by the authors. Despite all this, certain issues with classroom participation still remained. For instance, the Chinese students often reported not having opportunities to speak in classroom discussions because they could not react to it as quickly as their native English-speaking peers (p. 295). Some students no longer had challenges understanding the class content and discussion, but responding to it was difficult and required time. Classroom discussions can be dynamic and fast-paced, and these students felt that whenever they were ready to contribute orally into a discussion, the topic had already moved on. In addition, although some students were able to respond but not as fast as their peers, they commented that more proficient peers would just cut in, interrupting the ESL students' responses. After continuous experiences of interruption, the students felt they had nothing else to share in class.

These contrasting learning experiences show how an international student may occupy different positions within the community given its dynamics of power and learning expectations, having to negotiate their situated identities in the classroom context which may involve social, cultural, curricular, pedagogical, and interactional structures. These structures influence

international students' participation and consequently shape their identities and community membership. The construction of an identity is directly linked to the degree of participation a student engages in. In most cases, as seen in the studies explored here, issues with participation are majorly a result of insufficient ability in the academic language and communicative competence in English; however, in some cases, little participation may be a voluntary coping strategy for some of the students.

## **5.6 Theoretical Perspectives and Research Findings**

In Chapter 3, I provided a brief introduction to the theories and frameworks related to peer interaction and second language development. In this section, I connect some of the findings of this chapter to those theories and frameworks which some of the research explored in this project has drawn from in order to illustrate their relevance.

Studies concerned with peer interaction have highlighted a range of themes that have helped us understand the role of interaction in the lives of ESL students in higher education. In the literature explored in this project, focus was placed on interaction as the medium which facilitated ESL students' academic experiences, and as an initial step into processes that allow second language acquisition and development to occur. However, interaction is complex, multi-layered and guided by diverse parameters. For ESL students, in addition to having to learn new socio-cultural interactional modes of operation, success in these (interactional) conversational experiences also depended on possessing a certain level of linguistic proficiency.

The findings have also underscored the relevance of theoretical perspectives that guide further research in this area. The significance of spoken language proficiency and the role of interaction are supported by theorizing from SLA that highlights the ways in which input that is

appropriate is essential. As supported by the studies here, failed experiences for ESL students also stemmed from a lack of comprehensibility of the input. The input produced through academic language is difficult and different from the one which ESL students may be accustomed to dealing with in their formal language classes. Krashen's theoretical perspective (1985) stresses the important role of comprehensible input in promoting language acquisition for second language learners.

Early work by Long (1991) and others drew attention to the role that interaction played in second language acquisition. This is particularly significant given that the academic context traditionally focussed on reading and writing and did not consider oral engagement critical to success. Student experiences clearly showed how being overwhelmed with language input beyond their levels made it impossible to engage and interact at all.

The findings also recognise the important role of the work of Wenger (2006) and others about the ways in which membership in a community of practice are constructed. The studies showed that for ESL students in higher education, language contextualises the academic community. However, integration into the academic (classroom) community happens through a complicated process which requires ongoing efforts on the part of ESL students because the different statuses held by existing and new members are very prominent. The studies highlighted that a lack of support for new members and the inability to access the practices valued by the academic community resulted in unsuccessful opportunities for ESL students to enhance their language skills and to develop a sense of belonging.

Sociocultural Theory (Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Belleter, 2002) has brought to the fore the importance of collaborative dialogue in mediating second language learning in the higher education context. ESL students who were unable to engage in conversations with their more

proficient peers in which opportunities to solve language-related problems were available became stagnant in their journeys of second language development and acquisition. However, for other ESL students, social interactions – based on the construct of Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) – which involved mediation and partnership allowed for transformation of identity and growth for ESL students as individuals. These findings emphasise the relevance of sociocultural theory in second language learning, especially the role of collaborative dialogues and conversations between learners and peers.

Finally, some of the strongest voices were those of students attempting to shape their own identities, to find a place for themselves in their new lives. Students clearly expressed their feelings of frustration, anxiety and isolation as they attempted to change the course of their journeys. Throughout their academic experiences, ESL students realised the effect of personal agency in transforming their negative experiences into positive ones. In some cases, ESL students employed personal agency to resist their assigned positionalities by drawing from different mechanisms and strategies available to them, such as seeking language accommodation and presenting themselves explicitly as members with inferior language proficiency.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

In this final chapter, I analyse the findings of this literature review in order to draw conclusions about the role of language proficiency and peer interaction for ESL students in higher education and identify emerging questions for future research.

My interest was to examine the role that conversational interaction with peers plays in ESL students' language proficiency and their overall academic experience. Additionally, I was interested in exploring in more detail the challenges ESL students face – primarily challenges concerning language, but also social, educational and personal challenges – in order to try and meet expectations related to interaction and participation in their new academic environments. The questions that guided this review were: What role does conversational peer interaction play in the second language development of ESL students in higher education?, and How do challenges related to oral language proficiency for the purpose of interaction affect ESL students' experience in the higher education context? A number of dominant themes emerged from the literature.

As revealed by the literature reviewed here, language plays a crucial role in enabling these students to contribute to their communities and succeed in the higher education context. For international students who speak English as a second language, difficulties that stem from insufficient language proficiency can critically affect the students' overall experience in their host university. For ESL students specifically, the educational system of universities becomes a completely new world to navigate, with different social, cultural and institutional structures. Classroom behaviour in English-speaking universities is characterised by active participation in

class through oral communication, mostly being achieved through and expected in small-group, whole-class or pair work that may not be familiar to students who have not been educated in the same environment.

The studies showed that competence in the language used in the academic context may help ESL students succeed in the higher education context by enabling them to interact successfully with their peers and instructors. International students' competency in the English language can be a predictor of that student's adjustment in the new context abroad, which includes the ability to relate to the local community (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson & Pisecco, 2002). Indeed, much of the literature reviewed in this project exposed language proficiency as the dominant factor which interfered with ESL students' successful adjustment into the higher education context, and more specifically, with their active participation in the academic classroom.

In Li's study (2004), the four Chinese undergraduate students lacked proficiency in academic English, which directly impacted their successful participation in class as well as their adaption into the new educational environment. Liu's (2011) experience further illustrates this argument. Whenever in class, Liu could not understand her professor and her peers because her language skills were insufficient for interaction in the higher education context. The lack of socio-academic adaptation which was directly influenced by language caused Liu to feel less competent, frustrated and stupid.

The findings in Kim's study (2006), for example, indicate that in the academic classroom, *language is power*. Kim's (2006) ESL students had passed international language exams but reported being highly concerned about leading class discussions as well as participating in whole-class discussions, tasks which Kim (2006) suggests involve a high level of stress and

intimidation for ESL students. Moreover, the students in Kim's study (2006) reported leading class discussions was the most challenging task for them, even though their peers were the same individuals with whom they completed group projects outside class. The students in Ostler's study (1980) reported not experiencing challenges using language for daily activities and informal communication; however, they reported that conducting conversations with instructors and peers whenever in the academic context was problematic, suggesting, again, not only that language is power in the academic classroom, but that this academic language is also distinctively and highly complex.

However, although ESL students may not be able to effectively communicate in academic language whenever in the academic learning environment, they may still be able to *understand* the language used by their instructors and peers if this language is not too advanced (i.e.  $i + 2, 3$ , etc.). One common assumption held by ESL students about themselves is that from having passed internationally recognised language proficiency exams, their linguistic capabilities will be on par with those which are expected by their host university. This assumption may also be held by some instructors, who may be unfamiliar with international language proficiency exams or ESL students' previous language training. The students in Li's study (2004) reported being unable to understand their instructors and to communicate with them clearly, one student having to write her question on the board when in a private meeting with the instructor. We may argue, then, that ESL students' language proficiency may oftentimes be significantly below their self-perceived abilities. Inadequate proficiency levels result in ESL students becoming stagnant in their attempts to improve or acquire language.

Second language development and acquisition can occur more successfully when peers interact regularly and collaborate together toward a mutual goal. This notion originates from



Wenger's theory (2006) *Community of Practice*. This theory takes into account the role of social interaction when members of a community are engaged in activities that foster the improvement of their abilities. In the context of second language learning, ESL students may become more proficient through regular interactions with their peers in which the focus is on a task that involves or requires oral communication (e.g. in-class group work). Hung and Hyun's long-term study (2010) with East Asian ESL graduate students clearly illustrates this notion.

In the beginning of their studies, Hung and Hyun's ESL students experienced exclusion and isolation from their communities. Employing Morita's (2004) frameworks of peripherality and legitimacy, it may be argued that, at the beginning, the East Asian ESL graduate students were granted no or minimal degree of access to the academic community in which they wished to integrate. Over time, however, these students were able to develop better language proficiency and better content-specific knowledge in their classes by interacting regularly either with their co-nationals or their classroom peers. When the environment or the community provides adequate opportunities for new members to participate in the activities valued by the existing members, new members may have better chances to enhance their own skills and therefore integrate more naturally into the community.

Additionally, language proficiency has an impact on identity and how ESL students are perceived by others and by themselves as competent members of the classroom community. Because intellectual competence can be and often is constructed around language, being proficient in (academic) English may be the key factor in allowing these students to diverge the course of their academic experiences. For instance, language can be the powerful instrument which ESL students need in order to demonstrate their real intellectual competence and knowledge in the classroom community. Without the appropriate level of language, ESL students

are likely to remain in a disadvantaged, marginalised position. The students in Morita's study (2004) struggled to gain acceptance from their peers into their classroom social circles even though these ESL students had significant knowledge and personal experience to share with their peers, but lacked one important component: *adequate language*. The students' real identities of knowledgeable classroom members were blocked and therefore could not be expressed due to the lack of proficiency in academic English, leading these students to be perceived by themselves and their peers as less competent than the others. Only when some of the ESL students explicitly presented themselves lacking in language proficiency and in need of accommodation were they able to begin negotiating better identities for themselves.

Another important conclusion is that, in addition to the impact on identity, language may be the necessary factor that supports successful integration and adaptation of ESL students into the academic community. Language gives ESL students power to navigate through the various structures present in their new higher education context. Moreover, language is also the factor that allows students to successfully engage in conversational interactions with their peers in and outside the academic classroom. The ability to naturally interact with peers conversationally is important because it helps prevent the silence that plagues ESL students' efforts to engage in conversations inside the classroom. In the literature reviewed in this project, silence contributed negatively to the students' experiences; however, it also emerged as a coping mechanism employed by some of the ESL students. Silence derived from educational differences concerning the expectations and roles of the instructor and learners themselves (Lee, 2009; Tatar, 2005), as it also stemmed from language anxiety and insufficient language to keep up with dynamic oral interactions in the classroom (Morita, 2004). The findings by Marlina (2009) and Lee (2009) both suggest that ESL students' oral contribution was directly related to the degree of

collaborative support their peers or tutors offered them. For instance, when ESL students had their comments expanded on by their peers, more oral contribution followed. On the other hand, when ESL students' comments were ignored or cut off, silence then emerged as a coping strategy to the lack of peer support. We may argue that ESL students may always be at a disadvantaged position when first attempting to gain membership in a community whose membership is granted by a power that is language. In this sense, it is imperative that the professional community be aware and mindful of their new members' linguistic profiles so that they too may have access to the knowledge cultivated by the community.

Furthermore, being able to successfully interact conversationally with their native-speaker peers may mean that students will also have the ability to lead class discussions and contribute to group work since these two oral activities rely on student interaction. In turn, since participation in the graduate classroom generally equals expected oral participation, being able to participate actively in classroom oral activities may improve students' feelings substantially, as not being able to participate in oral activities tends to generate in students feelings of anxiety, depression, frustration, irritation and nervousness, as indicated and supported by some the research literature reviewed in this project (Lee, 2009; Morita, 2004; Tatar, 2005). Peer interaction can offer students benefits and advantages to their academic experiences but language proficiency appears to be the bridge that connects peer interaction to its benefits.

Interaction is the main source of language acquisition for ESL students. In a broader sense, although the experiences of ESL students in the studies reviewed have led to some personal success (e.g. more familiarity with the host educational system and its teaching and learning expectations, socialisation with peers and newer identities), there has been limited reporting on the *linguistic* gains achieved by ESL students from engaging in peer interactions.

One way to interpret the lack of reporting on significant linguistic development may be through the lens of the Interaction Hypothesis. As reported by the students and sometimes their instructors, ESL students were (and may still be) presented with inadequate opportunities to interact with their peers inside the academic classroom. When interactions initiated by their peers or professors allow ESL students to participate equally, language acquisition may be likelier to follow.

However, as reported by the Turkish students in Tatar's study (2005) as well as the Chinese students in Zhou et al.'s study (2005), classroom interactions can be dominated by speakers of higher proficiency. Additionally, these ESL students lacked the ability to respond naturally and in a timely manner to the discussions and opinions presented by their peers. Some of the students even reported being interrupted when they did have the chance to speak up. Therefore, for ESL students in non-language academic classes, interactions may be most beneficial when they are somewhat regulated by the instructor or when ESL students' peers are aware of their foreign peers' linguistic needs.

A number of questions have emerged from this review and merit future research. The original impetus for this review was an interest in how ESL students' English proficiency could be improved by conversational interactions with their native English-speaking peers. Many educational and socio-cultural benefits are available to ESL students from engaging in conversational peer interactions. The literature reviewed in this project did not focus on measuring or quantifying language proficiency improvement (e.g. which and how classroom peer interactional activities can assist language proficiency). In-depth, long-term research on language outcomes for ESL students' oral proficiency would be useful in assisting with the

development and promotion of interactional activities that can support and benefit ESL students' language proficiency and oral engagement.

From this literature review, new questions have emerged. Considering the significance of language proficiency for a successful academic experience, and how ESL students struggle to succeed in the academic environment due to insufficient language proficiency, it would be important for future research to investigate how students of English as a first or dominant language can be better equipped to understand and collaborate with students from an ESL background to support their ESL peers' success in higher education contexts, such as in the academic classroom. For instance: what forms of support are available within institutions to assist ESL students in their challenges? What challenges do instructors encounter in working with students from an ESL background? Additionally, how can students of higher language proficiency be more aware of the linguistic needs of their ESL peers? These questions would examine educational and pedagogical practices in order to reveal what changes must be implemented so that ESL students' academic experiences may be less difficult.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### *Studies Reviewed in this Project*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Beykont and Daiute (2002)	Interviews	United States	18 graduate students
Brown (2008)	Observations and interviews	England	13 post-graduate students
Cheng, Myles and Curtis (2004)	Survey and interviews	Canada	59 graduate students
Hung and Hyun (2010)	Interviews	United States	7 East Asian female doctoral students, 5 faculty members
Kim (2006)	Survey	United States	70 East Asian graduate students
Lee (2009)	Interviews, observations and small group recordings	United States	6 Korean graduate students
Li (2004)	Interviews, e-mail messages and research journal (researcher only)	Canada	4 Chinese undergraduate students
Liu (2011)	Self-reporting	Canada	1 Chinese graduate student (self)
Marlina (2009)	Interviews and e-mail messages	Australia	4 Asian undergraduate Arts students
Morita (2004)	Interviews, observations and e-mail messages	Canada	6 Japanese female graduate students, 10 course instructors
Ostler (1980)	Survey	United States (University of Southern California)	131 undergraduate and graduate students
Pawanchik, Kamil, Hilmi, and Baten (2011)	Survey	New Zealand (University of Otago)	17 students
Seo and Koro-Ljungberg (2005)	Interviews	United States	5 Korean graduate students
Tatar (2005)	Interviews, classroom observations, focus group and course material collection	United States	4 Turkish (2 doctoral male students, 2 Master female students)
Wright and Lander (2003)	Observations	Australia	72 first-year male undergraduate students (36 Australian, 36 South East Asian)
Wu, Garza and Guzman (2015)	Interviews	United States	10 students (undergraduate and graduate)

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Zhou, Knoke and Sakamoto (2005)	Interviews	Canada	10 Chinese ESL graduate students
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## Appendix B

*Summary of Research Findings on Academic Language and Students' Experiences*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Findings relevant to this project</b>
Beykont and Daiute (2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' perception of conversational interactions and discussions was affected by different educational practices</li> <li>• ESL students perceived classroom discussions to be dominated by North Americans</li> <li>• The fast-paced and dynamic nature of classroom discussions was a reason for concern for ESL students</li> <li>• Oral in-class contributions by mostly North Americans were of little relevance to ESL students as contributions were based mostly on personal individual experience</li> </ul>
Brown (2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The inability to effectively communicate orally led students to experience feelings of anxiety, shame and inferiority</li> <li>• East-Asian students employed silence as a coping mechanism out of fear of speaking in class</li> <li>• Students associated themselves with their co-nationals due to the inability to effectively speak English</li> <li>• East-Asian students' silence led non-Asian ESL students to feel uncomfortable with the amount of talking they did in class</li> </ul>
Cheng, Myles and Curtis (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leading class discussions rated by students as most difficult and most important skill to have</li> </ul>
Hung and Hyun (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' academic experiences affected by lack of academic English literacy, especially in classroom activities and identity formation</li> <li>• Lack of content knowledge and of language proficiency shaped students' identity of less knowledgeable classroom members</li> <li>• Improved language competence allowed students to be more assertive and to acquire more subject-specific knowledge</li> <li>• Students later perceived participating orally as more important and worried less about making mistakes</li> </ul>
Kim (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students most concerned about leading class discussions and participating in whole-class discussions</li> </ul>

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Lee (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' classroom oral participation affected by various factors, including lack of academic language</li> <li>• Students' level of proficiency in English inadequate for oral participation despite passing internationally recognised language tests</li> <li>• Different cultural and educational practices affected students' oral participation</li> <li>• Students' competence perceived as inferior due to non-native-speaker status</li> <li>• Lack of content knowledge, shy personality and lack of communicative competence as major factors influencing students' perception of competence</li> <li>• Students attempted to present identity of more competence by preparing lines to say in advance</li> <li>• Students' silence motivated by different cultural understanding of oral contribution</li> <li>• Students expected instructors to invite them to participate orally</li> <li>• Silence employed when students' comments were ignored or cut off, but when comments were expanded by peers, oral contribution followed</li> </ul>
Li (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' lack of proficiency in academic language affected their successful adaptation and participation in class</li> <li>• Lack of academic language and prior acculturation with Chinese methods of learning and teaching as factors impeding students' classroom participation despite passing internationally recognised language tests</li> <li>• Students fell behind in understanding and following lectures</li> <li>• Students' identity of less competent due to lack of academic language skills</li> <li>• Students attempted to present identity of more competence by reading textbook before class</li> <li>• Students changed study habits and study schedule</li> <li>• Tape-recording lectures, asking friends and instructors for help as strategies to help cope with challenges</li> </ul>
Liu (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Though student passed both TOEFL and IELTS, the lack of academic language prevented her from understand her peers and professors in class</li> <li>• Student perceived herself as stupid and less competent due to lack of language proficiency</li> </ul>
Marlina (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in tutorials was contextually shaped, and especially influenced by tutors' response to students' comments</li> <li>• Silence employed when students' comments were ignored or cut off by their <i>tutors</i>, but when comments were acknowledged, oral contribution followed</li> </ul>

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Morita (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students faced major challenges negotiating identity, power and competence to participate in class due to lack of language proficiency</li> <li>• Classroom participation affected by issues of power, identity and competence</li> <li>• Peripherality and legitimacy must be present in academic communities in order for ESL students to be able to integrate and participate in them</li> <li>• Due to a lack of proficiency in English, students' identities were often perceived as of less competent</li> <li>• Some students negotiated better competence and identity by presenting themselves explicitly as ESL students with needs for accommodation</li> <li>• Students' passiveness in the classroom motivated by language anxiety along with several other factors which varied according to the classroom context</li> <li>• Silence as a response to the inability to follow fast-paced discussions and to jump into discussions</li> <li>• Students employed strategies to mitigate participation and membership issues: speaking in earlier stages of a discussion, introducing personal perspectives into discussion themes, preparing points to say in advance, expressing openly the desire to participate in class discussions</li> <li>• Students withdrew themselves from activities in which their assigned roles were of less competent members</li> <li>• A student requested the instructor to accommodate her needs, though this could not be achieved</li> </ul>
Ostler (1980)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students reported having insufficient speaking proficiency to conduct conversations with professors and their peers</li> </ul>
Pawanchik, Kamil, Hilmi, and Baten (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaking as second most important skill for academic success, but less than half of students saw it as important for participating in class discussions</li> </ul>
Seo and Koro-Ljungberg (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-class peer interaction unsuccessful due to students' lack of communicative competence in English</li> <li>• Students had major challenges participating in class due to insufficient language proficiency (e.g. issues around participating in group work and classroom presentations)</li> </ul>

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Tatar (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' classroom participation influenced by educational, environmental and linguistic factors</li> <li>• Students' participation affected by different educational and cultural practices (e.g. teacher-centeredness and discouraged oral participation in Turkish schools) along with insufficient proficiency in English</li> <li>• Natives-speaker peers dominant in discussions</li> <li>• Students' non-native-speaker status in class excluded them from contributing orally</li> <li>• Oral contribution not perceived as important by ESL students</li> <li>• Students also negotiated new identities around better linguistic competence among co-nationals</li> <li>• Students' silence motivated by different cultural and educational understanding of oral contribution</li> <li>• Classroom discussions dominated by native-speaker peers, contributing to ESL students' silence</li> <li>• Students saw group work as an opportunity to start speaking and gradually change assigned identity of less competence based on language</li> <li>• Preparing questions to ask in class and other behavioural strategies employed to change the overall sense of participation</li> </ul>
Wright and Lander (2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• South East Asian students' verbal productions inhibited in the presence of Australian peers when in group work</li> </ul>
Wu, Garza and Guzman (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students faced a number of difficulties when they had to communicate orally in an academic setting due to insufficient language proficiency</li> </ul>
Zhou, Knoke and Sakamoto (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students had negative in-class experiences due to poor English and unfamiliarity with the Canadian educational system</li> <li>• The inability to participate orally in class led students to feel inferior than their peers</li> <li>• Low level of participation created in the students feelings of anxiety, frustration, depression, isolation, inferiority and loss of confidence</li> <li>• Unfamiliarity with Canadian educational practices as a contributing factor to students' inability to participate orally in class</li> <li>• Support offered by peers and instructors played a role in motivating students to participate orally in class</li> <li>• Students' listening and comprehension skills improved after some time in the English-speaking environment; however, pedagogical- and educational-related challenges still remained</li> </ul>