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Deyu Xing, Benjamin Bolden, and Sawyer Hogenkamp

Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

Situated within an increasing trend of globalization and internationalization, many universities pride themselves on the number of international students they recruit. At Canadian universities, there are more international students from China than any other country. However, Chinese international students tend to demonstrate lower spoken English proficiency than other international student groups. Research has shown that oral English proficiency significantly influences international students' academic acculturation, however, little research has examined what academic acculturation looks like for Chinese international students with limited spoken English proficiency. This study sought to understand the academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students with limited spoken English proficiency. We employed a musically enhanced narrative inquiry approach, building on traditional narrative research methods by utilizing sound and music to re-tell participants' stories. Data were collected through arts-informed interviews with six Chinese international students, and analyzed through both narrative and musical restorying, resulting in the creation of literary and musical narrative representations. The findings contribute to the understanding of international students' academic acculturation by giving authentic voice to their stories and communicating them through musically enhanced representations. These evocative representations can affect audiences in new ways, engendering resonance and understanding through the unique use of sound and music.

During orientation week I had no idea what the Canadian students around me were laughing about. I just followed them around, feeling awkward and frustrated. When we had a group dinner together, the Canadian students were all chatting and laughing with each other. But I just sat there, among a big table of people, not understanding what they were saying. Occasionally I could grasp a sentence or two but by the time I had finished thinking about how to respond, they had already moved on to something

new. I finally opened my mouth only to find myself not able to say anything. Voiceless.
So I just sat there, silently. I felt like I was a transparent person sitting amongst them.
Although they seemed to be right beside me, within reach, they were a world apart,
thousands of miles away from me. I thought to myself, "What am I going to do? How
am I going to live a life like this?"

—Kevin

"To live is to have personal relationships" (Lafollette, 1996, p. 4). To have personal relationships, one has to communicate—in most cases, orally. When one suddenly lives in a foreign English-speaking country, with limited capacity to speak English, forming relationships can be extremely difficult. Without those relationships, it is easy to feel alone and lost, or just like Kevin.

International students' academic acculturation

In the current era of globalization, recruiting international students has become a common practice in higher education around the world (Meng, Zhu, & Cao, 2018). In response, a number of studies have been conducted in the past two decades to understand the factors and experiences that influence international students' academic acculturation in foreign institutions (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In 2008, Cheng and Fox (2008) defined international students' academic acculturation as "the dynamic adaptation processes of linguistically and culturally diverse students engaging with the academic study cultures" (p. 309). This process involves a complex and idiosyncratic interplay between academic and nonacademic experiences, heavily influenced by language proficiency (Chen, 1999; Cheng & Fox, 2008). For the purpose of this work, we conceptualize international students' academic acculturation as a dynamic psychological adaptation process (Berry, 1997) involving a complex and idiosyncratic interplay between academic and nonacademic experiences (Cheng & Fox, 2008) impacted by language proficiency (Chen, 1999).

In an extensive review of the literature concerning academic acculturation experiences of international students, Smith and Khawaja (2011) considered 94 studies, 81 quantitative, and 13 qualitative. Their analysis revealed that acculturative stressors commonly encountered by international students include language proficiency stressors, educational stressors, sociocultural stressors, practical stressors, and discrimination. However, an earlier review by Chen (1999), focused on international students enrolled in postsecondary studies in Canada and the United States, identified that among all the common acculturative stressors encountered by international students language proficiency was salient, because it interacted with other stressors in academic and nonacademic settings. The

inability to communicate using English could have "strong and long-lasting impact on international students' self-concept and other related cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects" (Chen, 1999, p. 51) during their transition into the host culture. A significant positive relationship exists between English language proficiency and international students' successful academic acculturation (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012). Students who have inadequate language proficiency are vulnerable during their academic acculturation (Aubrey, 1991).

Globally, more international students originate from China than from any other country (Meng et al., 2018). In addition, research suggests that Chinese international students are more likely to experience acculturative stress due to limited English proficiency than other international students: Wang et al. (2012) discovered that Chinese international students in the USA experienced more difficulties in adaptation and social integration due to their lower English competence than their European counterparts, while Spencer-Oatey, Dauber, Jing, and Lifei (2017) found that non-Chinese international students regarded Chinese students' English proficiency as a strong barrier for their social integration and adaptation.

The number of host culture friends that international students have in a new social environment is a major factor for them to acculturate successfully (Hong, Fox, & Almarza, 2007; Sam, 2001). Among the four skills of language proficiency (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), speaking is particularly important for international students' adaptation and integration into the host community; the inability to speak the host language fluently is a primary inhibiter for international students to develop intercultural friendships (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Although evidence therefore suggests that oral language proficiency is particularly salient to successful academic acculturation, to date existing research on international students' academic acculturation has predominantly considered language proficiency as a whole. There is a dearth of research on the academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students with low *oral* English proficiency and how limited *oral* English impacts their academic acculturation in English-language institutions.

Given the increasing number of Chinese international students worldwide and their oft-reported stressful academic acculturation experiences, there is an ongoing need to further explore the factors that influence Chinese international students' academic acculturation (Meng et al., 2018). Smith and Khawaja (2011) have identified in particular a lack of qualitative examination of the issue. For the reasons detailed above, we felt it was most pertinent to focus our qualitative inquiry on Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency, and how low oral English particularly influences their academic acculturation. Accordingly, we designed

a qualitative study to understand the academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency within a mid-sized Canadian English-language post-secondary institution. The study was structured as a musically enhanced narrative inquiry (Bolden, 2017).

Musically enhanced narrative inquiry

As the name implies, musically enhanced narrative inquiry (MENI) is grounded in narrative inquiry, a widely employed and effective methodology for understanding and representing human experiences in the field of education (Clandinin, 2000). Building upon the core practices of narrative inquiry, MENI involves working sonically with participants' spoken words and voices to generate musical representations that complement traditional narrative research methods (Bolden, 2008).

While narrative inquiry has mainly relied on literary forms, all forms of artistic expression are ultimately forms of storytelling (Bresler, 2006). Within the emerging field of sound studies (e.g., Gallagher, 2016; Gershon, 2013), sound has been utilized to express and represent human experiences (Droumeva, 2015; Gershon & Van Deventer, 2013; Wargo, 2018) and offered as a vehicle to map and provoke feeling, significance and meaning embodied in human experiences (Gallagher, 2016). In the intersection of sound studies and educational research, much work has been done to address questions of silence, culture, and equity (Daza & Gershon, 2015; Wargo, 2018) using sound as a means of representing human experiences that "avoid ocular binaries of framing" (Daza & Gershon, 2015, p. 639). Sounded narratives (Gershon & Van Deventer, 2013) provide opportunities to "listen to the tone, tenor, pitch, emotion, and ideas in ways that are not possible in text" (Gershon & Van Deventer, 2013, p. 102), enabling the capture and communication of nuances in the voices of participants' stories that would otherwise be neglected (Bolden, 2017).

We chose to employ sound and music to further represent participants' narratives with the hope and belief that the provocative power of music and sound could help us achieve the fundamental purpose of qualitative inquiry: promoting empathic understanding, which "involves resonance, an embodied state of mind that is cognitive and at the same time, affective and corporeal" (Bresler, 2006, p. 25). Connecting sound to meaning can provide a powerful mechanism for eliciting memory and emotions (Gallagher, 2016; Trainor, 2010), and music has long been utilized to enhance storytelling because of its tremendous capacity to represent and evoke emotion across cultures and contexts (Bolden, 2017). The personal academic acculturation stories of Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency are emotionally complex stories. Telling their

stories with music representations offers profound possibilities to foster deeper understanding and to build connections between participants, researchers, and audiences (Bolden, 2008; Leavy, 2015).

Recruitment and participants

We recruited participants from a mid-sized Canadian university where English is the language of instruction. Utilizing our personal contacts and soliciting help from the university's International Center and School of English, we informed Chinese international students at the university about the study. Eventually, three participants were recruited through email responses to recruitment posters and three through personal contacts. All six Chinese international students were attending university classes. We used students' admission language proficiency test scores as a sampling criterion to identify their low oral English proficiency. All participants' Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) speaking scores were at or below the minimum requirement for admission into the undergraduate program. (Often international students are offered conditional acceptance even though their language scores fall below the minimum requirements, with the condition that certain language courses be completed before beginning or during the program of study.)

Data collection

Arts-informed semi-structured interviews

We conducted one-on-one interviews (rather than group interviews or focus groups) to allow us to hear the individual voices of the participants, unencumbered by influences of their peers, as personal stories can contain information that people may withhold in a more public context (Morgan, Ataie, Carder, & Hoffman, 2013). Semi-structured interviews enabled flexibility for capturing voices and experiences (Rabionet, 2011). We conducted the interviews in Chinese, because the participants were, of necessity, low in oral English proficiency, and it was important that they use the language with which they felt most comfortable and were most likely to be able to communicate the full richness of their experiences.

To enhance participants' expressions of their experiences, we incorporated arts-based interviewing informed by artistic artifacts to compensate for "the limitations of verbally based research methods for understanding and capturing the multidimensionality of lived experience" (Blodgett et al., 2013, p. 312). Prior to the first interview, participants were asked to choose or create a piece or multiple pieces of art to represent some aspect or

aspects of their academic acculturation experiences. Then, during the interview, we asked the participants to explain how the art works represented their experiences, to ensure that our interpretation of the art works was responsive to their own meanings and associations (Bagnoli, 2009).

Data collection procedures

One preliminary interview was conducted with each participant in person. After preliminary analysis of data from the first interview, one follow-up interview was conducted to further probe themes that emerged from the data. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. All transcripts were sent to the participant to verify that the transcription accurately captured what the participant meant.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data was conducted through the process of re-storying, in keeping with narrative inquiry methods (Creswell, 2007). The re-storying involved (a) transcribing interview conversations into transcripts (in the language used by participants, i.e., Chinese); (b) coding significant text segments from the interview transcripts using general inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006); and (c) organizing the coded text into a sequence for re-storying that highlighted and illuminated the most important themes.

Simultaneously, we carried out the processes associated with the "musically enhanced" aspect of the narrative inquiry (Bolden, 2008). We worked with the audio data using digital audio software to listen to and consider the interview recordings many times. Analyzing this sound dimension of the data enriched our literary analytical processes of theming and re-storying. The intonation, pauses, and subtle meanings borne in participants' voices told us things that the transcribed texts could not. This process enabled us to confirm existing themes from the literary analysis and identify new emergent themes from the audio dimension of the data.

Ultimately, the goal of working with the data acoustically was to craft musical representations that re-told participants' stories in their own words and illuminated the most significant themes. First, we used digital audio software to organize participants' recorded words into an audio story that best communicated the essence of each theme. Next, we composed music that corresponded to the audio story and represented our interpretation of it. Then, we situated the audio story within the composed music to further represent and communicate the participants' stories and our interpretations. Because participants spoke in Chinese, we incorporated English translations into the musical representations so that the pieces would be accessible to English-speaking audiences.

By the end of the analysis process we had generated end products to represent the experiences of the participants in two modalities: written narrative pieces and musical/audio pieces that complement the written narratives. We composed seven musical representations, with each piece highlighting a different theme. We also composed and recorded a theme song as a distillation and synthesis of themes present in all the participants' experiences. In the following section, we share the themes from the narratives, report the composing process of each musical representation, and provide permanent links to the digital audio files, so that readers can access the musical narrative representations in addition to reading the text.

The sound of silence

To protect the privacy of the participants, any use of the data conceals all identifying information such as names and locations mentioned. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. Participants' original voices were also distorted digitally to minimize identification possibility.

Theme one: excitement and shock

Please use the following link to access the musical representation for the theme:

https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/12/28/MENI-Theme—Excitement-and-Shock

Composing process

In this piece, we used an uplifting piano flourish to communicate the feeling of optimism and excitement participants held for their international education journey when they first arrived in Canada. Then, we used a contrasting piano melody to suggest the painful undertone of the unexpected discrepancy between their optimistic outlook and the reality they encountered. Within the second half of the contrasting melody, we incorporated chord accents in the upper register to represent the unexpectedness and magnitude of the shock of this discrepancy. Finally, we used an abrupt ending, in a contrasting tonality, to further represent the shock of the unexpected reality.

Featured interview excerpts

Kevin: I was so excited when I first arrived here, drowning in the beautiful landscape of Canada. I felt so lucky to be able to study in such a wonderful

place. I was very enthusiastic about communicating with people around me. Everything seemed so exciting.

Kandy: But once I started to talk with people in English, I was shocked. It suddenly dawned on me that my spoken English was worlds apart from the English spoken by Canadians. Once the Canadian students started to talk, I was just totally overwhelmed, thinking in my head, "Oh my God! Why are they speaking so fast? Oh my God! Why? Why can't I speak?"

Theme: frustration and pain

Please use the following link to access the musical representation:

https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/12/28/MENI-Theme—Frustration-and-Pain

Composing process

In this piece, we used a very slow, sad minor piano melody. The chromatic motif represents the frustrations and psychological stress participants experienced as a result of the communication barriers they encountered. When the chromatic motif resolves upward, it represents painful emotions closer to the surface. The fully accompanied variation of the melody at the end represents pain of increased magnitude and indescribability.

Featured interview excerpts

Selina: It was extremely difficult to communicate with people in English. And everything seemed so frustrating after I came because I could not communicate. It's just like the tree in the picture, all barren. It has lost all its leaves, all barren. I lost everything I had in China, my social influence, my confidence, my voice … everything, just like that tree, all barren, all barren.

Nick: At the very beginning of my studies, one Canadian student asked me very curiously "Why do Chinese students always only hang out with other Chinese students?" Canadian students might think Chinese students do not want to hang out with them, but it is the opposite. It's just that when I constantly found myself not able to say things that I wanted to say, I felt frustrated. The more excited I was to talk, the more frustrated I got. That feeling of being unable to even open your mouth to talk like a normal person is beyond what words can describe. That kind of pain cannot be described in words; it can only be *felt*. That kind of pain cannot be described in words; it can only be *felt*.

Theme: anxiety and inferiority

Please use the following link to access the musical representation:

https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/12/28/MENI-Theme—
Anxiety-and-Inferiority

Composing process

In the first half of this piece, we used a flowing piano melody with contrasting note repetitions in the middle range to represent the unsettling, anxious feeling experienced by the participant. We embedded syncopated high notes to relate to the anxious tapping of feet in class. Then we used a slower melancholy melody to communicate the inadequacy of the participant's English proficiency compared to Canadian students and other international students. The descending progression swells to accentuate the weight of the participant's words. We ended on a crescendo to further represent and communicate the magnitude of the anxious and inferior feelings, and the heavy consequences of the participant losing her voice and respect due to her inability to speak.

Featured interview excerpts

Kandy: I got very nervous and anxious when talking to professors and other students. Because I knew I was supposed to participate by speaking English, but I also knew that I was not able to express myself in English. Then I got so anxious that I could not even sit still in class. I did not know where to look when talking, and I would nervously tap my feet when sitting in class.

Lisa: I felt I was not good enough compared to other Canadian students or other international students with sufficient oral English capacity. I felt like Canadian students and I were not equal anymore when I could not express myself. When I could not say what I thought and how I felt, I felt weak among them. I think only when one can express oneself can one truly exercise the right to speak. And only when that person's voice is heard can people really have respect for them.

Theme: loneliness and isolation

Please use the following link to access the musical representation:

https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/12/28/MENI-Theme—
Loneliness-and-Isolation

Composing process

In this piece we used a slow, hypnotic progression of middle-range minor chords to represent the sorrowful undertone of the participant's feeling of

being isolated from the Canadian community (in Canada) due to his inability to effectively communicate. We used meandering low range chords, and single high range, separated notes to accent the words directly associated with the theme, like "having no one to share with." We ended with very slow low-range piano chords to represent and communicate the saddening emotions resulting from the isolation faced by the participant due to his inability to communicate.

Featured interview excerpts

Kevin: When I was back in China, I was a very social person, making friends wherever I went. But in Canada I was forced to suppress my desire to talk because my limited spoken English would not allow me to talk. Sometimes, I really just wanted to talk to someone to make a friend or two, but after the general greeting of "Hello," I would just get stuck there, unable to say anything more. So I could not make friends with Canadian students and I always felt alone.

I had taken thousands of pictures of the fabulous landscape of Canada. But I had no one … I had no one to share them with around me.

During the orientation week, when we had the group dinner together, the Canadian students were all chatting and laughing with each other at the table. But I just sat there, struggling to understand what they were saying. Occasionally, I could grasp a sentence or two, but by the time I had finished thinking how to respond, they had already moved on to something new. Then I was not able to say anything. So I just sat there, feeling like an outsider, an invisible person, among a big table of Canadian students. Although they seemed to be right beside me, within my reach, they were still a world apart from me. I thought to myself, sitting there, "What am I going to do? How I am going to live a life like this?"

Although Canada seemed so beautiful, it did not feel like a world where I should be. It did not feel like a world where I should be.

Theme: helplessness and resignation

Please use the following link to access the musical representation:

> https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/12/28/MENI-Theme—Helplessness-and-Resignation

Composing process

For this piece, we used both solid and broken minor chords to represent the depressing experiences described. We used the "stratosphere" timbre to represent the overwhelming and engulfing feeling of helplessness. Then we embedded contrasting vibraphone sounds to accentuate key

descriptions directly related to resignation. Finally, we ended with a very slow lingering vibraphone melody to bring out the participant's questioning of people's understanding of her experience of helplessness and resignation.

Featured interview excerpts

Kandy: When you are home surrounded by your family, you feel like you have someone to fall back on. When you are all alone, far away from home, everything seems heavier.

But I couldn't tell anyone those feelings, because I didn't want my parents to worry or be disappointed with me. I couldn't talk about these feelings with other Chinese students around me either, because I felt they felt the same way and it would get too depressing for everybody if we started talking about those things too much.

Later on, I thought about using the counseling service but then I thought to myself: "It's English. I can't even talk with people in simple English. How am I going to talk to the counsellor?" I mean, I want to go talk about my problem of talking to make myself feel better but then I would find myself not even able to talk about my problem of talking. How would you feel? Of course, worse. So I gave it up. So I gave it up.

So I had to keep all those feelings to myself, though I felt like the person in *The Scream.* The most I could do to was just torture my beddings in my room alone when it got too hard and I wanted to smash things to vent. I couldn't even smash hard objects because I was afraid that the sound would attract attention. It was a really lame way to vent but also the only way.

When I was alone in my room, I would just sit there and think about those embarrassing and suffocating moments when I couldn't talk, and I just felt like I was not made to communicate in English with people. Then I started to close myself up.

Do you understand that?

Theme: awakening and regret

Please use the following link to access the musical representation:

https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/12/28/MENI-Theme— Awakening-and-Regrets

Composing process

In this piece, we used an underlying low-range minor chord progression as the musical foundation to represent the heaviness of the emotion. We used

higher pitched major chords to accent key moments of realization, concerning the misconceptions of overseas study and language education held by the participants, their parents, and their English teachers back in China. We ended with contrasting amplified high-pitched chords to further represent and communicate the awakening and painful regrets associated with the recognition of the participants' misguided preparation before their international study in Canada.

Featured interview excerpts

Amanda: I originally thought that my spoken English would improve really quickly after I came as I imagined that I would be listening to and speaking English every day by making lots of Canadian friends.

However, the reality in Canada was just the opposite of what I expected. I found my spoken English was at the very bottom of the bottom among the students around me in Canada. And I realized my English teachers back in China were not even speaking English but Chinese English the whole time. And they told me I spoke great English just because I got good grades for the tests.

Nick: I feel so regretful now. If I could go back in time, I would definitely change the way I learned English and prepared for my study in Canada. I would spend the time I spent on memorizing useless words on training myself to be better at speaking *real* English. If I were to be an English teacher when I went back to China, I would not teach my students test-taking skills because they are useless in real communication.

Theme: hope and uncertainty

Please use the following link to access the musical representation:

> https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/12/28/MENI-Theme—Hope-and-Uncertainty

Composing process

For this piece, we used a moderate tempo and major scale to create the motif for hope—the perceived possibility of oral English improvement participants held because of the English-speaking environment that surrounded them in Canada. Then we used contrasting low and high-range piano sounds at various points to represent participants' doubts and worries about whether or not this possibility could be transferred into reality. The piece ends with an amplified melody with chords to further represent the uncertainty that shadowed the hope participants held for their educational journey in Canada.

Featured interview excerpts

Lisa: I hope, with effort, I will be able to communicate with people confidently in Canada one day, becoming someone that I used to be again. I mean, I am already in Canada where people speak English all the time. If I still cannot improve my spoken English, it will be so embarrassing.

However, I cannot do this all by myself. I need help. If I continue to be isolated from the Canadian community, I do not think my spoken English is really going to improve. I am worried that my spoken English will still be as bad as it is now after I graduate.

Kandy: Although I feel it is easier to get along with Canadian students, my limited spoken English places a direct barrier for any interaction between us. I know only when I fix my pronunciation and fluency problems in English can I really make some international friends. But I don't know how to really fix these problems, especially pronunciation. For instance, Canadian students still think I am saying the word "dream" when I am actually saying the word "gym" even after being corrected repeatedly by them. It is so embarrassing and frustrating. I desperately want to fix it, but I don't have a clue about where and how to start.

Discussion

As mentioned at the outset of this article, international students' academic acculturation involves a complex and idiosyncratic interplay between academic and nonacademic experiences that are often impacted by language proficiency (Cheng & Fox, 2008). Through the analysis of participant data, it became apparent that the academic acculturation experiences of the six participants in this study were fraught with emotionally painful challenges; their oral English deficiency severely impacted their psychological well-being during their time studying in Canada. The findings of the study echo results reported in previous studies that raise serious concerns about mental health amongst Chinese international students in English-speaking countries (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015). Other studies of Chinese international students in English-speaking countries have, like us, reported themes such as shock and isolation from the host community (e.g., Yi, 2004; Zhang & Beck, 2014). However, we believe our research makes a unique contribution. While elsewhere these themes have been reported, we have aimed in our work to not only report but to provide vivid and evocative descriptions of the harsh, poignant, and even tragic lived academic acculturation realities the participants experienced. By doing so, we hope to emphasize the seriousness of the issue and shed light on the factors and mechanisms that are at play, thereby helping stakeholders identify how to better support Chinese international students.

What the findings reveal

While many of our findings were expected, we did not anticipate the intensity and magnitude of the psychological reactions the students described. Even though we knew from previous literature that Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency were likely to experience acculturation stress, this study brought us a little closer to understanding what the stress felt like for participants and what caused it. During her interview Kandy explained how helpless and anxious she felt struggling to acculturate into a new English-speaking world, then asked, "*Do you understand that?*" Through our sonic narratives, we ask listeners and ourselves the same question—Do we really understand what Kandy and the other participants were experiencing? Have we really listened closely to what they had to say?

  We propose that the impossibility of closing one's ears offers the possibility for us to listen more closely and fully to our participants' experiences (Daza & Gershon, 2015). *Listening* to the voices of the students silenced by their inability to express themselves within their English-dominated academic and social contexts enabled us to *hear* the "silent scream" for help. We hope that our sonic representations similarly communicate at least some of what we heard to others who take the time to listen. We heard, for example, that the international students with low oral English proficiency in this study were not just isolated from the host community, as common sense would likely enable us to expect—they were in dire need of help and support that they had no means to access.

  Furthermore, certain reported factors contributing to the helplessness described by participants were surprising. It might seem reasonable that international students could look to support from domestic family and friends and same-culture peer groups in their institution. However, our data indicated the opposite. Instead of providing empathy and comfort, the previously supportive domestic systems turned into additional stressors. Because participants' families and friends held misconceptions regarding participants' oral English proficiency and international study, they were not able to make sense of the participants' frustrating academic acculturation experiences. As a result, participants either stopped communicating or lied about their academic acculturation difficulties to avoid conflicts and embarrassment. As for same-culture peers in their institutions, even though participants sought community with other Chinese international students, they chose not to discuss painful experiences for fear of bringing each other into a downward spiral. Instead, they focused on "lighter things to chat about" (Kandy). Consequently, relationships with same-culture peers did not alleviate the stress of the frequent academic acculturation challenges. And finally, while the university did offer counseling support to all

students, the participants' limited oral English proficiency rendered counseling support useless.

Another noteworthy finding for us was the participants' surprisingly high confidence—before they arrived in Canada—in their potential to thrive in an international study context. This misplaced sense of confidence was the result of a false assessment of their oral English capacity and a lack of understanding of the academic acculturation challenges they would face. In China, the participants experienced an English language learning system that focused almost exclusively on reading, writing, and testing scores. Participants who received good scores were praised by their English teachers and parents and so assumed that their English was proficient in all aspects, without realizing that their oral English learning had been ignored. Consequently, when participants came to Canada and encountered extreme difficulty communicating in oral English, the harsh reality shattered their confidence, leading to frustration, vulnerability, and stress.

Implications

The findings from this study have implications for various stakeholders, including host institution policy makers, educators, and support service personnel who work with international students. In addition, the findings have implications for Chinese international students and English language educators in the Chinese context.

Implications for host institution policy makers, educators, and support service personnel

The findings of this study suggest that policy makers should reconsider university admission language proficiency test score requirements. It is clear that low oral English proficiency is significant in negatively impacting international students' academic and nonacademic experiences; a more stringent requirement for the *spoken* score of the English proficiency tests utilized for admission decisions should be considered, as opposed to focusing only on the overall score of a language proficiency test (comprising listening, writing, reading, and speaking) or requiring a lower spoken English score in relation to other components of the test. All participants in this study experienced substantial academic acculturation stress and difficulties due to their limited oral English capacity. A low oral English score requirement for international admission sends a misleading message to prospective international students regarding the importance of oral English capacity for their study in English-speaking institutions, and what is needed for their successful academic acculturation. As Nick regretfully shared, "had I known

that my life here would be this difficult and restricted, I would have chosen to stay in China for a better education and life."

Meanwhile, faculty and staff in higher learning institutions need to be able to access professional learning opportunities that help them understand and mitigate the challenges that students with low oral English proficiency face in academic contexts. For example, the group project grading practice (reported by Nick) based on oral participation was inherently disadvantaging to international students with limited oral English capacity. Superficial understandings of international students are unlikely to result in meaningful academic accommodations that truly honor inclusivity and equity.

Furthermore, particular attention needs to be paid to the thoughtful design of support programs intended to reach international students. Given that international students on campus may have low oral English proficiency, programs such as academic and personal counseling need to be made available in ways that can bypass the inherent communication barriers. Multilingual staff support and counseling services, for example, would have been hugely beneficial to the participants in our study.

Additionally, findings from this study suggest that participants' connections to other Chinese students with similarly low oral English capacity were not effective in supporting academic acculturation. Similarly, connecting participants to native Canadian volunteers in language programs was not helpful either, as participants found it hard to learn the oral English basics that they were missing from native speakers, and to form meaningful relationships with them due to the communication barriers. Instead, effort could be made to connect new Chinese international students with senior Chinese international students with high oral English proficiency, who have acculturated successfully into the host community. This kind of connection could enable successfully acculturated senior international students to offer strategies that had helped them achieve oral English proficiency and navigate the foreign context.

Implications for Chinese international students and English language educators

Many Chinese students pursue international study (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). To be admitted into English-language institutions, Chinese students are generally required to achieve a certain score on an English language proficiency test such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Parents tighten their budgets and save as much as they can to pay for expensive test preparation classes that accurately predict test items (Matoush & Fu, 2012). Unfortunately, the driving motivator for these test preparation companies is economic; they seek to improve learners' test

scores to justify the tuition fees they demand. Until the market demands achievement in *oral* English language capacity, the test preparation companies' practices are unlikely to change. Therefore Chinese international students and parents must be cognizant of the limitations of test preparation and test centers, and balance test preparation with authentic language learning; English *speaking* must be meaningfully addressed, alongside listening, reading, and writing. Chinese parents and students must understand the detailed academic acculturation realities faced by Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency overseas and the impact spoken English has on their international study during their international education planning stage. Participants in our study suggested that future parents or students planning on international studies seek true and authentic accounts of overseas studies experiences, instead of relying on international education advertisements. Only when Chinese parents and students fully understand the realities of international study will they be able to make well-informed English language learning decisions.

This study also has implications for ESL teacher training in China. ESL teachers need specific professional training for teaching the oral component of English, so that they are able to help students communicate in authentic spoken English rather than what the participants described as "Chinglish" (a blend of Chinese and English). From the accounts of our participants, it was evident that their decade-long compulsory English language education included a great deal of "Chinglish." The participants reported that their teachers in China were not able to identify what authentic English sounded like, or what strategies were effective to help students achieve oral English proficiency. Only when the teachers are better equipped to educate students regarding oral English study will Chinese students be likely to achieve the oral English proficiency needed to facilitate their academic acculturation in English-speaking institutions.

Contribution of the musically enhanced narrative inquiry (MENI) approach

The MENI approach employed in this work builds on traditional forms of narrative inquiry by utilizing sound and music (Bolden, 2017). We believe the process of analyzing and composing representations through sound and music enabled us, the researchers, to promote empathic understanding, the fundamental purpose of qualitative inquiry, which "involves resonance, an embodied state of mind that is cognitive and at the same time, affective and corporeal" (Bresler, 2006, p. 25). Specifically, the MENI approach contributed to this study by enriching the analysis of the data and the representation of the findings.

Working artistically with the data enriched our analysis in two ways. Our understanding of the data was enhanced by (a) repeatedly listening

to the participants' words and voices, and (b) examining and reconsidering the meaning within the stories from a musical perspective.

As an inherent aspect of crafting the MENI representations, we listened repeatedly to the participants' words. The addition of this sound dimension to the data enriched our analytical process of theming and re-storying. Specifically, we were able to pay close attention not only to the participants' words, but to the way they *spoke* those words. We realized that the intonation, pauses, and subtle denotations borne in the participants' voices could convey meanings that the transcribed texts could not (Bolden, 2017; Gershon & Van Deventer, 2013). When we went back to read the transcripts, the participants' voices were in our ears, informing the literary identification of themes. This iterative process of going back and forth between working analytically with the data in the musical and audio context versus the literary and written text context enabled us to identify and highlight meanings that would otherwise have been neglected.

Furthermore, our understanding of the data was enhanced by examining and reconsidering the meaning within the participants' stories from a *musical* perspective. As we crafted the MENI representations of the data, our artistic process required us to consider and test the match between the meaning conveyed by the participants' spoken words and by the music we were carefully composing. The process of art making therefore required a further exploration and interrogation of the data, thus developing our understanding of them.

In addition to enhancing our analytical capacity to identify the meanings of the participants' stories, the MENI approach enriched our ability to communicate what we learned, not only through written words but also through eight sound compositions that feature the authentic voices and words of participants supported and framed by music intentionally composed to highlight their significance.

We believe the musical representations, allowing audiences to access the stories through the modality of sound, will bring them closer to the participants' lived experiences. By utilizing music in the presentation of participants' stories, we can potentially affect audience members—engender resonance and empathy—in ways not available through other forms of communication (Leavy, 2015). Our hope is that the musical compositions will inform and engage listeners in an active process of meaning making—that they will evoke and provoke emotion, thought, and action, as arts-informed research is supposed to do (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Validity and trustworthiness

By sharing the sonic representations of this study, we invite readers to listen to our exploring, understanding, and telling of our participants' narratives. It

is crucial to acknowledge that these representations of participant words and stories include the influence of our own interpretations and voices. As Gershon noted, "sounded representations are as manipulated as any other kind of representation, necessarily incomplete, and are intentional acts of interpretation and translation" (2013, p. 259). We recognize that the sonic representations we offer include inherent manipulation as a result of our composition processes, in which participant words were transformed through our processes of analysis, interpretation, and representation in and through music. In addition, the process of translating participant words from Chinese to English and dramatically reading the translated words involved another undeniable layer of manipulation. We acknowledge overtly that composing music to people's words has the potential to change their meanings. We also recognize that the musical representations may well be more a representation of composer/artist/scholar than participants; we present their stories as filtered through us. Furthermore, even though there are repeating affective and interpretive tendencies of sound—which we have intentionally employed in our representations to highlight the meanings we identified in the participant data—these tendencies could unfold differently in the audience's context (Gallagher, 2016). Listeners may perceive meanings and interpretations we did not intend; perception is in the ear of the beholder. However, the goal of employing sounds in narratives is not triangulation, nor is it to arrive at a certain form of truth claims of our participants' stories (Wargo, 2018). As with any narrative inquiry and sounded studies, this study was not meant for pursuing "truths," but for opening up understanding and possibilities (Bolden, 2017; Gershon & Van Deventer, 2013). Our aim in utilizing music and sound in this work was to employ the power of music and sound to evoke affective responses that may open up more understanding of and empathy for the stories of the participants.

Validity, the believability of a knowledge claim of research is not "inherent in the claim but is a characteristic given to a claim by the ones to whom the claim is addressed. Thus any knowledge claim is not intrinsically valid; rather, its validity is a function of intersubjective judgment" (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 474). It is the audience that makes the judgment as to whether or not a knowledge claim is plausible based on the evidence reported by the researcher (Torrance, 2013). Therefore, the validity of a study is assured if a knowledge claim is supported with sufficient evidence for the audience to reasonably believe it is so (Barone & Eisner, 2012). We hope that the evidence we have reported, that is, the participant words and stories, have been sufficient to support the claims we have made about the students' experiences of academic acculturation.

Researcher bias, that is, the thoughts and expectations brought to the data collection and analysis by the researcher, is a challenge inherent in qualitative

research. To address this challenge, we paid careful attention to acknowledging our own impact upon the data, and ensuring that the analysis rang true to the actual lived experiences of the participants and the personal meaning they were attributing to those experiences. Various strategies, described below, were built into this study to ensure the narratives reported achieved verisimilitude and rang true, thereby crediting the study with trustworthiness and validity (Loh, 2013).

To enhance trustworthiness, interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions to allow participants' voices to emerge, thereby guarding against simply eliciting the data we had expected. Artifacts' interpretations were directly acquired from participants' descriptions instead of our personal interpretations. Member checking was built in throughout the analysis process to assist in ensuring that the participants' own voices were heard and the text was not primarily the researchers' own creation. All transcripts (in Chinese) were sent back to participants for verification and revision to increase the likelihood that they captured what participants meant in interviews. All re-storied narratives (in Chinese) were sent back to participants for verification that they conveyed the meanings participants held for their experiences. Lastly, we provide detailed description of our composing process to communicate to the audience our intended meaning of the composed music to minimize confusion. We utilized these strategies to enhance the verisimilitude of the human experiences we researched and subsequently represented.

By combining traditional narrative methods with MENI processes, we not only gained a deeper understanding of the stories of our participants but also more importantly, we *heard* and *felt* their stories and the urgent need to share them. As with any qualitative study, the findings from this research are not meant for generalization, but we hope the emotions that we have felt in carrying out this work and creating these pieces will transfer to listeners, and so help to enrich their understanding of the lived experiences of our participants.

Contributors

Deyu (Cindy) Xing is a recent M.Ed. graduate in the Faculty of Education at Queen's University, Canada. She earned both her B.Ec. and B.A. at Beijing Foreign Studies University in China prior to Queen's. Her research interests include at-risk learners who thrive, family and parenting, international students' academic acculturation, and second language acquisition.

Dr. Benjamin Bolden, music educator and composer, is an associate professor and UNESCO Chair of Arts and Learning at Queen's University, Canada. His research interests include creativity, arts education systems around the world, the learning and teaching of composing, arts-based research, teacher education, teacher knowledge, and teachers' professional learning.

Sawyer Hogenkamp is an Ontario Certified Teacher and holds a M.Ed. from Queen's University, Canada. He also holds a B.Ed. from Queen's University and a B.A. from the University of Waterloo. His research interests include music education, bullying and peer aggression, school transportation, and school climate.

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