The Process of Oral Academic Discourse Socialization and Workplace Enculturation of International Graduate Students of Business

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The Process of Oral Academic Discourse Socialization and Workplace Enculturation of

International Graduate Students of Business

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Abstract

This study addresses the process of oral academic socialization that learners of a second language and culture undergo to succeed in disciplinary graduate courses. The participants were students from Mainland China and Taiwan pursuing an International Master of Business Administration (IMBA) degree at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL). Guided by social constructivist and language socialization theories, this ethnographic case study investigated factors that facilitated oral academic discourse socialization of speakers of Chinese. A group of eight IMBA Chinese and Taiwanese students studied their first academic year in their home country before transferring to study abroad in the U.S. to complete their graduate degree. After the beginning of their second semester of studies in the U.S., they shared their experience of adapting to oral academic discourse in the classroom and workplace over a period of eight months. The participants reflected on sociocultural differences in education, challenges they encountered, and coping strategies in their disciplinary studies through a second language and culture. Following the academic coursework, five of the same participants began an internship in St. Louis, of which they shared their challenges and strategies working in a second language and culture. They also reflected on how these experiences compared to their academic classes. Data were derived from focus groups, individual interviews, reflective journals, and field notes from class observations. Drawing on data analysis rooted in grounded theory, findings from transcripts and notes were triangulated. Open and axial coding were used to identify features and themes of the socialization process in academic and professional settings. Keywords: oral academic discourse socialization, social constructivist theory, language socialization theory
Dedication

I dedicate this work to all my ESL students, past, present, and future. Their journey as second language learners in a new country is met with challenges and rewards. They teach me something new every day, for which I am grateful.
Acknowledgements

Writing a dissertation is a long, arduous process that requires the help of a village. I am indebted to the many who helped me on this journey.

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Chapter One

Introduction

An impetus for this study began when Ming (pseudonym), a Taiwanese IMBA student, approached me, frustrated. Ming shared she had a group work project in one of her business classes, but she felt unable to contribute. The native speakers spoke quickly, out of turn, and their dialogue overlapped. Then one student told her they had already arranged everything for the project, so she would not need to help them. Ming, however, wanted to contribute. She could speak English fairly well, but it appeared her communication needs extended beyond conversational skills.

Two semesters later, I sat in on an IMBA class, Business Law, in which Ming was enrolled. She sat in a corner with other international students from China and Taiwan. The instructor delivered an effective lecture with PPT slides and spoke clearly. However, there were some academic terms and concepts, phrasal verbs, idioms, and other vocabulary items probably unfamiliar to second language learners. For instance, the instructor offered an example about a farmer in Iowa who had a verbal agreement with Monsanto to sell his crops. He did not follow through and lost a lawsuit. I wondered to what extent the second language learners could understand terms such as “verbal agreement”, collocations as in “lose a lawsuit”, or the many phrasal verbs and idioms including “follow through” and “went off the cliff”. Do first-year international students know Monsanto/Bayer and its power and influence in the St. Louis region?

The instructor asked and answered questions to engage students in the learning process throughout the three-hour class. Most of the native speakers of English actively participated, all paid attention, and some offered additional perspectives and examples,
while none of the Asian students said a word. Some, like Ming, were attentive and followed the discourse. A few were distracted by their phones, perhaps texting or looking up words they did not know. During the break, the Asian students told me they understood the class content fairly well because the instructor spoke clearly. Still, to me, the native speakers received a learning richer experience. I realized that the challenges faced by international students might be more complex than faculty or even I, a Teaching Professor of English for Academic Purposes, had imagined. Difficulties for international graduate students may include the second language, academic and disciplinary vocabulary, lecture content, cultural differences in education, sociocultural ways of interacting, negotiation of identity in the new setting, academic assignments, and perhaps psychological obstacles. In short, many international graduate students encounter problems in the process of academic discourse socialization.

I chose to focus on the oral academic and workplace discourse socialization of a group of second language speakers, due to my interest in oral communication for academic and career success. In particular, I wanted to investigate factors specific to graduate students of Business, whose native language is Chinese, to ascertain how they navigate the process of acclimating to academic and professional situations in the U.S. Chinese make up the majority of the international students at UMSL, where I teach; Taiwan places fourth (D. West, personal communication, August 10, 2017). Insight into their adjustment to academic courses will enhance my practice and that of many other university professionals. In the U.S., there were 279,824 graduate students from Asia in 2015/2016, a 7.6% increase from the previous year; 123,250 were from China and 9,164
from Taiwan. 24.3% of all Chinese students and 19.8% of Taiwanese students come to major in Business (Open Doors, 2017).

I am also interested in how graduate business programs prepare students for the work environment. MBA graduates, with their knowledge of English, are likely to seek employment in international companies. In 2016, total trade of goods and services with countries that speak Chinese was $794.3 billion (Office of the United States Trade Representative, n.d.). An understanding of workplace socialization, the experiences, challenges and coping strategies of a newcomer to the language and culture, is necessary in this age of globalization.

**Background of the Problem**

International students contribute greatly to the United States economy and its institutions of higher learning. In 2015, they delivered $35.8 billion into the United States and are thus a significant financial resource for universities and surrounding communities. Most pay full tuition fees (Open Doors, 2017), and at state universities, non-resident fees are roughly three times that of resident fees. Besides needed revenue and job creation, universities receive additional benefits from recruiting and retaining international students, who bring a diversity of ethnicities, knowledge, and perspectives.

International students choose to study in the U.S. for various reasons that include the reputation of its research institutions, majors not offered in one’s home country, ease of admittance, and current teaching methods. International enrollments have risen from 386,851 in 1988/1989 to over 1,043,839 in 2015/2016, with Asian students representing 60% (Open Doors, 2017). Another draw for Asian students to study in English-speaking countries is the cross-cultural experience and fluency gained in English. Since it is the
international language most often used in trade, bilingualism is an asset in today’s increasingly global market. For admittance, most international students must pass a standardized exam of English proficiency, but these texts do not measure conversational and discipline-specific vocabulary, nor ability to participate orally (Lee, 2009). Plus, academic discussions require students to understand a variety of speech acts, field-specific academic vocabulary, and the sociopragmatics of group discussions in the target culture (Bardovi-Harlig, Mossman, & Vellenga, 2015).

Developing competencies in a foreign or second language can be a long, arduous process for adult learners, especially for those with little contact with native speakers in the new language and culture. Students learning a language containing different vocabulary and grammatical roots from their native language, such as Asian students, may face more difficulties than speakers of Indo-European languages and cultures. While academic writing is indeed difficult, listening and speaking in classes may be more challenging for second language speakers (Shi, 2011). Discussion topics are often spontaneous, not allowing a second language learner time to prepare language; thus, extemporaneous communication on complex topics is a difficult task. Sociocultural differences in speaking may also be perplexing, such as turn-taking, interruptions, agreement, and comprehension checks (Morita, 2000). The lengths of inter-turn pauses vary. Another difference in language use is silence, which may be used to be socially discreet, show respect, communicate emphasis, and avoid embarrassment.

A study comparing international students found those from China tended to interact less with U.S. students and experience weaker educational and social experiences (Rawlings & Sue, 2013). Chinese MBA students felt unprepared to speak in classes,
because they could not understand conversational English due to its idioms, phrasal verbs, slang, and various accents (Shi, 2011). Chinese students, raised in Confucian values of harmony, may also be reluctant to speak in classes for fear of wasting their classmates’ time (Parks & Raymond, 2004).

**Graduate Disciplinary Studies and Academic Discourse Socialization**

Graduate students face challenging academic tasks, including class presentations, research papers and projects, discussions of complex readings, meetings, writing a thesis or dissertation, and perhaps conference presentations and oral defenses. To succeed, students undergo a process through which one may “develop voice, identity, and agency” in studies, and “increasing competence in an academic way of knowing, speaking, and writing” (Ho, 2011, p. 576). This process, known as academic discourse socialization, encompasses much more than participation in classes. It is how newcomers to an academic discipline become competent participants. They may face issues of language comprehension and use, new expectations, membership, and different cultural norms. Research on academic discourse socialization views it as “a social, cognitive, and rhetorical process and an accomplishment, a form of enculturation, social practice, positioning, representation, and stance-taking” (Duff, 2010, p. 170). Studies claim the path to acclimation is quite complex in nature.

Both native and non-native speakers of English new to graduate studies may feel “insecure about their knowledge, skills, and performances” (Morita, 2000, p. 302). Some are uncomfortable initiating conversations in classes (Shi, 2011) and may experience struggles (Ho, 2011). However, non-native speakers are more likely to be challenged by written and oral requirements of disciplinary studies due to language and cultural barriers
(Morita, 2000). Being from another country, some may also lack background knowledge of topics including history, present and past current events, and cultural traditions. Thus, developing oral academic discourse socialization is more than just learning a second language to study abroad. It is “the process through which students learn about the conventions and practices of their field while carrying out academic-related oral tasks” (Ho, 2011, p. 438).

**Problem Statement**

Many international Asian graduate students in the United States are reluctant to speak in classes due to challenges adapting to both linguistic and Western sociocultural education practices in classroom discourse (Choi, 2015; Kim, 2006; Kim, 2013; Morita, 2000; Seloni, 2012; Shi, 2011). Low levels of oral participation may result in little exchange with native students, a diminished potential to increase oral fluency, lower grades, and challenges for instructors. Furthermore, a lack of socialization and acculturation can be detrimental to a student’s mental health, possibly resulting in depression (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; Hamamura & Laird, 2014; Poyrazli et al., 2004).

Early studies on academic discourse socialization of international graduate students focused on writing, especially in the beginning of this topic during the 1980s and 1990s (Morita & Kobayashi, 2008). Since 2000, there has been an increase in research on oral academic discourse socialization (Morita, 2000; Seloni, 2011) and the experience graduate students from Asia encounter. The literature on academic discourse socialization demonstrates that sociocultural differences in the classroom are overwhelming for international graduate students from Asian countries (Choi, 2015; Kim, 2002; Kim, 2006; Kim, 2013; Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2014; Lee, 2009; Morita, 2000, 2009; Samimy, Kim,
Lee, & Kasai, 2011; Seloni, 2012; Shi, 2011; Wyatt-Smith & Burke, 1996; Yanagi & Baker, 2015; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). In addition to issues of marginalization, other obstacles explored were silence (Choi, 2015) and academic literacy socialization (Hung and Hyun, 2010; Seloni, 2012). Use of strategies was shown to depend on both an individual’s personal investment and the social context (Parks & Raymond, 2004).

Qualitative studies generally have explored perspectives of the students. Orientations have included identity (Ahmandi, Samad, & Norrdin, 2013; Ho, 2011; Li, 2005; Morita, 2000; Morita, 2004), power (Morita & Kobayashi, 2008; Shi, 2011), overcoming challenges (Morita, 2004) and legitimate peripheral participation (Morita & Kobayashi, 2008). The process to oral discourse socialization is eased through group discussions (Parks & Raymond, 2004; Yanagi & Baker, 2015), presentations (Morita, 2000), and developing strategies outside of class that assist learning (Morita, 2009; Seloni, 2011) as well as developing networks (Chang, 2009; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). Asian graduate students did not participate in class discussions for individual reasons, but would join small group discussions (Choi, 2015; Ferris, 1998; Ho, 2011; Kim, 2006; Kim, 2013; Lee, 2009; Parks & Raymond, 2004). Nevertheless, sharing ideas in class discussions empowered students to develop new perspectives (Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2014). Long-term studies on the process of academic discourse socialization are few. Morita (2000) conducted an eight-month study on the effects of presentations on graduate students in Canada, two of which were Chinese and four Japanese, and another on a doctoral Japanese student in Canada’s strategies over a year (Morita, 2009).
Language socialization in workplace settings has received less attention than academic discourse socialization. Workplace enculturation occurs in corporate or institutional discourses, professional discourses, and their social contexts (Roberts, 2010). A review of literature on this topic revealed few studies were conducted on second language learners, and most of those researched immigrant communities in blue-collar work, such as factories (Duff, 2017). In this age of globalization, migration, and product changes, despite the demand for research on language socialization in professional contexts, few studies have been conducted due to the fact that employers are suspicious of outside researchers (Li, 2000; Roberts, 2010), especially in professional, white-collar settings, such as those of the IMBA interns.

International graduate students have claimed their participation in classes is influenced by differences in language, sociocultural classroom norms, individual characteristics, and the class environment (Lee, 2009). Furthermore, speaking skills required for academic discussions are challenging to many new international graduate students for linguistic, sociocultural, and personal reasons (Morita, 2000). Thus, the process of oral academic discourse socialization often presents difficulties in the academic pursuits of many international graduate students. Many such students pursue employment in an English-speaking country or will work with native-speakers of English, but little literature exists on transferring from academic to workplace environments.

The aforementioned gaps in the research of oral academic discourse socialization of international students include longitudinal studies of how challenges may change over time as one acclimates to a new language and sociocultural educational system. To date,
as best as I can ascertain from my search of academic journals including TESOL Journal, the Journal of Pragmatics, and Journal of English for Academic Purposes, no study has yet been conducted on oral discourse socialization on second language oral discourse socialization of transfer students within the same discipline. Few studies based their results on multiple interviews, and focus groups were rare. There is also little research on to what extent academic socialization relates to that of workplace socialization

**Research Questions**

My research addresses the following question: How do speakers of another language and culture adapt to oral communication in their academic courses and workplace settings? Specifically, I address the following sub-research questions:

- What linguistic and cultural challenges do transfer international graduate students from China and Taiwan face?
- What do transfer international graduate students from China and Taiwan experience in IMBA oral classroom discourse?
- What coping strategies do these individuals develop to overcome challenges and how do they change over time?
- How do previous disciplinary knowledge and experience impact performance in class and at work?
- How does the process of oral academic discourse socialization compare to and prepare one for workplace socialization?

**Significance of the Study**

This qualitative ethnographic case study of oral academic discourse socialization and subsequent workplace socialization of a group of international graduate students
whose native language is Chinese addresses gaps in the literature. Literature on the oral process is lacking, and thus researchers claim that more is needed on strategy use (Parks & Raymond, 2009), how Asian students learn English and develop social relationships (Liu, 2000), and oral academic activities across various contexts and over time (Morita, 2000). This study examines these issues and provides an in-depth view into the experience of second language learners in U.S. classroom discourse and oral communication in a workplace setting. While results may reveal implications for all MBA students, the participants were speakers of Mandarin Chinese.

It is important to learn more about acculturation and challenges of students of Chinese because they are significant to U.S. universities. The number of international students from China to the U.S. significantly increased from 2000 to 2014, roughly 500% (Redden, 2014), representing 31.5% of all the international students; Taiwan placed seventh at 2% (Open Doors, 2017). Moreover, besides being a cultural and intellectual resource for academic institutions, Chinese students contribute over $10 billion to the U.S. institutions and economy (Open Doors, 2017), so it is in the interest of universities to understand ways to serve and retain international students.

Immigration also affects academic and business settings. The number of Chinese immigrants was approximately 11 million in 2015; immigration to English-speaking countries was as follows: 2,420,000 were in the United States, 939,000 were in Canada, and 547,000 were in Australia (Zong & Batalova, 2017). Thus, insight into the challenges and solutions of workplace socialization of Chinese employees is indeed paramount.

This study contributes to the literature of oral academic discourse socialization and workplace socialization of second language speakers. As graduate students are
expected to enter a professional discipline upon graduation, insight into their process may be of interest to faculty and administrators who serve international populations. According to Gomes and Yasin (2016), today’s business environment is competitive, and oral communication is more important than ever. Business leaders need strong speaking skills to communicate with employees, suppliers, and customers. Nevertheless, Gomes and Yasin felt MBA programs fell short in incorporating communication skills in the curriculum. As the importance of oral communication skills and other aspects of language and discourse socialization grows, MBA students may face even larger challenges in future contexts.

Faculty might examine how their methods and practices serve to prepare students and develop ways to accommodate and engage international students in particular. Learning about other cultural perspectives will assist local students in their studies and careers in international business. Indeed, in this age of globalization, MBA programs are preparing future business professionals who need cross-cultural knowledge and intercultural communication competencies. Findings may also be of interest to linguists, new international students, international employees who transfer into a new linguistic and cultural work environment, and their employers.

**Definitions of Terms**

In the literature reviewed for this study, the term *socialization* is used with language socialization, academic discourse socialization, workplace socialization, and other concepts of a newcomer learning the norms of a group; in this study of second language socialization, the context is academic, disciplinary classes. The term *enculturation* is used in disciplinary enculturation, meaning that when one enters a
workplace, he or she learns the cultural norms, practice, values, and linguistic terms and styles of that particular organization. I use the term *workplace enculturation* as the process of learning how to navigate the job requirements and sociocultural norms and expectations when interacting with other employees at a company.

*Language socialization* in this research refers to learning a second language in a cultural context. International students learn language explicitly (i.e. looking up words or taking an ESL or EAP class) and implicitly through listening, speaking, reading and writing for academic purposes. In this research, the participants increased their fluency in English through learning content in graduate-level business classes, social interactions outside of class with peers in their apartment and at the gym, and in the workplace. They learned appropriate cultural behaviors and interactions of English in social contexts such as pragmatics of small talk or turn-taking in group discussions. *Social constructivist theory* is another framework referred to; it is explained in detail later, but in short, it is how learners use prior knowledge and experience to comprehend ideas and problem solve in a new social and cultural setting.

In this research, *oral academic discourse socialization* (occasionally shorted to *academic socialization*) refers to the process newcomers undergo to become competent in oral communication in graduate studies. Academic communication includes listening comprehension, asking and answering questions, and participating in group discussions. It also includes oral tasks not required for course work, such as making small talk with native speakers, seeking help outside of class, and increasing fluency as needed to live and study in a second language. *Periphery participation* refers to classroom engagement
that is non-verbal, including listening attentively, absorbing information, and observing interactions. It is a step prior to full engagement in discussions.

**Delimitations**

From February 2018 to September 2018, eight IMBA Chinese and Taiwanese students enrolled in graduate-level courses of business at UMSL participated in this study. Five entered internships in St. Louis, Missouri, after graduating. Data included two to four individual, face-to-face interviews with each participant, two group interviews, reflective journals, and field notes from observations of eight MBA classes. Interviews were transcribed. All the data were coded; inductive methods revealed themes which were organized into categories and themes.

**Limitations**

There were limitations in this study. There were only eight participants, and it is possible that more participants would shed a better understanding of the process of academic socialization and workplace enculturation. The participants were between an intermediate to low advanced range of English listening and speaking skills, so all struggled with listening comprehension of both academic and conversational English and with engaging in discussions. Stronger skills would have advanced the socialization process sooner as understanding lectures and questions was quite challenging. In addition, a more fluent group could have integrated more fully with local students and colleagues and expressed their perspectives more easily, possibly providing contextual variations for the study results. This group was also highly motivated to succeed in school and work. Not all international students and employees possess this same positive
attitude, so perhaps research conducted on less enthusiastic participants might yield more avoidance from communicating with native speakers.

In addition, I would have liked more participants from Mainland China, a major global trading partner with the U.S. Many of the viewpoints were from the six Taiwanese participants, who had little professional work experience. Internships were white-collar, but entry-level administrative positions, so perspectives of blue-collar or executive-level professionals or long-term employees are not revealed. Furthermore, a longer-range study of workplace enculturation would provide more depth into this important research of intercultural communication.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

This chapter addresses the theoretical frameworks for the study and a review of the literature. Similar to the focus of this research are longitudinal studies on oral academic discourse socialization, especially ones in which Asian international graduate students are interviewed more than once and share coping strategies developed to achieve academic success. I differentiate the terms enculturation and socialization. Next, the social constructivist approach and constructivist theories are discussed for the frameworks of this study: language socialization theory and Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory. Also reviewed are theories of community of practice, social network theory, and identity, which are also common theoretical frameworks of relevant studies on academic discourse socialization. I then present challenges of oral tasks and coping strategies. Finally, there is a summary of literature on workplace socialization including studies on language socialization, job interviews and identity formation.

Conceptual Framework from Related Literature

Language socialization theory, informed by Lev Vygotsky and other disciplines (Duff, 2010), was drawn upon to view the development of language fluency in English in disciplinary classes and workplaces. Language socialization can be defined as “the process by which children and other newcomers to a social group become socialized into the group’s culture through exposure to and engagement in language-mediated social activities” (Morita, 2000, p. 281). It aims to comprehend how one learns the language and how the use of the language is intertwined with topics of identity, ideologies, behaviors, and practice of a target group (Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). Studies conducted under
this conceptual theory explored learning a second language through engagement in a new academic community (Ho, 2011; Li, 2000; Morita, 2000, 2009; Roberts, 2010; Wang & Slater, 2016, Zappa-Hollman, 2007). The second theory that guides this study is social constructivist theory, derived from Vygotsky’s emphasis on cognitive development through socialization and culture (Mhouti, Nasseh, & Erradi, 2014). It investigates the participants’ experiences, challenges, and the extent to which they use previous knowledge and experience to construct methods to comprehend class content and solve problems through new cultural and social contexts. This theory has been used to understand struggles of identity, awareness of cultural differences, development of coping strategies, and adaptation to classroom discourse in a new culture, academic subject, and academic use of English (Hung & Hyun, 2010; Morita, 2009). In the following, I first clarify the definition of the key terms in this dissertation, enculturation and socialization. Then, I present the theoretical framework of social constructivist approach to language socialization with relevant literature review.

**Enculturation and Socialization**

As children grow, they undergo a process of “childhood enculturation (or socialization) of individuals into recognizable members of a given cultural community” (Kim, 2002, p. 261). Likewise, when a person enters a new culture, a process of resocialization begins. It involves both acculturation, which is learning new cultural habits, and deculturation, unlearning of old habits. The individual may then transform to the state of assimilation (Kim, 2007). Referred to as enculturation, or cross-cultural adaptation, it occurs in many types of situations in which newcomers enter an established community, be it in a new city, residential community, school, or place of employment.
Clarification of the difference between the terms enculturation and socialization may be useful as they are often used interchangeably. Disciplines vary in their definitions of the two terms; the origin of enculturation is in anthropology while the term socialization, becoming part of a group without emphasis on culture, is used in sociology (Shimahara, 1970). Anthropology and cross-cultural psychology view that enculturation is covert or implicit, learning by imitation, but socialization is overt or explicit, such as being taught in school or in a place of work. In the fields of psychology and sociology, enculturation includes both types of cultural learning (Ferguson, Costigan, Clarke, & Ge, 2016). Mead (1963) explained that enculturation is “the process of learning a culture in all its uniqueness and particularity” and that socialization is “the set of species-wide requirements and exactions made on human beings by human societies” (p. 187). Prior and Bilbro (2012) use the term academic enculturation to discuss how students adapt to studies, as opposed to the concept that knowledge is simply transmitted to students. Nevertheless, the terms are quite similar or the same in meaning in most fields and contexts.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Theories of second language acquisition generally focus on cognition, without taking socialization perspectives into account. Thus, sociocultural theoretical perspectives were considered a better choice than cognitive and psycholinguistic ones to explore how international Chinese MBA students learned adaptive strategies. “Constructivist/socioconstructivist orientations proved more apt to promote student interaction than transmission modes of teaching” (Parks & Raymond, 2004, p. 386). Research on second language socialization focuses on “the nature of interactions and the role they play in
socializing individuals into the different groups and social contexts in which they seek membership” (Zappa-Hollman, 2007, p. 460). A number of conceptual theories related to the influence of the social context on learning have thus developed.

**Language socialization.** In *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky (1986) wrote about thoughts and speech. While some psychologists feel they are separate or the same, he claimed they are connected. Inner speech, or thoughts, are not separate or the same as speech. Rather, they are a combination in that inner speech aids cognitive reasoning. Minds select what is essential and prepares these ideas for external verbal expression. He also discussed the concept zone of proximal development (ZPD), the development level one could achieve from a mentor. To illustrate, he conducted a study with two eight-year-olds at the same level of development in which both studied with assistance. One reached a twelve-year-old’s level, while the other only reached a nine-year-old’s level. ZPD is “the discrepancy between a child’s actual mental age and the level he reaches in solving problems with assistance” (Vygotsky, 1986, p.187). ZPD has influenced theories of language socialization and social cognitivism because the newcomer to a linguistic environment or discipline learns by those of higher expertise, such as a teacher or more fluent peer with whom one socializes. As a result, in group work where people possess various levels, novices learn from more experienced peers. This situation is thus considered highly effective for learning. Likewise, scaffolding content in instruction is also important.

The term language socialization theory was coined by Schieffelin and Ochs (1986), who claimed “the notion of language socialization draws on sociological, anthropological, and psychological approaches to the study of social and linguistic
competence within a social group” (p. 163). Thus, it stems from Vygotskian theories, but also draws on other disciplines. The authors emphasized that the learning of language and sociocultural aspects occurs simultaneously. Language socialization is the process of learning communicative competence, membership, and legitimacy in a new community of culture (Duff, 2007). Its goal is to learn the language, use of the language, identities, ideologies, behavior, and practice of a target group. In short, one learns the second language and about a society and culture through various situations in which one interacts; its focus is on second language development and identification with a group. For instance, Ho (2011) drew on the theory to examine how U.S. and international graduate students learn and practice academic discourse through group tasks. Through delivering oral presentations, second language graduate students increased their fluency and use of academic terms (Morita, 2000). Language socialization theory guided a study on how a linguistic feature improves through oral academic discourse socialization (Wang & Slater, 2016). Many other studies on oral academic discourse socialization have been guided under this theory, including Li, 2000; Morita, 2009; Roberts, 2010; and Zappa-Hollman, 2007.

**Social constructivist approach.** When the United States moved away from behaviorist theories around the 1960s, Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, and subsequently Lev Vygotsky, a Russian philosopher who had written much about psychology, came into focus. While Piaget saw children as alone in their cognitive development with little credit to socialization (Farnham-Diggory, 1992), Vygotsky claimed that their learning cannot be separated from a social context since humans internally construct new experiences through contacts and in contexts with others.
Cultural-historical psychology, which is now known as sociocultural theory, is a developmental theory by Vygotsky (1978). This popular theory focuses on the influence of culture on learning, and from it, other theories have emerged.

Constructivism has become an umbrella term for diverse constructivist theories, and all of them generally hold that “learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge” (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, p. 2). In the classroom, knowledge does not simply transfer from an instructor communicating to a student. Rather, instruction supports the construction of knowledge. Constructivism is built from personal experiences, beliefs and cultural factors, new skills, and multiple social interactions. Constructivist approaches view that classroom learning is active and includes creating knowledge based on experience, problem solving, reflection, critical thinking, inquiry, creativity, collaboration, group work, and learning strategies. Autonomy is also emphasized in learning, or one’s taking individual responsibility (Lempart, 2006). Thus, students play central roles in controlling learning to set their own goals, regulating their own learning process, and even self-assessment. Constructivist theories divide into two major sides: cognitive constructivism associated with Piaget and social constructivism aligned with Vygotsky’s theories. Both cognitive constructivist and social constructivist theories share that learning is an active process through which individuals construct meaning. The primary difference is that cognitive constructivists believe individuals make sense of information on their own. Learning is seen as a process of active reorganization. Acculturation occurs into a pre-existing community of practice that has already been established.
On the other hand, aligned with Vygotsky’s theory on children’s egocentric speech, cognition begins socially and learning is collaborative (Marti, 1996). While cognitive theories focus on the individual’s intellectual capabilities to learn information by oneself, social constructivism emphasizes social and cultural contexts in which learning occurs in shared endeavors such as discussions and projects (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996). The individual thus brings unique experiences and values to the learning process of a group. Defined as an “approach to learning according to which knowledge acquisition is facilitated by the inclusion of social field of learner” (Mhouti, Nasseh, & Erradi, 2014, p. 1654), social constructivism recognizes the challenges an older expert, often a parent or teacher, exposes to a younger learner (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996). Another situation in which learning best develops is through problem solving in collaborative contexts. In groups, individuals bring various levels of knowledge that they share with each other, simultaneously instructing and learning. Through constructs of social constructivism, academic discourse socialization requires reliance on past experience, critical thinking, problem solving, reflection, learning strategies, taking responsibility, and collaborative learning within group work.

Community of practice. Under the umbrella of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, that learning is co-constructed through social interaction, the theory community of practice was introduced by Lave and Wenger in their book *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (1991). It is a major orientation of the literature on academic discourse socialization (Morita & Kobayashi, 2008). Ho (2011) claimed it is “learning how to participate in a competent and appropriate manner in the discursive practices of a given academic community” (p. 444). While learners may emulate practices and seek
support from others, this theory is limiting because one cannot account for how much help learners will receive from relationships (Zappa-Hallman & Duff, 2015). Indeed, 13 Chinese MBA students felt unable to interact well with native speakers due to not understanding informal English vocabulary and cultural differences (Shi, 2011). In another study of MBA students, some native speakers did not want to have team projects with Chinese students because they feared doing so would lower their grades, while others welcomed working with them (Parks & Raymond, 2004). Community is also a focus of topics related to disciplinary enculturation, a term referred to as “a process of learning to become a particular kind of person, who has developed a sense of belonging in a particular academic or research community” (Li, 2005, p. 153). Disciplinary enculturation includes academic integration, social adjustment, and “the gradual process of learning the ways of doing and being as full-members in the disciplinary community” (Chang, 2009, p. 14).

The concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) developed from the community of practice frame. Lave and Wenger (1991) indicate that LPP involves learning in an environment framed within a communal context. According to the concept of LPP, newcomers become members of a community by initially undertaking low risk but productive tasks that meet the needs of that community. Marginalization often occurs when international students feel like a minority status due to race, culture, and lesser ability to communicate. LPP applies to situations recognizing that new students are on the periphery of participation, observing, listening, preparing to join as more fully-engaged members. In a longitudinal study, international graduate students spent time on the periphery of participation due to language, culture and psychological challenges. A
support group assisted students to engage more fully (Samimy, Kim, Lee, & Kasai, 2011).

**Social network theory.** Academic discourse socialization is a complex experience through which students are engaged beyond the classroom. Social network theory is an approach used to view how learners integrate into an academic and social community by socializing with various networks, which may include roommates, classmates, campus services, and study groups. The type of networks can be an individual preference. For instance, Morita (2000) found some graduate students benefitted strongly from academic networks of other students, including group partners in classes and both native and international friends; however, others preferred meeting with instructors. Many studies on academic discourse socialization have pointed to the importance of faculty mentors in acclimation and use of out-of-class resources, such as writing center tutors. Zappa-Hollman and Duff (2015) created the term individual networks of practice when investigating the channels international students develop through disciplinary studies, including study and work groups, friends, classmates, tutors, and roommates, interactions upon which the international students relied for successful academic socialization.

**Identity in academic discourse socialization.** Morita (2009) defined academic discourse socialization as a complex process in which students gain knowledge and communication norms of their discipline and “negotiate their multiple identities, access to and membership within their new academic communities, and social relations of power” (p. 443), a definition for which she credits a number of studies. Individuals develop and reconstruct their identity in a new setting in terms of seeing themselves in the discipline
and as a member of the academic learning community. Zimmerman’s 1998 concept of transportable identity guided research on identity construction in a study on small-group discussions. It was determined group work enabled both native speakers and non-native speakers to improve their discipline-specific discourse and process of academic socialization (Ho, 2011). Results showed the students increased their critical thinking skills and identity formation in their disciplinary coursework.

Identity is a theme in much of the literature on the process of academic discourse socialization. Renegotiation of identity into new disciplinary courses and a profession is examined. (Ahmandi, Samad, & Norrdin, 2013; Ho, 2011; Li, 2005; Morita, 2000; Morita, 2004). Since some international students may lack the language skills to engage in class and group work, another major orientation of studies on academic discourse socialization is the exploration of issues of power, marginalization, and resistance to learning English (Morita & Kobayashi, 2008; Shi, 2011). In fact, some international students choose not to interact with native speakers in or outside of class for either linguistic or cultural reasons (Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015), or feel rejected by native speakers (Parks & Raymond, 2004). Undoubtedly, second-language students may avoid communicating with native speakers due to fear of making errors. However, some research focused on relationships international students formed and communities of practice (Chang, 2009; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015).

**Oral Academic Discourse Socialization**

As previously stated, in contrast to writing, there has been less research on socialization of second language learners through academic oral tasks. “An emergent line of qualitative research, however, has documented a variety of challenges, conflicts, and
tensions that L2 learners may experience when participating in such activities in mainstream content classrooms” (Morita, 2004, p. 575). Indeed, most of the literature has focused on experience as related by students and on factors that presented obstacles in the process. Oral participation in class is “important not only for the successful completion of their courses and programs but also for their disciplinary enculturation and apprenticeship into academic discourses and cultures” (Morita, 2000, p. 280). Strong speaking proficiency is emphasized by Western universities. The TOEFL exam added an oral assessment, and many universities require oral proficiency for admission (Zappa-Hollman, 2007).

**Lack of oral participation among Asian students.** Most studies on academic discourse socialization have been conducted on Asian students, whose oral participation is impacted by a lack of language proficiency as well as sociocultural aspects of interpersonal communication (Shi, 2011). Many second language learners, particularly those whose language skills are less advanced, prefer to reflect before speaking, whereas the more confident native speakers of English are better able to spontaneously ask and answer questions (Morita, 2000; Parks & Raymond, 2004). In their cultures, communication is often indirect and implicit (Kim, Ahn, & Lam, 2009), which may have an effect on explicitly stating opinions.

One major cultural difference is the role of the instructor. In traditional settings, an instructor is highly respected and should not be interrupted. Kwang and Smith (2004) noted that in the Confucian tradition, teachers maintain control and harmony in the class; one should not ever cause a teacher or another student to lose face (Brown, 2000; Parks & Raymond, 2004). Asian cultures traditionally hold high respect for those of higher
status, and interrupting an instructor would be considered disrespectful. Harmony is created through conformity, humility, and emotional restraint (Park, Kim, Chiang, & Ju, 2010). Some Asian students have commented that asking a simple question during class is discouraged in their home country. They were expected to find answers themselves and not bother the instructor with an office visit until after every effort was made. Also, based on my observations and comments from Chinese students, classes in their country are typically quite large, with often 50 or more students, so whole class discussions may not be expected or even possible.

In contrast, many Western instructors value a Socratic method in which students are expected to speak spontaneously in class and offer conflicting opinions about topics. Socrates viewed that teachers should aim to enable students to question their ideas and create better perspectives (Hlinak, 2014). Classes in English-speaking countries may emphasize individual expression (Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Timimi, 2004). Morita (2009) reported that in Japan, students see the instructor as the authority on a subject, whereas in Canada, students often contributed to discussions and received feedback from their peers as well as their teacher. Graduate students from Asia were surprised when classmates asked basic questions, to which instructors gave explicit answers (Choi, 2015).

An additional influence is psychological in that some second language students worry about how their comments and questions are perceived by others. In particular, international students from Asia may be concerned about losing face (Shi, 2011); they fear sharing opinions in public because they might appear inept or lacking knowledge. They also put “pressure on themselves to be perfect and to excel in their work, abstaining
from sharing their opinions in public to avoid making mistakes in front of others” (Park-Saltzman, Wada, & Mogami, 2012, p. 1). Other interpersonal factors may come into play, such as confidence, fear of being misunderstood, gender expectations, and adjusting to a new identity. Chinese students in particular were found to be uncomfortable speaking in class, including class discussions, asking questions, or engaging in group work (Parks & Raymond, 2004; Redden, 2014). Acculturative stress may cause some international students to avoid speaking English. International students who only interacted with students from their home country were believed to display a decrease in English language skills (Trice, 2012).

Nevertheless, students who do not participate orally in classes may still be engaged in academic discourse, as discussed above, as viewed through Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). Understanding the language and course content, listening actively, following directions, taking notes, and conferring with classmates outside of class are important actions in academic settings. They succeed by making connections, accessing academic resources, and communities outside of class, and other ways (Morita & Kobayashi, 2008). This engagement of peripheral participation is seen as an effective start to the process of academic discourse socialization (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

**Challenges of oral academic tasks.** Studies have shown that oral academic speech acts are considered more challenging than reading and writing for numerous reasons. For written assignments, students can seek help from a tutor, a peer, or an instructor; also, they have time to reflect before completing their work. Being able to spend time on written communication is why two Korean graduate students who never
spoke English in classes felt comfortable doing so in online discussions (Choi, 2015). Speech acts in a classroom are usually spontaneous and require listening comprehension (Lee, 2009). Class discussions are also challenging because academic topics require complex vocabulary, and discourse is often based on readings from the textbook. Thus, advanced vocabulary, literacy, and critical thinking skills are needed (Ho, 2011).

Many international students also face challenges in oral academic discourse in Western universities. The following studies list difficulties that overlap. Some are due to language, and more are related to sociopragmatic differences in speaking. The three biggest academic obstacles for international students in one study were the lack of engagement in class discussions, conversing with native speakers, and answering questions (Ferris & Tagg, 1996). Note-taking, presentations, class discussions, and were reported as the most difficult assignments of university courses in a study of 768 international students in the United States (Ferris, 1998). A study of Japanese students in Australia determined that oral academic difficulties in using English were breaking into conversations, taking turns, and leading group discussions; speaking in class discussions; knowing English expressions; and being able to answer questions without reflection (Yanagi & Baker, 2015). Such differences in sociopragmatic language, such as turn-taking and use of silence, made some graduate students perceive their speaking skills in English as weak, even if they had strong fluency (Lee, 2009; Morita, 2000).

These challenges are indeed more difficult for those in graduate-level courses; international graduate students ranked group discussions as more difficult than undergraduates did (Ferris, 1998; Kim, 2006). Compared to those in Asian countries, graduate seminars in Canada were found to be more active, fast paced, and less controlled
Graduate students of business are expected to actively participate in class and group discussions, which are often based on academic readings and require disciplinary vocabulary. 70 East Asian graduate students studying in communicative disciplines reported that their biggest academic challenges were class and group discussions, strong listening skills, and asking questions (Kim, 2006). Others also felt it was very hard to interrupt and join a discussion, work with native speakers on group projects, and ask questions (Morita, 2000; Parks & Raymond, 2004). Students who do not engage in class discussions may earn lower grades for their lack of participation. MBA courses often consist of students who are professionals, who are often required to share perspectives of work experience (Kim, 2013). However, like those in the IMBA program in this study, upon graduation, many seek employment with international companies. Thus, the ability to speak English in academic settings is necessary for their success.

**Coping strategies.** In addition to Vygotsky’s theory of ZPD, which is that students learn from more knowledgeable peers and instructors, language socialization requires an individual to develop his or her own methods to overcome challenges. Thus, applicable to this study is literature on the experience of and ways Asian graduate students overcome challenges. To succeed, international students may alter their cultural norms and usual practices (Zappa-Hoffman & Duff, 2015). Coping strategies may change as language levels and skills develop. Interestingly, a study of learning strategies of ESL students in a college concluded that intermediate students relied more on strategies than those at beginning and advanced levels. Metacognitive, or conscious, use of strategies were employed the most. Perhaps as one advances in fluency, techniques become unconscious (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006).
Studies on graduate students revealed tactics developed to improve their oral academic discourse. A longitudinal study of a Japanese doctoral student revealed coping techniques he developed: he practiced oral academic presentations before class and used notes to guide his speech, spoke with group members outside of class to acclimate to their accent, and sought help from a tutor for writing assignments (Morita, 2009). A Chinese doctoral student assimilated to academic norms by interacting with peers, a support group, and his supervisor (Li, 2005). A study on linguistic changes as a Chinese graduate student became more socialized in his studies measured his use of cohesive devices over 12 months, which grew in complexity (Wang & Slater, 2016). The authors claimed few other studies have addressed the topic of longitudinal changes.

Classroom practices of presentations are found to enhance oral academic discourse socialization. Oral academic presentations were a positive influence on the developmental process of both native and nonnative graduate students in terms of critical thinking, presentation strategies, social and collaborative construction between the presenter, classmates, and instructor (Morita, 2000). They delivered successful oral presentations by choosing topics they knew well and creating audiovisual aids. The students improved their knowledge of academic readings and cultural topics, plus practiced expressing their opinions and collaborating ideas, all of which helped the graduate students “gradually develop competence and strategies by learning from various sources” (p. 294).

Small group discussions are also a context through which students learn academic discourse socialization through practice of problem-solving and development of critical thinking (Ho, 2011). Research suggests international students felt less anxiety speaking in
group discussions than before the class. In Ho’s (2011) study of groups in which students contributed prior and existing knowledge, three features emerged: construction of novice-expert identity; critical thinking and reasons; and making intertextual connections, which is relating content of readings to one’s own experience. The students were gradually socialized into the discipline because group work helped them increase their listening comprehension, better comprehend class material, and practice speaking. In a study of seven Korean business students in the United States, group work empowered them to be less dependent on the instructor, more independent in their learning, and more confident when explicitly offering opinions (Kim, 2016).

Korean MBA students who always remained silent in whole class discussions due to language proficiency and different sociocultural norms would interact in group discussions, especially the females. The males were more fluent but did not initiate conversations. One reason was that the younger male showed respect to the older one by not speaking first. Fear of making errors was another reason. Interestingly, another factor was talking too much is frowned upon in the Korean culture. One participant said, “Many Koreans think it is more important to say one important thing than to say many unimportant things…However, many Americans seem to think of talking as a way to construct knowledge, and the whole society seems to value it. I think it is a different cultural value” (Kim, 2013, p. 148). Positive feedback from instructors and other students motivated them to speak English more freely.

The process of achieving academic success is “complex, ongoing, and situational, which unfolds in multiple academic and non-academic spaces” (Seloni, 2012, p. 57). In a study of first-year international doctoral students, the author identified three areas: initial
contact frames, which encompass speaking in classes and with peers; institutional academic spaces, such as classes, the writing center, and group tasks; and the academic culture of collaboration, which could be a support group or a community space for conversations. Oral interactions positively influenced the academic literacy of the participants. Becoming more self-reliant in the learning process helped East Asian international doctoral students in a U.S. university. Hyun and Hung (2010) studied reflections of both the participants and faculty members, and they determined oral academic discourse was compromised by language and cultural differences as the students were used to highly structured and teacher-centered classes. At first, the participants suffered psychological obstacles of self-blame for not comprehending course content but eventually learned to take more individual initiative. They developed internal and external negotiation skills and metacognitive reasoning; they also became proactive in class participation, taking individual initiative in reading, observing, and completing assignments. The amount of self-reliance depended on factors such as personality, previous studies abroad, and level of English. Suggestions included offering an online course prior to the semester, orientation workshops to the discipline, mentors to help with writing and professional socialization, and intercultural awareness training for faculty members.

The presence of native speakers may facilitate the use of strategies. Graduate Chinese students in a Canadian MBA program succeeded by emulating native speakers. The authors concluded that motivation must be internally derived and may increase due to social contexts. Those who interacted with native speakers acclimated better in group work, especially when participation of every member was required in group projects.
Class debates in this study proved helpful in that the international students enjoyed participated in them (Parks & Raymond, 2004). In a study of Japanese students in Australia, working with native speakers and being assigned tasks in group work eased linguistic competencies (Yanagi & Baker, 2015).

In conclusion, coping strategies include metacognitive awareness (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006), developing practices to plan and deliver strong presentations (Morita, 2000) and observing and imitating methods native speakers utilize to prepare academic talks (Parks & Raymond, 2004). Quite a few studies examine the positive impact of participating in group discussions and projects. Working in study groups and initiating conversations with peers outside of class were found to be helpful techniques, as was seeking tutorials (Morita, 2009; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). Imitation of native speakers was a strategy cited in Morita (2000).

Workplace Language Socialization

Language socialization in the workplace falls into two categories. The first is referred to as workplace enculturation, learning the ways a particular organization uses terms and other speech acts as well as its unique ways of interacting. The second is workplace socialization, the more general and relates to professional knowledge, such as the discourses and values in vocational settings, training sessions, or conferences (Roberts, 2010). Studies have been conducted at settings of medicine, nursing, law, cosmetology, offices, and factories. Most of these studies were of native speakers, not second language socialization. Thus, there is a significant gap in the literature on second language socialization in the workplace.
In a review of literature of second language socialization in the workplace (Duff, 2017), findings showed that most were conducted on immigrants in factory settings, many of whom used their first language at work. There have been several studies done on minority Francophile workers in call centers in Canada, where sociocultural differences and other factors led to poor self-identity (Duff, 2008). Riddiford & Joe (2010) noted that studies of sociopragmatic language skills were conducted in language classes, not workplaces. Their research determined that sociocultural knowledge learned in a classroom can transfer to a work setting. Culturally appropriate ways to communicate requests were taught to 11 Asian and Russian professional migrant workers in New Zealand over three months. Results demonstrated a greater ability to understand and negotiate requests in the workplace.

As with academic discourse socialization, workplace language socialization extends beyond fluency, vocabulary, and pragmatics. Li (2000) conducted an ethnographic case study of the experience and developmental processes of a Chinese woman’s workplace socialization. She was trained by those with more experience, as per Vygotsky’s ZPD, and overcame her cultural practice of indirectness to become more explicit in making requests. She learned how to assert herself and ask others to be courteous, thereby constructing change in how others communicate at work, which displayed tenets of social constructivism.

One study revealed the complex nature of language socialization. It measured the impact of language and skills training on language socialization of 20 immigrant aides in a long-term resident care home in Canada. Many reported that they had had few opportunities to learn English and feared speaking it with native speakers, but
nevertheless wanted to be involved in an English-speaking environment. Sociocultural aspects of caregiving were found to be most challenging, such as issues of privacy, physicality, and expectations. The process was arduous as they had to learn body language, technical English, interaction, and other communication skills needed by caretakers (Duff, Wong, & Early, 2002).

A lack of sociocultural understanding of language use during job interviews can negatively impact second language speakers. A Chinese man who interviewed for a job in Australia displayed a communication style considered more typical of East Asians in his use of eye contact, indirect answers, and gestures. He was poorly received (Bayliss, 2010). In another example, a Spanish-speaker in the U.K. failed to pass a job interview to be a physician because she appeared to have low English proficiency when in fact the candidate was fluent in English and competent in her knowledge. She was hesitant while speaking because she did not understand sociocultural contextual cues as to how to answer questions, and whether the answers to questions should be of medical information, opinions, or personal experience. (Sarangi & Roberts, 2002). Intercultural awareness on both sides could have alleviated misunderstandings.

Identity formation was examined in research on graduate students as in-service instructors (Ahmadi, Samad, & Noordin, 2013). It was a rare study in that it included both the process of academic studies and work experience. “Identity formation was a non-stop reciprocal interaction between factors including prior learning and teaching experiences, knowledge from academic discourse practices and their real fieldwork experiences” (p. 1768). The findings were relevant; the participants reported previous learning, work experience, and dialogic interactions with peers helped them establish
themselves as professionals. The study showed students need motives to participate in their professional communities, such as presenting papers or writing for publications. Opportunities to observe and interact with peers are necessary to build professional identity and roles.

In terms of workplace relationships in Asian cultures, Park-Saltzman, Wada, & Mogami (2012) claim that Asian workers, similar to Asian students, may avoid sharing opinions to save face, even that of their mentors. The authors discuss the relationship between a senior and junior employee in Asian workplace cultures. Seniors should provide guidance, training, and advice and the junior in turn holds high respect and loyalty. This relationship may continue throughout their careers.

**Summary**

The frameworks for this study are Vygotsky’s language socialization and social constructivist theories, and other theories that have guided studies of academic discourse socialization have been discussed. Most of the studies have been on international Asian graduate students. Various theories related techniques developed to overcome challenges, but did not measure how challenges changed over time. There is less literature on workplace socialization as employers are often reluctant to allow strangers into their companies (Li, 2000; Roberts, 2010). Research findings of workplace socialization of international employees could empower managers to better gauge how to oversee staff and affect change in multicultural and multilingual settings (Duff, 2008). Hence, there is little literature of longitudinal oral academic discourse socialization, how strategies change over time, and the process of language socialization in the work environment and how oral academic discourse socialization compares with that of workplace socialization.
Drawing on the social constructivist approach to language socialization in academic and workplace discourse, this study seeks to address those gaps.
Chapter Three

Methodology

Research Design

The primary focus of my research was to conduct an ethnographic case study on a specific group of Chinese and Taiwanese graduate students in the IMBA program in their first year of studies in the United States at UMSL. The eight participants studied their first year of IMBA classes in China or Taiwan, where nearly all of the classes were taught in Mandarin Chinese, and then they transferred to UMSL for their second year of studies in the United States. Five participated in an internship at a local company in St. Louis for at least the summer months upon finishing their second semester. I recruited the participants via email or face-to-face by inviting them to participate voluntarily in this research. The participants each signed a consent form informing them of the interviews and journal prompts, and that attendance was voluntary. They could withdraw at any point.

I observed the level of participation of the participants in classes eight times during two academic semesters, and gathered information about their perspectives and coping strategies over eight months through a series of focus groups, individual and pair interviews, and analysis of reflective journals. Data from sources of field notes, transcripts of focus groups discussions, interviews, and the participants’ reflective journals were analyzed line-by-line. Through open and axial coding, concepts and categories were compared and combined to determine themes. This approach to data analysis is rooted in grounded theory (Merriam, 2009).
My positionality was advantageous in that the participants in this study were familiar with me as their instructor and in other capacities. I had delivered three training sessions to all the IMBA students on speaking skills such as engaging in small talk and accent modification for clarity. I also participated in organized events for the IMBA students that included attending a welcome dinner and a holiday dinner and concert. Six were former students of mine who took courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), in which I created a relaxing environment conducive to class interaction, and I had met with them individually several times during office hours. Thus, they were comfortable speaking with me. Only Neil and Irene had never been my students, but they had met me at workshops and events, and both were open and relaxed during the interviews. My positionality had advantages in that the students were familiar with me and at ease discussing their experiences. Potential bias was that I recalled their former levels of English, which could change over time, and I was aware of some of their strengths, weaknesses, and motivations prior to the study. A potential weakness is that I cannot speak Mandarin, and interviews in their native language may have revealed more information.

Students in UMSL’s IMBA program undergo academic discourse socialization to achieve academic success. This process affected their performance in their subsequent internships in the St. Louis area. Through focus groups, interviews, and journals conducted across the second semester of the program and during their subsequent internship, this study shows challenges they experienced and techniques developed to overcome these difficulties. Results may be used to better understand the first-year
experience in a study abroad program in one’s discipline, and discover how the academic staff who serve these students can assist in the transition.

**Research Questions**

My research addresses the following question: How do speakers of another language and culture adapt to oral communication in their academic courses and workplace settings?

The research questions of how speakers of another language and culture adapt to oral communication in their academic courses and workplace settings:

- What linguistic and cultural challenges do transfer international graduate students from China and Taiwan face?
- What do transfer international graduate students from China and Taiwan experience in IMBA oral classroom discourse?
- What coping strategies do these individuals develop to overcome challenges and how do they change over time?
- How do previous disciplinary knowledge and experience impact performance in class and at work?
- How does the process of oral academic discourse socialization compare to and prepare one for workplace socialization?

**Setting**

At UMSL, the IMBA program is a two-year graduate program in business administration in which the first two semesters are offered in the students’ home countries of Mainland China and Taiwan at participating universities, and the second two semesters are at UMSL, a public research institution located in the Midwestern city of St.
Louis, Missouri. Some of the students spend a third semester, over the summer, to finish coursework. After their coursework, many of the IMBA students at UMSL conduct an internship at a company in St. Louis for a minimum of several months.

**Participants**

To find participants for this study, at the end of their first semester, I sent an email invitation to a group of IMBA students, who are referred to by pseudonyms. Six of the eight who responded were former students in my classes of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and two, Neil and Irene, contacted me because they were interested in participating. All were highly comfortable speaking with me and eager to communicate. None of them ever seemed nervous in our interviews; in fact, they were enthusiastic to speak about their experiences. They felt this project would help improve their oral language skills in English because of the practice it offered in speaking during interviews. They also thought they would benefit from developing meta-awareness of their oral communication skills, in other words, reflecting on their listening and speaking, progress, and experiences in the U.S. culture across the eight-month study. All were between an intermediate to low-advanced range in their levels of English. Information about the participants is presented in Table 3-1. It includes their prior work experience, which was longer for the two participants from China, and perceived levels of English language for listening and speaking.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>UG Major</th>
<th>Work Experience</th>
<th>Perceived Level of Listening &amp; Speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Adam</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Appl. Math</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>H. Inter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Jill</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>H. Inter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Joshua</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Inter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Vicky</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>1.5 yrs. Educ.</td>
<td>H. Inter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: H = high; L = low; Inter. = Intermediate; Adv. = Advanced*

While a formal assessment was not conducted, Neil appeared to be the most fluent speaker, which may be why he was chosen to work as a student assistant in their department. His campus job required him to speak English with his supervisors, practice which further advanced his listening skills and fluency in speaking. Irene and Vicky appeared higher in speaking relative to their perceived levels when compared to the other participants. On the other end was Eric, who entered at a very low level of English comprehension. In fact, he claimed he could not understand one word in classes at the beginning of the first semester. As his instructor of reading and writing during his first semester, I recall that his listening and speaking skills were very weak, yet he felt comfortable asking questions and making comments in my class. Both Irene and Eric, from Mainland China, were outgoing and talkative in the group interview. They were
also older than the others and possessed professional work experience. Their confidence in speaking English could be due to any or all of these factors. The Taiwanese were younger and either had no work experience or had held part-time positions in an educational setting such as tutoring or assisting a teacher.

Adam and Joshua, who also identified at low intermediate levels of speaking, seemed to struggle the most with oral communication. Adam had low proficiency and often used phrases instead of complete sentences. Even at the end of the academic year, he sometimes deleted verbs while speaking. Joshua was quite shy in nature and more self-conscious than the others. Unlike the other participants, both had tested into intermediate-level EAP classes instead of advanced ones.

Data Collection

Data sources included reflective journals, observations of classes, and interviews with the participants. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted with individuals and occasionally pairs. In addition, two focus group meetings were held to allow for more spontaneous comments.

Reflective journals. The eight participants in the qualitative study were requested to submit reflective journals once a month during an approximately eight-month period of their first year studying and working in the United States, in which they commented on oral academic discourse and workplace socialization. I emailed two questions for each journal writing prompt, asking them to write about their experiences learning in classes and any class or group oral participation they engage in, and subsequently speaking at work informally and in work projects and meetings. The questions are in the Appendix. They responded by email when it was convenient for them. Answers were usually several
sentences to a short paragraph for each question. Sometimes I sent additional questions to the writers to clarify or expand on their responses. Topics included understanding lectures, language, culture, and other social norms; asking questions or making comments; and what helps or impedes comprehension, speaking, and meeting academic and workplace challenges. Studies have shown this written reflection adds to the breadth of the researcher’s understanding of the complex process (Li, 2005; Morita, 2009; Samimy, Kim, Lee and Kasai, 2011; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). Reflective journals offered insight into the progression as students acclimate to the new environment.

Writing also helped students prepare for the interviews and focus groups in terms of language and content as the discussions were conducted in their second language. The participants were more responsive in writing during the academic semester; participation of journal prompts was remarkably less over the summer months despite repeated attempts to contact them. Perhaps some participants no longer checked their student email or felt busier working full-time.

**Class observations.** Four different IMBA courses were observed twice, each at the beginning and end of the semesters to gauge whether there was any change in the level of participation of the students. Three were during the spring academic semester and one during the summer. I was able to observe all the participants in more than one course. I took field notes on students’ oral participation in both class and group discussions and periphery participation. I also experienced sitting with them and learning course content outside of my discipline. My observations of the classes helped me see the collective teaching methods of four business professors. Listening to lectures and class discussions also brought invaluable insight into comments the participants made in their interviews.
and reflective journals. In particular, the Business Law class was discussed the most since it was quite challenging due to cultural references. I listened to a total of four lectures of that course during this research and one prior to it, so I understood the difficulties as the topics were not easy for me as well, a native speaker from St. Louis. The observations also allowed me to ask questions about specific classes and interactions that I witnessed.

**Interviews.** The participants participated in at least one focus group discussion and one semi-structured individual interview during the academic semester, in which they were asked to share their perspectives on understanding class lectures, assignments and expectations; speaking in class and group discussions; their perceived levels of fluency and confidence; major challenges; and methods they develop to achieve academic success. The focus group discussions were approximately an hour each. They permitted spontaneous brainstorming of topics that might not come up in a one-to-one interview and provided topics that could be further examined in the reflective journals and individual interviews. The other interviews were individual though a few were pairs. They lasted usually thirty to fifty minutes each. These allowed me to further explore individual reflections. Over fifteen hours of interviewed recordings were transcribed. Participants had the opportunity to review transcriptions of their interviews and the right to edit or delete any portion.

Five of the eight IMBA students obtained a summer internship. They reflected on their workplace socialization experiences in written journals and shared them in a focus group discussion and at least one semi-structured interview. Two who did not have an internship also discussed applicable skills gained in academic classes. These reflections
were used to determine the extent the communication strategies used in graduate school transfer into their workplace.

In summary, the eight IMBA Chinese and Taiwanese students participated in one or two focus group discussions and were interviewed individually two to four times across an eight-month period during an academic semester and during a summer internship. Monthly reflective journals on the oral socialization process provided insight and helped prepare answers to the questions. In addition, there were observations of eight classes, and most of the participants were in at least two of these courses. During the observations, I noted the number of times all the students asked and answered questions. The number of collected journals and interviews conducted are listed in the Table 3-2.
Table 3- 2

*Data Collection of Journals and Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Number of Journals Spring</th>
<th>Number of Journals Summer</th>
<th>Number of Interviews Spring</th>
<th>Number of Interviews Summer</th>
<th>Number of Group Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data Analysis*

The data included field notes from class observations, participant reflective journals, and transcripts of the focus groups and interviews with the participating students. There were transcripts of 20 interviews, 34 written journals, and notes from eight class observations. All the content was loaded into a software program called Atlas.ti, which is used to analyze data for qualitative research using the grounded theory method. The process was inductive. Guided by the research questions, I read every line and identified words, phrases and sentences from which I created open codes related to topics including linguistic challenges of listening and speaking, experiences in classroom oral discourse, coping strategies, and previous knowledge and experience. Other themes presented themselves within these topics. Open and axial coding is “the process of relating categories and properties to each other, refining the category scheme” (Merriam, 2009, p. 200). Open coding requires analyzing each line of the notes, transcripts, and
journals to identify codes. From these, I grouped codes together into categories and
decided the relationships of subcategories. This process is referred to as axial coding
(Merriam, 2009). The density of codes was examined to determine their importance.
Categorizing was often difficult as some overlap occurred with listening and speaking
skills as explicit themes with sub-themes of reasons for challenges, motivation, goals, and
so forth. However, both also played a role within the classroom experience of group
discussions. I thus had to revisit and reexamine the codes and categories. For instance,
the relationships of faculty and peers fell into the various categories and thus better
belonged within themes than stand-alone categories. Once I understood how the
categories and sub-categories related to each other, the process became more systematic.

From all the data collected for the academic semester, 43 codes were created,
which were categorized into four main topics: Challenges of Listening Comprehension,
Challenges of Speaking, Cultural Differences in Classroom Interactions, and Differences
between Graduate Classes in Home Countries and the U.S. How the data presented itself
was surprising. Listening comprehension was more dominant than I had anticipated; there
were 32 comments about difficulties, and 26 that related to strategies to overcome them. I
knew group discussions were an important requirement in all the classes as many courses
had group projects and presentations; indeed, there were 44 quotations about group
discussions, but only two about presentations. One reason was group discussions were
extremely significant beyond preparing a project. The participants only felt comfortable
engaging in conversations with native speakers they had met through these meetings. The
code group named Speaking consisted of codes that included challenges, small talk,
goals, motivation, difficulties, and the amount of English spoken outside of class. Out of
these, small talk had the most passages with 14, while there were only five for goals. I did not anticipate the magnitude that small talk plays in academic settings and even more so in the workplace. Confidence, with 31 quotations, presented itself as an important factor in oral academic communication.

Two courses were presented frequently in discussions and thus were explicitly written about; one was Law, Ethics and Business, which is referred to as Business Law, and the other was an intensive seminar, a week-long course culminating in a group presentation. Business Law was the most challenging course due to cultural references, and another factor was one of its professors required oral participation of all the students during each class. The intensive seminar class required day-long group discussions that advanced the students’ interaction with native speakers.

For Workplace Enculturation, 33 codes were presented, from which the major themes were Challenges of Listening Comprehension, Challenges of Speaking, Coping Strategies, Drawing upon Previous Disciplinary Knowledge and Experience, Comparison of Oral Academic Discourse with Workplace Communication, and Preparation of Academic Studies for Workplace Communication. Sub-topics included difficulties interviewing for jobs, using the telephone, engaging in small talk, and communicating with supervisors. Small talk, as mentioned above, played a more important role in workplace than the classroom; it was present in 22 quotations. The most quotations were in the code comparing classroom communication with the workplace, which was less surprising as this was an explicit research question. Previous work experience only had two quotations. Listening played a less important role than it did in the academic setting,
with 22 quotations. One unanticipated theme was the amount of distress of having to ask a question of a supervisor.

The data provided insight into the collective process of oral academic discourse socialization and workplace enculturation. In the chapters of the results, I included paraphrases and direct quotes to support and exemplify the findings. Sometimes reading the exact words helps one better view the perspectives and feelings. Note that as second language learners, their speech and writing contain grammatical and word choice errors. I transcribed and wrote the quotes exactly as they were said or written. In cases of possible confusion, I added a correction in parentheses.
Chapter Four

Findings of Oral Academic Discourse Socialization

As previously stated, this study examines the process of oral academic socialization that second language learners of English from China and Taiwan faced in graduate courses in their discipline. Chapter Four presents the findings from the data collected of one focus group session, 18 individual interviews, 28 reflective journals, and eight class observations during the spring semester and early summer of 2018. The following question is addressed: How do speakers of another language and culture adapt to oral communication in their academic courses and workplace settings? This chapter discusses data findings responding to the first four of the five research questions:

▪ What linguistic and cultural challenges do transfer international graduate students from China and Taiwan face?

▪ What do transfer international graduate students from China and Taiwan experience in IMBA oral classroom discourse?

▪ What coping strategies do these individuals develop to overcome strategies and how do they change over time?

▪ How do previous disciplinary knowledge and experience impact performance in class?

To answer the research questions, data were collected from recordings and journals of the perspectives the students shared. The categories of challenges, experiences, and coping strategies during the process of oral academic discourse socialization from the data codes prompted sub-themes of listening and speaking difficulties, the importance of small talk, the overt faculty encouragement to participate in
discussions, the benefits group work provided, individual and social coping strategies, and appreciation for the new cultural style of lecture and classroom discourse. The themes discussed in this chapter are supported by summaries and quotes from the participants. The following flow chart, Figure 4-1, offers an overview of the process the students underwent to overcome challenges studying in a second language and culture. They each encountered a few or all of the factors in each box.

**Figure 4-1**

The Process of Meeting Challenges in Oral Academic Discourse Socialization

The first two sections address the first research question on the linguistic and cultural challenges the participants faced.
Challenges of Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension was an important topic because weaknesses in comprehension negatively affected the process of oral academic discourse socialization. There were two primary areas of difficulty in understanding lectures: second language interference and references to unfamiliar topics. Inability to understand English also limited the ability to participate in required group discussions with native speakers. Less related to academic goals was the ability to comprehend humor in classes, social conversations, and movies. The major theme that emerged was that lecture comprehension in business classes is not only impacted by listening challenges but also knowledge of the culture, as demonstrated below.

**Difficulty understanding professors during lectures.** The data revealed that while lecture listening comprehension had improved considerably the first six months in the U.S., it remained a difficulty due to both language and cultural factors. Since all the courses in their home countries were taught in Mandarin, with English mostly used in textbooks, entering graduate-level courses at UMSL was their first experience being immersed in their second language and academic lectures were especially hard to comprehend. Their listening skills improved during their first semester; at the beginning of their second semester, they perceived that their listening comprehension ranked from intermediate to advanced levels.

Listening to native speakers interacting in a host country is often surprisingly more difficult than one could imagine despite the years of English language classes completed in one’s home country. It is also harder due to the native speakers’ use of colloquial language, cultural references, rate of native speech, and other factors (Shi,
Neil reported, “Instructors' accent, speed and volume could also affect my understanding.” Academic lectures, furthermore, contain vocabulary and jargon not commonly found in conversations. Jill found her accounting class to be highly difficult her third semester at UMSL due to the amount of professional vocabulary.

During this research, the participants were asked about their listening abilities throughout the semesters’ interviews and journals. Eric of his finance class:

Last semester, when I joined this class, the first day understand nothing. First of all, the language is difficult. And the professor always eating something. In the second thing is that academic information is very special. The first (day) in the class, I even work hard to try to understand him but I can’t.

English is difficult for new second language students to comprehend due to the rate of speech by native speakers, plus terminology associated with academic coursework. Eric’s quote reveals that other factors like eating can make speech hard to decipher. In the class observations, I noticed a large number of idioms and phrasal verbs were used in academic lectures, which likely contributed to low comprehension (Shi, 2011). Still, Eric’s complete lack of understanding suggests some new international graduate are underprepared linguistically and experience intense struggles to understand lectures.

A number of factors assisted or hindered listening comprehension. In the first group interview, the participants mentioned that comprehension often depended on the speaking style of the instructor. Jill’s comment summarizes those of the participants when she said, “Sometimes I can’t understand them. They speak too quickly, too fast to understand.” Helen commented that some instructors spoke more slowly for foreign
students while others did not modulate their speech. Also, non-native speakers were easier to follow than native ones. She said:

Some of the professor or classmates are not local people, and they will speak more like us. Last semester, I had a marketing class, and the teacher is from Hong Kong, so I can understand like 90% what he was teaching.

Less concrete subjects were also harder for Irene to grasp. She claimed, “For some classes, like accounting or finance or about technology, I can understand more than law or some social class. More than 80%. But like Law, it’s just 50 (%).” The participants reported that the instructors were generally easy to understand by the second semester, especially if they enunciated and avoided using a lot of slang. For example, Mr. Caster (pseudonym) in particular, a law professor who had taught overseas, was careful to avoid colloquial language.

Besides lectures, the participants had difficulty understanding questions instructors asked. During a logistics class I observed, Adam was sitting in the back row next to a friend and occasionally made comments in Mandarin to him. The instructor consistently walked around a large room of over 40 students calling on students by name, fielding questions, answering questions, and responding to comments. She approached Adam and specifically asked him a simple question the lecture, but he could not understand what she said. She repeated it several times, and then he finally uttered a few words, which she pretended were correct to avoid causing him to lose face.

**Difficulty understanding cultural references.** Understanding lectures was difficult due to linguistic features and a lack of background knowledge of cultural references. As Adam reported, “It’s not just the English problem also the culture, the life,
and the work experience.” When asked whether a lack of comprehension was due more to language or culture, the group was divided. Half claimed it was not understanding the English language, while the other half felt cultural references accounted more for the confusion. It appeared the more the students advanced in understanding English, the more they claimed culture over language impeded comprehension of lecture content; the first semester classes had been much harder to follow because of not understanding words.

Business Law class was cited as the most difficult class. Its content was laden with unfamiliar cultural knowledge about topics, such as legal practices of businesses, the rights of employees, the U.S. Constitution, U.S. laws, business practices, and other culturally-specific topics, all of which the international students had no previous background of. They said the U.S. laws were quite different from those in their home countries. Mr. Caster made the content easier for the international students by using various ways to express ideas and by comparing U.S. laws with those from other countries. Eric commented on this:

Yes, he even he can use some Asian or Chinese local law information. And connect with the American law. Like the common law and the civil law, English law and non-English law. So, they put the information together and we can, based on our background information and enhance our new information from this class. I think this is method is better teaching of law class so I can learn more information from this class…and this method is not only good for Asian student but also the American student. Also use this method to enhance their Asian or Chinese law information to learn some new classes. I think this is a better skill or technology (technique) for the teaching.
As implied, Mr. Caster’s including information about laws in Asia not only broadened the horizons of the local students, it also helped the Chinese and Taiwanese feel included, better understand their own legal system, and have a means to compare and comprehend the same topics in the U.S. One theory that has come from language socialization theory is community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). By adding referring to laws in the countries of the international students, the professor helped facilitate their inclusion into the academic community.

In my observations of IMBA classes, instructors would explain a concept or practice and then illustrate it with examples of specific businesses and other cultural references, as briefly discussed earlier. Examples included the U.S. Constitution, environmental legislature, Congress, Guantanamo Bay, Monsanto, and local pizza restaurants. Anheuser-Busch was referred to quickly as “AB.” Major businesses in St. Louis, such as Monsanto/Bayer, Anheuser-Busch/Imbev, Ralston Purina, Boeing, Emerson Electric, and Edward Jones, were often brought up in lectures. However, the participants were largely unfamiliar with these companies. Adam said if topics were related to a domestic company, “I will have no idea!” They did, however, know cell phone companies and international businesses that are present in their home countries, such as Nike, Adidas, and Pizza Hut. As stated earlier, they found the Business Law class to be most challenging, and I too found many of its topics unfamiliar despite having grown up in the U.S. While previewing materials does much to increase listening comprehension, examples and tangential conversations are not generally included in a professor’s PowerPoint slide. Thus, the participants had a harder time understanding them. Neil commented:
So if I preview the class, just like I do for my accounting, I will have a better understanding what teacher say…when most teachers start to talk about something I mean new, I’ll start to lost the idea what teachers are talking about.

More on how previewing material increased listening comprehension is discussed in the section titled Coping Strategies.

Cultural references also accounted for difficulties understanding conversations with native speakers of English. Neil said it was hard to understand his classmates due to the many cultural topics embedded in their language. Adam agreed, “Yeah, when I talk with Americans, they will involve many things and sometimes when I’m sometimes confused, I cannot guess what are they talking about because it’s too broad.” Again, the theme emerged that familiarity with local topics, companies, and customs will assist lecture comprehension.

**Difficulty understanding other students.** Difficulty in understanding English had a negative influence on the ability to ask questions and participate in group discussions. Thus, weaknesses in listening directly impacted the participants’ ability to interact with classmates in group projects. This is exemplified in Irene’s comment:

> When I first arrived American last August, I felt that some natural speakers talking very quickly, and I was unable to catch what they were talking about. Therefore, during group discussion, I could not provide my opinions to my teammates, because I even cannot understand completely about their ideas…Sometimes I just can’t understand what they said. It’s not very clear so I can’t ask very clear questions, so I don’t know how to ask.
Like Irene, all the participants felt exclusion in their academic community when unable to participate in discussions with local students, which was also confirmed by Shi (2011) in a study on Chinese graduate MBA students in group discussions. Thus, listening comprehension is an instrumental part of inclusion in the community of practice.

The amount of English understood in small group discussions depended on the number of people in the group. When more native speakers were present, they were more likely to speak English faster and use slang, and less likely to modify their speech for an international student. “I can feel that when Americans talk to each other, they speak significantly faster,” Eric commented. As Irene explained, “If the group have just one or two local student, I think is not difficult to communication. If I’m the only one who is not local student, it will be difficult to understand what they say.” This indicates a more equal proportion of native speakers and non-native speakers will help international students comprehend the conversation.

Eric explained how the inability to understand classmates and express himself made him spend more time preparing than he would have done in Mandarin. He said:

At home country, I can express my idea and team idea for me to building the final presentation. Here I just, just hear, heard and read everything I can’t express more idea. I spend half the time to understand and spend another time to prepare.

Joshua was a quieter student who desperately wanted practice speaking English. He revealed feelings of isolation in situations while everyone else in a group communicated without him:

I don't know what they are talking about. They talk too fast. And yeah…I’ll just be the last person with the idea when they're going to finish this discussion, I just
stand there and what they're talking about, just try to understand. And they might have tried to repeat what they’re talking.

Again, Joshua’s comment reveals the feelings of exclusion from an academic community of practice when one is unable to comprehend group members.

**Difficulty understanding humor.** Humor presented itself as a minor theme as a challenge and a goal for the second language learners. While it may not seem an important part of academic discourse, three of the participants claimed it was necessary to better understand class discussions, social conversations, and cultural artifacts like movies. Jill commented sometimes the other students in class laughed a lot, but if she did not know the context, she could not understand the joke. Vicky said understanding jokes was one of her goals, and that humor could help one form closer relationships with others. She described:

> My goal for speaking English is to easily understand jokes Americans tell, and give them feedback which they expect. It is really an important way for people to make friends and have a good relationship with others no matter where they are.

> The reason is jokes could make people laugh, have more motivation to keep talking with you, and want to learn more about who you are.

Eric also discussed humor when he said he was still challenged by language after the second semester. It was still hard for him to communicate well with native speakers. “I need more background to understand…I cannot make a joke and talk to them like that,” he commented.

Another listening situation of humor is watching movies. Jill said all types of jokes were in films. Both Eric and she found watching movies quite helpful to better
understand humor. She purchased a movie pass at the end of the semester and saw one every day for a week, which helped improve her comprehension of jokes as well as her listening skills. When Eric saw Deadpool, he could not understand why parts of it were funny, so he looked up its plot on the Internet and watched a movie with a similar story. This is an example of ZPD, an aspect of language socialization theory, which is that one can achieve a higher level of language from a mediator. In this case, the movie serves as the role of the higher language input. Not only people but artifacts such as movies, technology, and written documents can evoke the cultural context (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011); under this theory, the context cannot be separated from learning.

**Challenges of Speaking**

Oral academic discourse socialization includes navigating the graduate business classroom with its high expectations for oral communication skills in classroom interaction and group discussions. Furthermore, oral presentation skills are needed for success in most graduate business classes as well as interacting outside of class. Compared to their home universities, the participants found oral academic tasks in the U.S. to be overwhelming with stringent requirements for speaking; the U.S. professors expected oral participation and required group and individual presentations. It was the first time the participants had lived and interacted in an English-speaking environment, so the inability to express themselves was stressful, especially in academic situations with little time to prepare. As with challenges in listening, one theme of speaking skills was that cultural factors intertwined with language challenges in the difficulties to participate. Speaking was not easy due to lack of vocabulary expression, but during classes, even if the students were able to understand a question, they were reluctant to answer it because
they were unaccustomed to this style of teaching. Another important theme not anticipated before the start of this research was the importance of small talk. The ability to initiate and continue small talk conversations is an important skill for social interactions in the U.S. Similar to listening and classroom interactions, achieving it presents language and cultural challenges.

**Difficulty in language.** At the start of this research, the participants’ perceived levels of English ranged from low-intermediate to low-advanced. Speaking in a second language is challenging, in particular in graduate-level academic discourse with its high level of disciplinary terminology. Indeed, vocabulary was cited as the major challenge with speaking. Also, during classes, the participants claimed they needed more time to prepare questions and answers. Another obstacle to oral communication in classes was fear of making errors while speaking.

**Difficulty in appropriate vocabulary use.** When asked about speaking challenges, the participants cited vocabulary expression as the primary issue. Other aspects of speaking skills, such as grammar and pronunciation, were rarely mentioned. Formulating correct expressions for academic topics was hard, especially without time to prepare, such as when spontaneously asked a question in class. This impacted the ability to fully engage in small talk and group discussions for research projects and subsequent presentations. While this research focused on academic situations, the participants discussed that they also spoke English while traveling. For instance, Helen needed better speaking skills as she was in charge visiting the southwest when her parents and boyfriend came to visit her.
Lack of fluency in English also impeded the ability to interact in classes with professors and classmates. Irene said it was hard for her to express ideas and feelings. For instance, she could not ask questions in class because she did not know which words to use. Joshua mentioned having limited words to express ideas. Adam further explained that vocabulary was especially difficult when topics were unfamiliar, such as those related to the U.S. culture. He said, “I fear that I can't convey my real meaning to my classmates and instructors.” Possessing a strong level of vocabulary expression is thus imperative for one to interact in graduate-level classes.

Lack of speaking skills also impacted the ability to participate in group discussions, which were required to prepare presentations. Joshua explained this when he said:

Firstly, language is the biggest obstacle for me. On the contrary, the most challenging for them might be understanding what we want to express. We do not have enough vocabulary; therefore, we try our best to express our thought by using the limited word.

This suggests the participants felt a lack of inclusion in their academic community of practice. Furthermore, the inability to express their opinions and fully add to group discussions meant the native speakers had less input and perspectives from their international classmates.

*Lack of time to prepare speech.* Another factor that made expressing ideas difficult for the second language learners was the lack of time in class to prepare language in English. Eric said, “Native speakers, they can get the question quickly and can answer with more accurately. If non-native speakers, they need to understand
questions and hardly express.” Eric wanted to answer questions, but his language skills impeded him. He explained, “I spend half the time to understand and spend another time to prepare.”

Irene also said she could not ask questions due to time constraints. She explained, “Maybe I don’t understand. I don’t know how to ask the question…(I) need a lot of time to think about how I would ask the question.” This likely impacted her learning of course content, though she improved over the academic year. While lecturing, the instructors usually paused and asked if there were questions. Then, after a few seconds or less, moved on to the next topic. As Irene reported, “Maybe, there’s some problem about language. Maybe I don’t understand, I don’t know how to ask the question. They need a lot of time to think about how I would ask the question.” By the time they think of an appropriate question, the instructor has moved on to the next topic. This indicates that class participation impeded by a lack of vocabulary could be enhanced if instructors could offer more time for participants to prepare language. Lack of time to create appropriate language was also a factor in other studies on academic discourse socialization of international graduate students (Morita, 2000; Parks & Raymond, 2004; Yanagi & Baker, 2015).

**Fear of making errors.** Interpersonal concerns about fear of making mistakes presented as a theme because the participants felt anxiety when speaking in their second language. The word nervous appeared at least 27 times in the documents in regards to speaking. In particular, the participants reported feeling insecure when speaking with native speakers of English. Fears stemmed from making mistakes in grammar and not being able to find the right words. As time went on, participants worried less as the local
classmates were patient and focused on ideas expressed. Still, it was a concern. As Neil stated, “I worry about grammar: I shouldn’t worry about that I think it’s not like perfect language when I speak.”

In classroom discourse, fear of making errors came up frequently as a reason to avoid asking questions; mistakes make one “lose face.” This aligned with research by Shi (2011). Jill was especially worried about what others thought. She admitted, “I am afraid all of my classmate can’t understand what I say because of pronunciation or vocabulary.” Irene claimed that native speakers were able to understand academic terms and ask questions using professional vocabulary; she felt embarrassed having weaker language skills than they had. During group work, the participants felt more comfortable conversing with other non-native students; they were not worried about errors with their European classmates. The perception was that other second language students would not focus on accuracy despite the fact that they said the U.S. students also did not care about their mistakes. Over time, the participants found their classmates to be kind, which eased anxiety about errors, but their greatest confidence remained with other second language learners.

**Cultural challenges in engaging in classroom discourse.** In the eight classes which were observed, none of the participants or other speakers of Chinese asked a question in class discussion, not even when the professors specifically asked for one. They only answered when specifically called on by name. Cultural factors for the lack of participation were stronger than the language weaknesses described above. In the observed classes, even the speakers of Chinese who had been at UMSL for several years and understood and spoke English well avoided participation in class discussions. There
were several factors related to culture. (The topic of cultural differences in class interaction is further explored in the next section, Cultural Differences in Classroom Interactions.)

One cultural difference was the bi-directional style of discourse used by the professors of business. The students claimed their home academic lectures were one-directional communication from professors. During the class observations, several local students spoke regularly, quieter ones participated occasionally, as did international students not from East Asian countries. The following comments reveal their perspectives comparing the behavior of native and non-native students in the U.S. classroom. Helen’s comment here shows how hard it is to adapt to a new behavior:

I find out that native speakers prefer asking question and answer the questions. However, international students are not familiar with answer the questions. Some believe that language barriers are the problem that non-native speakers don’t like to answer the questions during the class. However, in my opinion, the reason that I don’t like to answer is because I am not used to do this.

When asked how likely the participants were to ask a question in classes, the answers ranged from “seldom” to “never.” When asked for reasons why they were reluctant to ask questions, the participants replied that in their classes in their home country, students were not expected to ask questions during class. Common practice in their countries was to ask a professor questions after the class. Jill explained, “We will wait for, wait until after the class to ask the professor a question in private.”

The students stated that they interacted in Mr. Caster’s section of Business Law, yet their participation was minimal compared to local classmates. Oral class participation
was required by this professor, who used to be an attorney, perhaps because law schools regularly use the Socratic method in their classes. He had the students check their attendance and whether they participated on the back of their name plates, which he collected. In the two times I observed his class, one which was the end of the semester, the participants did not ask any questions and only answered questions unless Mr. Caster called on them individually by name with relatively easy questions. Jill claimed she occasionally spoke in his class only because it helped her grade. When asked if she would ask a question without being given points, she answered, “Probably not [laughter].”

When asked whether they ever offered a comment in a class discussion, the participants all said they would not do that. Indeed, adding a comment requires bringing attention to oneself and perhaps interrupting the flow of discourse. Neil explained, “Making a comment will be harder for me than asking a question.” Not wanting to inconvenience the classmates and instructors was also a factor. Even Helen, who seemed confident and clear in her ability to speak English, said she would never make a comment in a class discussion.

Besides fear of annoying an instructor, there were other factors related to values of a collective culture with its focus on group harmony: a concern for how others would perceive them and avoidance of being singled out. Discomfort with being the center of attention could be interpreted as both interpersonal and cultural. Joshua, perhaps the quietest of the participants, feared standing out from others. He stated doing so made him “very nervous and uncomfortable.” Helen likewise disliked speaking in groups, citing they always made her feel uncomfortable. She preferred speaking with one native speaker at a time. Eric, an older participant, however, did not share these concerns.
Similarly, there was an intense fear of asking a basic question that could cause one to “lose face.” Asking a question that had already been discussed was dubbed “a silly question,” and the participants were afraid of doing this. They reported that the U.S. instructors assured them not to worry whether their questions were too simple, but they still could not overcome this fear. Jill, who tended to worry about what others thought of her, added that others would talk about her if she asked a silly question. The students also appeared to be concerned about what others thought of them; they claimed that in their home country, asking a basic question would make others look at them or talk about them. Thus, fear of inconveniencing others and “losing face” remain strong factors, even for the more fluent participants. Jill in particular worried that others would talk about her if she asked a question that had already been answered. She explained the fears others also had shared when she stated:

One thing is language and the other thing is culture because in our culture, if you ask too much question and take too much time people will talk about you. “Oh my gosh, he did it again!” If you ask too much question, your professor will tell you she can talk after the class…But here, they don’t worry about that. The professor will not worry about that, that the classmate interrupts his class, his schedule…just want those classmates understand those questions.

Adam echoed what was said by most of the participants:

Asians will think low of you if you ask a stupid question. Sometimes the professor don’t like you to ask some too easy question because they will think (you) can get the answer by yourself by your colleague, by your classmate. You don’t need to ask. You’re wasting their time.
The fear of losing face and reluctance to inconvenience others had been ingrained in the students throughout their lives. It appeared it would not be overcome in two semesters. As Helen added, “I think is that in my home town, we are not used to do this, so it is not easy for us to change immediately to the same thing that local native speaker do.” While the participants found this new style helpful for learning, at the end of the academic year, they still felt uncomfortable asking or answering questions, let alone adding their ideas to class discussions. Two semesters was not enough time for the students to overcome cultural practices in native academic discourse. Nevertheless, it was mentioned that professors in their home universities who had studied abroad in a Western-style of education were more likely to use interactive techniques. This suggests that with more globalization and study abroad opportunities, schools overseas may adopt more interactive teaching styles. A summary of the above reasons is listed in Figure 4- 2. Note that a student may experience any number or all of the concerns while deciding whether to ask a question.
**The most dominant challenges in class communication.** As stated, the largest obstacles to engagement in classroom communication were both linguistic and cultural. I sought to learn which factor was the most difficult for each participant and whether this short list contained either linguistic or cultural barriers to communication. Again, the students were almost evenly divided. Three responded with language issues, two cited listening, and the other one said speaking. Three reported challenges due to culture, feeling hesitant to questions and to speak with those of higher status. Adam admitted he felt unsettled speaking with classmates in a higher position. Hierarchy in relationships tends to be common in collective cultures; my students from some Asian countries often refer to their classmates only one or two years older than they are as “seniors.”
The other two participants found delivering presentations to be the most difficult oral task. One student said it was due to language, and the other feared classmates would not understand her, an interpersonal factor that related to both their language and culture. Table 4-1 lists the challenge each participant felt was the most difficult to achieve, and the comments offer more explanation for their reasons.
Table 4-1

Biggest Class Communication Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Name(s)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>I think the big challenge for me is asking the question, like similar to interrupt people to ask questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>The biggest challenge will be asking a question. I mean, it’s not, I mean in front of (a few) people, I 'm talking about half the class. I want to ask the question. And I will think that the professor might think why I do not ask the question during the class? This is the first things I would thinking about.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>Language. Sometimes I am just can't understand what they said. It's not very clear so I can't ask very clear questions, so I don't know how to ask.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>Language. Pronunciation and the vocabulary or pronouncing transition is be important for me. Sometimes different. So maybe this word have similar pronunciation, but this word has different meaning. Also grammar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>I think the American student is more confused (confusing) than the teacher because they speak very, very fast, and they don't slow down, but it is their own...I think the teacher know we are not a native speaker, so he slow down, but the native student don't know. They keep talking, talking. I cannot understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentations</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Probably is hard because we are foreigners, so if I speak something. I know I understand, but I'm afraid not all my classmates can understand what I say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>I need to prepare every sentence and be careful to express in the stage. You need to presentation the right content and your idea and express with PowerPoint, express content with PowerPoint. You need to exercise more and more. To come from the result is correct. Yeah. Both language and content of ideas are difficult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status of others</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Most of my classmates are in a high position or status. They are manager. Or they have their own business, so when I talk with them, I will feel (pause) intimidated. I can't speak fluently. I can't expand the knowledge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Challenges in engaging in social conversation outside the classroom.** Practice speaking English is helpful for expressing ideas. All the participants were highly motivated to improve their oral communication skills and thus sought opportunities to speak English outside of class. However, they faced challenges in finding people to speak English with, and they struggled while making and continuing casual conversations.

**Limited opportunity for social conversations.** Despite living on campus in the U.S., the students said it was difficult to find opportunities to practice speaking English. A few participants had host families; Helen spent the Thanksgiving holiday with hers, where she interacted with nearly two dozen people. Classmates were another source of conversation practice; the participants reported wanting to have small talk with them, but usually only did so with those they had met previously during group projects. As UMSL is a commuter campus, chances to interact with local classmates were likely fewer than those at a traditional campus; the local graduate-level classmates all lived off campus. Adam frequently stated that the local MBA classmates were never free to speak outside of class because they had full-time jobs and families while the international graduate students were full-time students. They had free time during the day since most of their classes were in the evening.

The university gym was a good place to practice English was. There, Joshua, Neil, and Adam had opportunities to interact. Adam explained:

> I usually speak English with the friend who I get to know from gym. When we play basketball, we have some small talk, such as NBA playoff and school life…I also get to know some Chinese or South American in class and gym.
Adam said he preferred talking with undergraduates since they lived on campus. He was also more comfortable speaking with them because he felt inferior to older students with work experience. Also mentioned was the patience native speakers had. He said, “I am trying to speak more with native speaker, and I am also appreciated that they have patient to chat with me.” Adam said he improved his small talk skills by listening to others. Neil said he sometimes talked with local classmates at the gym. He reported:

Frankly to say, I seldom speak English outside of class. But I still do my best to practice my speaking skill. For example, I usually go to gym for exercising once a week. Sometimes, I play with other foreigner, and we might have a small talk during the time we are exercising.

Adam added that conversations at the gym extended past playing sports. “I will get to know the friends in the gym, and we will have food outside, so I can have some conversation opportunity.” I have heard others comment on the mix of international and local students who meet there to play sports, usually basketball.

While the participants all lived in campus housing with other students, not all had conversation practice with them; those relationships varied. Adam and Helen rarely spoke with the students they lived with while Eric’s interacted with his. Jill was housed with other students from Taiwan, and her fourth roommate was from Vietnam; while conversations were sometimes hindered by pronunciation issues, they all claimed they benefitted from interacting in English.

Furthermore, there were few opportunities for discussions deeper than small talk. Joshua explained that at the gym, “It's difficult to talk more deeper, to have a deeper discussion. -just How is it going? Good take, good move, good shot.” He approached me
to find him a conversation partner, and I chose a tutor for campus veterans, a talkative older student. Joshua was rather hesitant, fearing discomfort if the conversation would die, but the native speaker was extremely good at chatting. “We met each other once or twice a week, we shared our life experience, such as hobbies, interest, and culture.” However, by the second semester, the tutor had less time to meet, and Joshua felt their conversations were limited, that it was hard to keep speaking when two people had little in common. “His major is different from mine. Have no common thing. So you might share your basic information in the beginning then you don't have any same topic.” Joshua’s comment reflects that it was hard for him and likely other international students to engage in conversation practice outside the classroom to develop deeper fluency in English.

**Challenges in topic selection.** Topics for conversations with native speakers proved to be tricky. Adam said it was difficult when someone mentioned a famous person in the U.S. that he did not know. He said, “He (or) she's popular United States. I have no idea, no information.” Even though his roommate discussed the same anime cartoons as he did, the actors differed between the languages. He also worried about touching on a sensitive topic, like politics. He stuck to talking about sports and asking about shoes, “because I like the sneaker. Also, last month is the NBA playoff so we can talk about NBA game. Sports.”

When discussing topics, the students reported feeling worry of bringing up a topic considered taboo by native speakers. When asked what a taboo topic might be, Adam replied, “Maybe the president?” Irene said that in China, one avoids discussing the age of women and salaries, but Adam said a salary was acceptable to mention in Taiwan.
Perhaps as in the U.S., salaries of minimum wage jobs students hold are acceptable to mention, unlike those of professions. Topics can also change over time. Irene commented, “Maybe, some old people in China will talk about salary, but younger people in the 20s or 30s don’t.” This example indicates that social appropriateness in language discourse is not stagnant but ever-changing.

**Challenges of engaging in small talk.** Another important theme that emerged from the research was the challenge of making or participating in small talk conversations, an ability the participants claimed was necessary when interacting with native speakers both inside and outside of class. They said learning to make small talk was important to interact with people in the U.S. as it provides speaking practice and ways to become acquainted with new people. However, it presented difficulties that were both linguistic and cultural.

Language challenges were due to a lack of vocabulary and language skills, little familiarity with topics, not knowing the pragmatics of continuing a conversation, or “keeping the ball going,” and the discomfort of talking with acquaintances or strangers. To help the IMBA students, I had delivered two workshops on it; one was to initiate a conversation and choose appropriate topics, and the next was to try to continue a conversation. The participants reported that while the two one-hour sessions were helpful, they still felt insecure about having spontaneous conversations with native speakers on unfamiliar topics.

Another important aspect to small talk was creating ways to repair and continue a conversation. The participants found small talk to be quite challenging with fears of how to keep a conversation going, or to prevent the “ball” from “dropping.” Jill commented
that she did not know how to do this. Adam, whose fluency appeared lower than that of the other students, also tried to make small talk with classmates but said the “ball” would quickly “drop.” When asked if he spoke English with classmates, he replied, “When they saw me and say ‘Hi’, I will just start ‘Hi. What are you doing?’ and it finishes.” Joshua said local classmates greeted him before or during class, but these exchanges did not extend to small talk or an opportunity to practice speaking English. “When they saw me and say ‘Hi’, I will just start ‘Hi. What are you doing?’ and it finishes.” He said students he knew at the gym were the same. “They just say ‘How are you today?’ ‘Good.’ ‘Okay’ ‘See you next time.’” Jill echoed this sentiment. “After we finish the question, we will stop the communication. ‘How do you feel today? Good. How’s your work? Good.’” Hence, it appeared the inability to continue a conversation produced a feeling of discomfort, especially for the shyer participants.

The students observed that native speakers were able to produce extended casual conversations with each other. Thus, the separation between students, which I observed in their seating positions, often stayed the same during the breaks. This created exclusion from their community of practice, or perhaps kept them as a group segregated within the large one. Joshua said:

Because for native, during the break, they might find their friends, their classmates, because they work in the morning, so they might share their something they saw in the morning or something interesting, what they are going to do during the weekend? So for me, I just try to communicate with the Asians, try to communicate with my friends.
Neil also commented on this topic, that native speakers have more in common with each other, and it was easier for them to interact. He said, “I just notice that when native speaker speak, they will have, I don't know, they will have more common background. So they can, they can talk.” He also felt nervous about engaging in a conversation he might not be able to continue, which would cause him to feel awkward. “I feel nervous because I feel a ball will drop, like you mentioned in the class. But, for like a small talk, we will have a small talk, but it will hard for us to talk like native speaker.” Despite his stronger level of fluency, Neil remained just as perplexed about how to make greeting continue into a conversation. He said that at work, whenever the director entered:

I will say ‘today, weather will change’. And yet, and he will respond to me like ‘yeah, yeah. It changes’, but the ball will drop. I will feel a little bad about that because I don't know how to talk to him.

Learning to make small talk presented linguistic and cultural challenges. The participants were unaccustomed to starting and continuing casual conversations because they did not do these much in their home countries. One possible reason was that in their home programs, all the classmates were the same in each course. That combined with the increase in class time together meant the participants knew their peers very well. Vicky claimed that classmates in Taiwan did not feel the need to talk socially unless they knew each other well. “(If) we are not good friends or good classmate, we will not say nothing.” She added that small talk with close friends and classmates is done after a group meeting, not before. The other participants also indicated that having personal conversations with those they were not close to felt awkward. Jill said, “I think that for
more close classmate with more conversation, we can ask that. But if we met for the first time, and I ask ‘How’s your weekend?’ It is too very close, for me.”

Several participants said that travel around the U.S. helped their ability to make small talk. One reason was they gained practice by chatting with people they met while traveling. In addition, upon returning, they could discuss the places they had visited. They could talk about what they had done over the weekend. Neil explained, “And since recently I travel (with) my friend, this is how I got some topic. So, when he (says) some place that he went, I can say this place is good too, so I can suggest go there.”

In conclusion, since small talk was a practice the participants were unaccustomed to in their home countries, it was both a linguistic and cultural challenge. It is an example of pragmatic language use that is an important tool for social interaction. The participants recognized its importance and believed learning to perform this skill would assist the process of socialization into their community of practice.

Cultural Differences in Classroom Interactions

This section responds to the second research question: What do transfer international graduate students from China and Taiwan experience in IMBA oral classroom discourse? From the data emerged three important themes. One was that the bi-directional interactive style of presenting material differed from that of the instructor-focused style in the students’ home cultures. Thus, while the U.S. instructors encouraged asking and answering questions during class discussion, the participants could not adapt to those expectations due to their home cultures discouragement of interrupting instructors, speaking out, and bringing attention to oneself. This cultural challenge was previously discussed. The second theme was that despite the reluctance to ask and answer
questions, the encouragement to do so of the U.S. professors increased the peripheral participation of the students. They enjoyed and benefitted from the interactive discourse and felt comfortable asking questions of professors after and outside of class. A third important theme was the extent that group discussions with native speakers strongly assisted the process of oral academic discourse socialization. The native speakers modulated their English so that it was comprehensible for the language learners. The projects were also challenging and rewarding. Furthermore, the participants felt comfortable engaging with the members they came to know through these discussions.

The participants stated that their native cultures placed much respect on the authority of teachers. This was also confirmed in other studies (Kwang & Smith, 2004; Brown, 2000; Parks & Raymond, 2004). There was thus fear of inconveniencing professors and other classmates by taking away class time with questions or comments. Another factor this study revealed was that the style of methodology differed due to the goals of the lecturers. The home professors’ aims were to present the material from the book while the U.S. faculty desired to expand beyond the textbook, assuming the students had already read the assigned material. Thus, their schedule had more flexibility in terms of time, a topic not discussed in the literature. Jill said that if she interrupted a professor, it would slow down his or her time schedule, perhaps prevent the professor from finishing the lecture. If students had questions, they asked them after class or during office hours. Jill explained, “Because our education or traditional idea to tell us if we, if we speak in the class, we will interrupt the class, interrupt the professor. That will make the schedule slowly.” Eric, who was more confident speaking and never shared concerns
about the opinions of others, insisted the primary reason was not wanting to waste the professor’s time.

Adjusting to cultural differences in classroom discourse is part of the process of academic discourse socialization (Morita, 2004). Indeed, the participants in this study were used to a classroom management style that was teacher-focused, quite different from the interactive style of the IMBA professors at UMSL. Thus, acclimating to these differences was a major theme in this research. The following quotes summarize the experience of encountering the new style of classroom discourse. Neil observed:

In Taiwan, the professor is one-way teaching. They will not expect the student to share their experience or share their story about what the professor just say…many students will share their experience where like what the professor just mentioned. So, I think it’s quite a difference.

Vicky observed more audience awareness and connection with her U.S. professors. “In Taiwan, a teacher just teach, and they will not focus on see each student. But here a teacher focus on every student, how everyone can ask or answer questions.” Although she was not confident speaking English in front of the class, the friendliness of U.S. instructors made her more comfortable seeing them during their office hours for questions than she felt with her professors in Taiwan. Her engagement in learning outside of class is an example of legitimate peripheral participation theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

**Asking questions in class discussions.** The graduate business professors typically used a Socratic method of interaction while presenting ideas. All four professors I observed encouraged questions. Three constantly elicited information while lecturing,
and the other one showed PowerPoint slides and paused frequently for questions. As stated, this style of class interaction was new for the international students, and they were surprised by the number of questions asked by local students; the participants in a study by Choi (2015) were also surprised by the simple questions asked by their classmates. Asking questions had a different meaning for the participants. It could indicate disrespect in their native cultures. It would be considered creating disharmony, inconveniencing a professor, or even causing someone to lose face (Park, Kim, Chiang, & Ju, 2010). Jill observed:

In Taiwan, we will (be) shy to share our idea or experience, but here they just raise their hand, directly ask the professor, no matter the professor finish his part or not, they will raise their hand directly...In U.S., because I can ask questions directly, other classmates can provide their thought, and then professors will do conclusion and correct something which is wrong or give students a new point.

Joshua also commented on how easily UMSL students asked questions. He said:

Here, if you don’t understand professor say, you raise your hand and ask because I saw a lot of classmate do that. If they don’t understand the professor meaning, they raise their hand and ask for detail. And the professor will explain.

Vicky added, “In the U.S., students have high enthusiasm to ask professors questions in the class or by email, while in Taiwan few students actively ask questions because they are afraid of making mistakes.”

Despite their reluctance to ask questions, all the participants appreciated when their classmates asked questions because it was helpful to understand course content. They could hear the language repeated, which clarified the content. Adam declared, “I
will hope the native speaker will ask more questions.” This indicates that repetition of content and language eased the listening challenges faced by second language learners.

**Answering questions of professors.** In my observations of classes, the instructors frequently sought to elicit information from the students while lecturing. Nearly all the native speakers would answer a question at some point, and some that repeatedly did so. I counted forty or more exchanges with one instructor during a class. The participants and other speakers of Chinese seldom answered a question, even those in their sixth year at UMSL. It happened only once, in a logistics class, when the instructor asked which Chinese city was on the overhead slide, and Eric, being the only student from Mainland China, knew the answer.

As stated, the U.S. instructors of business frequently asked questions to elicit information from the students. In my observations, most of the native speakers and occasionally a non-Asian international student seemed comfortable doing that. Adam said, “Native speaker are much more aggressive to answer instructors' questions.” Joshua observed the contrast in participation between local and international students when he explained:

In reality, native speakers always answer the questions. They raise their hand to answer and have an interaction with the professor. This action shows how they participate is the class…they ask questions they are curious about to the professor. On the contrary, it seem that less non-native speakers are raising their hand to answer those questions during the class.

The lack of participation to answer questions was an obstacle in the oral academic discourse socialization process. It certainly changed the class dynamic; under language
socialization theory, newcomers to a linguistic environment contribute to the discourse practices. This also indicates it created an internal community of practice within the larger one of the class and professor. The concern for others’ feelings stemming from cultural upbringing was strong. One example that demonstrated the depth of consideration was when Eric finished his midterm but waited to submit because of his concern that a classmate next to him would feel ashamed that she needed more time.

**Adding comments to class discussions.** In my observations, the professors often paused their lectures for questions and comments, and a few outgoing native speakers in each class would frequently give detailed answers and comments. Instructors in the classes regularly brought up examples to illustrate concepts and occasionally, local students would even interrupt to add their personal experiences and observations to the discussions. Adam noticed, “Besides answering questions, they also bring up their experience, which is relative with the questions or is just little connected, but non-native speakers prefer to directly answer the questions.” Neil said that in Taiwan the professor dominated the classroom discourse:

> They will not expect the student to share their experience or share their story about what the professor just say. Here many students will share their experience where like what the professor just mentioned. So, I think it’s quite a difference.

Neil appreciated the two-way interaction in classes because he found it more interesting than teacher-focused lectures. “I prefer this kind of style instead of one-way teaching like in Taiwan. It’s easier to fall asleep if teachers keep speaking without interaction with students,” he said. The difference in discourse appeared to be both a challenge and an asset in the process of language acquisition.
Appreciation of encouragement of professors to interact in classes. The participants appreciated that their instructors wanted them to ask and answer questions. It is interesting that while this encouragement did not result in engagement in class discussions, it did enable the international students to be attentive, meaning, they were more engaged in listening, less nervous about interacting in the classroom, and more likely to seek help from faculty outside of class. Joshua commented, “Professor just say, ‘Don't be afraid if you ask a question, it helps the professor to answer. Not just for you, but other people might not know the answer.’” Vicky added that her professors wanted students to discuss ideas and ask questions, not minding the simple ones to which students should have already known the answer. The encouragement suggests students were more enabled to be engaged and actively sought resources outside of class, which aligns with the theory of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wagner, 1991).

In their home countries, the participants said they would not ask questions of which the answers had already been stated in the lecture or textbook. Jill said she often asked questions after a class at UMSL. She felt less intimidated when able to speak slowly one-on-one, as opposed to in front of classmates, and the professor had more time to offer a detailed explanation. Vicky said she was still afraid to speak in class “but I think is better than in Taiwan...I have more breath and more confident to ask a question like after class or email teacher, but in Taiwan I seldom do that.” She added that in the U.S., “I don't have many chances to raise my hand, so if I can raise my hand, I will.” She appeared excited about her ability to do this sometimes.

Group discussions. Compared to their home universities, the participants said the MBA classes in the U.S. required more oral academic tasks with the increased
requirements for group discussions, projects, and presentations. Jill claimed that in Taiwan, there were fewer group projects but at UMSL, sometimes they had up to three in one class. In this section, the participants shared how they benefited from interaction in English in group discussions and with local students. Through the lens of social constructivist theory, the participants relied upon and shared their experiences, identity, and coping strategies. The other theoretical lens in this study, language socialization theory, showed that the students increased their oral English skills through interaction in challenging talks and problem solving with native speakers. The findings below align with the literature on the importance of group discussions in the process of oral academic discourse socialization (Choi, 2015; Ferris, 1998; Ho, 2011; Kim, 2006; Kim, 2016; Lee, 2009; and Parks & Raymond, 2004).

**Importance of group discussions.** A major theme from the data were the importance of group work in the process of oral academic discourse socialization, as was found in other research on this topic. Comments about group discussions yielded the most quotes, 44 in total. Interaction in small groups offered an opportunity for the students to speak English with local students. Only when group meetings were held did their classmates make time outside of class to speak with them. The participants claimed that the business classes at UMSL had considerably more group projects and presentations than classes at the schools in the home countries. The instructors formed groups that were a mix of native and non-native speakers, usually 50%-70% native speakers. Once, though, a professor simply formed the groups with students sitting next to each other. Since the speakers of Chinese almost always sat together, their group spoke only in their native language during that one project.
An intensive course called Seminar in Business Administration offered a deeper opportunity for the language learners to engage more fully in English. All the participants were required to take this course, a cooperative between universities in Germany and Finland and UMSL. The students had the option to take it in Finland or St. Louis, and most chose Finland while Adam and Joshua selected St. Louis. The course was an all-day class for seven straight days. They visited businesses and had lectures and a few social gatherings, and then groups of six worked together to create a presentation to an entrepreneur to convince him or her to set up their “company.” The group work was intensive, and the participants were usually the only non-native speakers in the groups. The experience helped the participants’ confidence increase since they became more comfortable speaking with their group members due to the amount of time conversing with one another. Neil said he could easily jump in the group discussions. Joshua’s level of comfort in conversing with his teammates grew considerably over the week. He explained:

The natives who were in our team shared their ideas and created unique thought when we were discussing. Mike, one of the gentlemen who I really like, always encourage me and cheered me up while I was nervous all the time.

He took the course after the end of the spring semester, and he remarked it would have been better if he had had this course earlier in his time in the U.S.

Nevertheless, Adam found it arduous to have to listen to English all day, as opposed to a shorter, one to three-hour class, which meets once or twice a week. Adam described his experience, “We have visit(ed) a different innovation hub, and we need to cooperate with our teammate. Most of them are native so I need to talk English, speak
English, and listening in English.” He said he felt closer to his classmates due to a social gathering at a Cardinals baseball game, though he claimed the social language was harder for him than academic language. Small talk at the gatherings felt awkward for him despite being familiar with his group members. However, he was more comfortable with European classmates than native speakers. The seminar faculty members were mixed in terms of nationalities. Adam explained, “Our teachers (were) from, two of them were from Finland, and two of them were from Germany.” In addition, there was a U.S. professor, and one of the professors from Germany was Chinese, whom the participants could ask a question of in Mandarin. Of all the participants, Adam appeared the weakest in English language skills, which may account why he was the only participant to complain about the challenge of day-long interactions in a second language.

**Cultural differences in group discourse.** A few cultural differences in speaking were presented during the interviews. One was the amount of speaking. In Helen’s experience, the U.S. group discussions required more interaction. In her experience in Taiwan, the students would each take a separate part to prepare, whereas in the U.S. students would meet as a group and discuss the project together.

Another difference was the perception that U.S. students were more creative. Perhaps this was due to being used to answering questions or other types of active learning. Joshua felt that U.S. students had an easier time thinking up ideas. He explained:

I think the most culture (difference) might be the ideas, yeah. So they just jump out of the box they think more… I just use what I learn in the textbook but they just bring their experience or think more.
When asked whether he thought the reason for creativity was, he replied he thought that the style of teaching in the U.S. made the students more innovative.

Several times I asked about turn-taking in group discussions and the ability to add ideas to the group discussion. I wondered if cultural influences, such as a reluctance to interrupt or deference for age, would play a part. This did not present itself as a theme, but a few responses showed cultural differences may impact one’s ability to engage in group discussions. One difference was interrupting a flow of conversation. Helen claimed it was rude to interrupt in her home culture. That made it difficult for her to take a turn. She said, “I still cannot jump in ask some question… I can’t interrupt two people…I'm not sure is the true reason, but I think is seen the way I grow up.” She felt confident speaking with an individual but had trouble jumping into a larger conversation.

In terms of taking a turn, Vicky’s comment perhaps summarized for others:

If there are more than five people in a group, I will feel afraid of asking questions because I will interrupt them and delay the meeting time. If I am in a small group, I feel more easily ask question and propose my ideas to them, and I could full-participate and understand completely in discussion.

Her comment of worrying about wasting other people’s time was the primary reason why many would not ask a question in a class discussion. Consideration for the needs of the group over the individual is often a characteristic in collective cultures.

Another possible cultural difference was awareness of status and assertiveness. Adam discussed feeling intimidated by working with local classmates, not because of language but due to their experience, which he said made them a higher status. “I think they are better than me. I know they have full-time working experience,” he said. He felt
that U.S. students were more comfortable sharing their opinions, and he was happy to have someone decide what his tasks were. He claimed, “Most of Americans have a leadership personality, so they will tell you his opinion and how we need to process and complete…it’s good because sometimes when I have no idea how to work, I can follow the steps.” Varying levels of experience in group work leads to increased learning, as per Vygotsky’s ZPD. Also, Adam’s deference for status indicates values in one’s home culture play a role in the process of language socialization.

Helpfulness of U.S. classmates. The social context plays an important role in the process of academic socialization. The participants said the patience and encouragement of their U.S. classmates accounted for success communicating in group work. The language learners thus felt more comfortable speaking over time. During their first semester, worried about errors, they were hesitant to speak and inconvenience classmates, but soon realized that their classmates did not judge them on their English skills. Eric said that when he made mistakes, the native speakers did not mention them. Local classmates were often described as “kind.” Irene claimed, “They are helpful. And they’re very kind.” Eric summed it up:

Last semester, I feel a little nervous when I talking to the American students. And now it’s disappeared, just comfortable. (I was nervous about) about how to express my correct idea. How to understand that our classmates, what they are talking about. Yeah. But now, I don't worry about the mistake which we are talking. My language skills have improved. We can understand more information … They are very kind to us.
Irene’s confidence improved due to positive feedback. She explained, “The positive response can enhance my confidence, like their understanding of my means or concentrate on my speaking.”

Regarding discussions, Adam said:

I would not feel uncomfortable in group discussions because native speakers usually pay attention on your speaking, and if they feel confused, they ask kindly. In the process, native speakers solve our confusion when we ask the questions…I am trying to speak more with native speaker, and I am also appreciated that they have patient to chat with me…They are patient. Yeah, I can have a good communication with them.

Jill claimed, “Because I always work one or two native speaker, people try to slow down their speed for me. If I don’t understand some word, they’ll try to explain... Get easy to know what they’re trying to explain.” In the process of language socialization, the learners were able to become more fluent in the context of an academic group discussion due to mentors, in this case, the native speakers. This was a highly positive growth in the academic socialization of the international students. While not all literature on group work revealed positive influence of local classmates (Parks & Raymond, 2004), other studies revealed that working with native speakers was helpful for speaking (Yanagi & Baker, 2015; Kim, 2016). Through the lens of language socialization theory, the process is interactional. In other words, newcomers change the linguistic environment (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011); the international presence appeared instrumental in helping local classmates learn how to modulate speech for second language speakers, a skill that could prove useful in their future careers in multilingual environments.
**Rewards of group discussions.** Overall, the participants felt positive about group work and its benefits. They were more confident speaking in group discussions than class discussions, as stated in Ho (2011). Eric cheerfully claimed, “I think (I’m) not bad when I was speaking in group discussions. Because I can express myself, and at the same time, they can understand and accept.” Group discussions provided Adam an opportunity to express himself in English beyond small talk. He said, “Native speakers solve our confusion when we ask the questions, but I am sometimes too shy to ask question. The most rewarding thing is that we can have detail conversion in discussion, which is not merely simple conversation.” The first time I observed Adam in a course on logistics, he sat in the back next to another Taiwanese classmate whom he spoke with in Chinese during the professor’s lecture. The second time I observed the class, Adam was seated with a group of local students he was presenting with. They had met before class to review their presentation. Thus, he had to engage in English and socialize with native speakers. Through these projects, the participants were able to improve their aural and oral language skills in a social and cultural context.

In addition, the group discussions were constructive in order to plan responsibilities and solve problems, the results of which were often presented to the class. In the logistics course, I observed the groups present their research of a country where their proposed company would be set up. Eric explained, “The most rewarding is that through the cooperation of us, our team has achieved a very satisfactory result.” Each project was typically comprised of classmates the participants did not know well, which could account for communication challenges yet offered opportunities to interact with a variety of people. Another major advantage of group work was the participants felt
comfortable interacting outside of groups and classes with the local students they had met in the discussions. Such interactions included small talk and asking questions about course content.

**Challenges and benefits of delivering presentations.** The participants commented that in their home country, they had fewer presentations and did not have the added difficulty of preparing to speak in a second language. This required extra time. Everyone agreed with Irene when she stated, “We need time for prepare the presentation, more time than in China. In China, we don’t have to prepare. But here maybe we need to remember all that we need to say.” While delivering a presentation in a second language, learners often have to focus more on language and less on the content of the ideas they wish to convey. Irene stated, “Yes, in our country we are focused on the content of the presentation, and here we focus on the language.” Adam added he felt a lot of pressure preparing presentations. This linguistic challenge created stress and worry about being comprehensible.

Presentations were seen as more challenging for language skills than group discussions. For reasons explained above, the participants felt presentations were generally considered more stressful, but were also a means to advance their second language skills. Eric’s comment below shows that group work helped him improve his listening and speaking skills, but presentations were more challenging. Thus, both were helpful for his English proficiency. He said:

In the group discussion, I need not only to understand the meaning of my teammates, but also to contribute my thoughts. I get some exercise from listening to speaking…I use the word “pardon” when interacting with native speakers, and
they consequently slow their speech...When presentation, I need to be confident, clear, and express the group's opinions loudly. At this time, no one can help you or replace you, and the requirement for speaking English will be higher.

Helen added that compared to group work, presentations were more helpful to improve her language skills and increase her level of confidence. “I think that presentations are more helpful than group discussions for speaking. Via preparing the presentation, I feel more confident in speaking English,” she commented. The mediator in this example of language socialization was creating the presentation; it required reaching a higher level of vocabulary expression. Oral presentations also assisted oral discourse socialization of both native and nonnative speakers of English in a graduate program (Morita, 2017).

**Differences between Graduate Classes in Home Countries and the U.S.**

Besides cultural differences in classroom discourse and oral tasks, the graduate programs in China and Taiwan and the MBA program at UMSL varied in other ways. The participants did not seem to have undergone difficulty with the transition to these differences, yet they impacted the academic experience. One difference was the amount of class time, which was far more in their home countries, 20-30 hours a week, as opposed to 9-12 in the U.S. Another difference was the IMBA courses at UMSL were usually in the evening, often meeting only once a week, since the program catered to full-time professionals. Adam said he would prefer morning or afternoon classes so that evenings could be used for social activities. He also thought learning would be enhanced with more classes during the week. “Our EAP Class was for one hour and fifteen minutes. Yeah, that's better for learning language, one hour than once a week, I think a few times a week is better than once,” he explained. Furthermore, some classes were
online, the opinion of which was unfavorable since improving speaking skills for social and professional reasons was a goal of the transfer students. Irene said the only advantage taking online classes was she could look up cultural references and other topics she did not understand at any point, unlike in a live lecture where pausing to search for information causes one to miss the next idea. However, she said this was not a strong advantage because she always searched for information before a face-to-face class. Adam complained the amount and level of reading in his online classes were challenging.

**Workload of U.S. classes.** One common difference between higher education in the U.S. and that of China and Taiwan was the distribution of coursework. Many countries worldwide rely on a final exam at the end of the semester while most courses in the U.S. have requirements distributed throughout the semester with assignments, group projects, presentations, quizzes, and a midterm; the final exam does not usually count for the majority of the final grade. Jill said in Taiwan, if they had a group project, there would be no midterm in that class. She continued, “But in America, even if we have project, not only 1 project, 2 or 3 project we still have a midterm and a final term.” Joshua and Jill mentioned that in the U.S., there was more focus on presentations and less on midterms compared to their home universities. Adam commented he felt more control over his grades at UMSL. Irene said that while there was more pressure throughout the semester in the U.S., she retained more knowledge than when she just studied for one exam.

Jill felt the amount of work at UMSL was higher but not necessarily more difficult, except, of course, for the challenges of using English. The amount of time needed to study had increased. She typically spent three hours preparing before a class at
UMSL and then reviewed the material again for another hour. U.S. professors covered less in class because there was less time and more expectations that the students would read the material on their own.

In terms of grades, Vicky confirmed the program in the U.S. had less focus on midterm and final exams and more weight on group projects. Irene felt overwhelmed by the amount of work yet appreciated the learning. She said:

In China, we usually don't have so much assignment and quiz as in U.S. In most cases, there is just a final exam for one course. So it's tough for us to review all the materials at the end of semester. We are exhausted to try our best to remember all information and forget them quickly soon. In U.S., we always have a lot of assignment and quiz. We feel pressured from beginning to the end, but we can deal with them and grasp the knowledge better. So, I prefer the teaching style in U.S.

Vicky’s comment suggests that more frequent assessments benefit learning, as Irene had said. Students including Adam and Irene also appreciated having more control over their grades through the numerous assignments.

Explicitness in U.S. discourse. Styles of lectures are said to be less direct in collective cultures compared to the linear pattern of organization in the U.S. with its explicit topic sentences in writing and lectures (Kim, Ah, & Lam, 2009). Neil exemplified this when he said that in his home country, “They just give you some hints and some tips and you have to sort of figure out by yourself.” He also noticed on how native speakers paraphrase ideas. He remarked, “I notice that the Americans speakers will use another sentence to say the same idea again.” In some cultures, main ideas may be
implicit or stated towards the end of a lecture; in contrast, in English discourse, the main ideas are typically stated before they are elaborated on. While this difference was not mentioned regarding the lectures, it was noticeable in group discussions. “The speaking style is kind of different yeah. For Asia we make all the key points behind… the behind the yeah. For the American people, they will talk about key points first,” Adam observed.

**Focus on theory vs. application.** The participants said that classes in their home countries fixated on theory while at UMSL, they focused on practical applications. The participants claimed that the U.S. professors gave more examples and less theory. Jill said professors in Taiwan were concerned about exams; they read details and concentrated on definitions, while in the U.S. application of the material was emphasized. Joshua said he thought in the U.S. the professors concentrated on interacting and helping comprehension rather than finishing the chapter. In a discussion about differences between teaching styles, Vicky discussed her accounting class:

Here, the teacher focus on the journal and entry. We need to write like statements, balance statement, income statement, and how this statement too can connect with the business, and how the balance sheet change, the asset changed or liability change, it can influence the business. But in Taiwan, we just focus on writing the theory. Not…. we have no connect with the real business. Yes, (here) it’s more practical. We can easy…we can know why we need to do this balance sheet. And if we have wrong in this subject, it will influence the company.

In a discussion on this topic between Jill and Eric, both felt the professors in their home countries focused on teaching definitions and the textbook. However, in the U.S., professors extrapolated from the text and offered practical examples. They viewed that
examples made concepts easy to understand and were better for students in the long run, such as in work situations.

Jill said professors in the U.S. assumed students could refer to the book and learn independently; class time was thus used to expand on the material. She said in Asian countries, the professors know the students do not want to read the textbook, so they repeat its content during the class. When she asked a question in Taiwan, they repeated the definitions and theories. The focus was on memorizing definitions, “not teaching you how to think.” She generally preferred learning by examples, but in some cases, she found the style in Taiwan to be useful. After the definition was repeated, and she then had to explain it in her own words, which helped her form a first grasp of the theory. Eric echoed what Jill said, that in the U.S., professors assumed students had read the textbook at home, and less class time was spent on offering information, examples, case studies and discussions beyond the readings. In his opinion, in China and other Asian countries, the professors assume the students did not read the book, so more time is spent on explaining its content and emphasizing memorization.

Appreciation of U.S. style of instruction. The appreciation for instruction in the U.S. emerged as a theme. Seven of the eight students preferred the style of instruction employed by the U.S. professors of business due to their enthusiasm, interactive styles of instruction, and focus on practical application over theory. The only participant who felt he enjoyed the style of teaching in his country more was Eric. In China, he was enrolled in a full-time program for experienced professionals that required active thinking. It was different from the programs in Taiwan or Irene’s program for part-time students in China. He claimed it pushed him to think critically, with less direct offering of the information
or following a textbook. He also said that his professors collaborated ideas with professors at other universities in China.

The participants felt their instructors’ focus on student learning was a major difference between classes in the home countries and the U.S. Vicky claimed the level of enthusiasm U.S. teachers had for asking questions improved her confidence and enabled her to have a closer relationship with her instructors. She claimed:

Here the teacher want student to understand detail, and teacher want every student know what he or she teach. But in Taiwan, the teacher want to finish the chapter. So, they don't want student to raise their hand or ask question.” She added that in Taiwan, professors do not look at or call on individual students. Joshua felt the U.S. methodology was practical and efficient. Neil claimed that his professors in Taiwan sometimes just read slides or out of books.

In my observations, all the MBA professors were highly engaged and enthusiastic, though this is not necessarily true of all U.S professors. Jill said, “Professors in U.S. will encourage students to discuss in class no matter any question. Even though the question has been taught, professors still love to answer it,” which was mentioned earlier by Vicky. Jill continued that professors in the U.S. enjoyed answering questions after class with details and drawing on the board. Some professors in Taiwan did not like her asking a question after class.

Another factor Irene appreciated was that the U.S. professors of business detailed their syllabi and posted slides and materials on the class learning site. She said in China, the syllabi were just simple outlines, and she appreciated the extra effort made at UMSL. She said:
In the United States, almost every teacher they will give their schedules, the slides on the Canvas before the class. So we can preview it and know every time what he will say. In our hometown, they will may be not be so clear about what he will say.

Several specific methods were discussed as being useful for learning. One was in their accounting class, in which there were required homework exercises and an online quiz that automatically told them if their answers were wrong. Thus, the students knew what areas they needed to focus on. In addition, the language learners appreciated when an instructor opened up a class discussion for questions. Irene explained, “The law professor, when he finished all of a section, he will say, ‘Do you have some questions about this?’ And I think it will make it easier.”

Jill mentioned that a lot of students in her accounting courses asked questions, which the instructor always answered; as discussed previously, the repetition of language during questions and answers helped reinforce material. Also discussed was how the instructor of Business Law compared local laws and topics with those of the countries of the participants. This assisted comprehension of material and helped local students learn about other countries.

There were three categories of reasons for appreciation of the teaching style in the U.S.: more control of their grades, the interactive style of lecturing, and closer relationships with their instructors. Table 4-2 offers quotes and other reasons why they enjoyed the U.S. teaching style of the MBA faculty. In general, they felt the focus on practical examples better prepared them than the memorization of definitions and theories more often used in their home countries.
Table 4- 2

Reasons for Appreciation of U.S. Teaching Style

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>I prefer the teaching style here because I think that I have responsibility to control my grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>In China, we usually don’t have so much assignment and quiz as in U.S. In most cases, there is just a final exam for one course. So it's tough for us to review all the materials at the end of semester. We are exhausted to try our best to remember all information and forget them quickly soon. In U.S. we always have a lot of assignment and quiz. We feel pressured from beginning to the end, but we can deal with them and grasp the knowledge better. So, I prefer the teaching style in U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>I prefer the teaching styles in the U.S. as it can train me to be more confident as well as to maintain a good relationship with professors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>In United States, I think it's more interesting because some of the professor use examples to bring the student into their surrounding and that's very useful. And if so, in Taiwan, they seldom interact with student. Just if there is a student have a question. But in United States, I think professor really focus on, professor want to interact with student. They think it’s more useful. It more efficient to learn during the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Here they will provide more examples and details to help us understand the class. But in our country, the professor will read the definition again, so it’s harder to understand the professor in my country.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coping Strategies

This section addresses the third research questions of what coping strategies the participants develop to overcome strategies and how they change over time, and the fourth, how previous disciplinary knowledge and experience impact performance in class and at work. The themes that the data presented were that previewing before a lecture aids comprehension of content, and the goals to increase speaking skills helped the
participants to create strategies to overcome challenges of language and academic success. Also, the data showed that previous coursework was helpful to understand course content. Prior work that contained similar tasks helped the participants perform those for academic work. The problem-solving techniques aligned well under social constructivist theory, with its focus on using past experience and knowledge to construct meaning.

Exploring how international graduate students in a new language and culture develop ways to succeed in challenging courses was a major focus of this research. Through the lens of social constructivist theory, I sought to see how the participants solved problems in their sociocultural setting to overcome language, cultural, and academic challenges and how they increased their levels of language fluency. I also wanted to know how strategies changed over time, an area little explored in the literature on this topic.

**Listening and lecture comprehension strategies.** A number of strategies were employed to assist lecture comprehension including previewing course materials: the posted PPTs, articles, and textbook. This proved extremely effective. The students developed strategies outside of class and drew upon previous knowledge and experience as well. Six also enrolled in a recommended EAP course.

**Previewing material.** While a number of strategies were used to increase academic listening skills, previewing material prior to a lecture was paramount to increase comprehension. The participants were asked how much they understood class lectures in general, when they previewed the material and when they had previous knowledge of its content. Table 4-3 presents the answers the participants gave. Many
reported it increased as much as twice, around 40%-80%, in the second semester, but to reach 80%, they usually had to prepare. Previewing material included reading the textbook and articles and studying the PowerPoint presentations instructors posted on the class website. Previous knowledge would mean the participants had already studied the subject or perhaps had learned of it through work experience.

Table 4-3
Self-Reported Listening Comprehension during Academic Lectures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>% of Comprehension of Class Lectures in General</th>
<th>% of Comprehension When Previewed Material</th>
<th>% of Comprehension with Previous Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60-70%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>70-80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the participants struggled greatly with listening comprehension during their first semester. When asked at the beginning of their second semester about understanding academic lectures, the participants claimed though their comprehension had improved, they still had difficulty with this. Irene commented, “Yeah. I think I am more confident than before in class to understand and to listen, but also have some difficulties.” As shown, three of the participants felt their comprehension rose to 80% when they prepared and another said it went to 90%. Joshua’s level of understanding stayed the same despite studying or previously having learned material. Only one participant never prepared for
class, Adam, because he said he was too “lazy.” When later interviewed, Eric claimed he could grasp up to 90% of a class lecture, if he previewed the material.

Engaging in post-lecture strategies. All the participants claimed to use the Internet to search for information. They also used Google to translate from English to Chinese to understand academic articles, with the exception of Joshua, who preferred to read only in English so he could improve his language skills. He was also the only participant who sat next to native speakers in class because he hoped to have an opportunity to ask them a question if he did not understand something they asked. To understand classmates in group discussions, Joshua took notes and prepared. He said:

I cannot really figure out what they are talking in the beginning; therefore, it (was) hard to join the conversation. What I do is to figure out the key point and do some notes. Then, I do some researches for the next time discussion.

Though the participants would not ask a question during class, all claimed they felt comfortable seeing instructors after class or during office hours to ask questions. Many had also done this customary in their home universities. Jill said that over the semesters, as her confidence grew, she stopped asking questions of her classmates and instead sought help from the professors after class. This was because professors offered more detailed answers with examples.

The strategies to improve listening and lecture comprehension aligned into two categories. One was interacting with others. These strategies of creating networks aligned with the theory of individual networks of practice (Zappa-Hollman and Duff, 2015). The other strategies created were performed individually. Table 4- 4 lists the strategies the participants used to understand class lectures along with comments.
Table 4 - 4
Strategies Employed for Listening and Lecture Comprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask question of local classmates</td>
<td>Vicky, Adam, Joshua</td>
<td>Most of time, I discussed with my Taiwanese classmates about the confusions, and then ask native classmates or professors when we are still confused.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask question of Chinese speakers</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go to the gym to speak English</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to the radio</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preview content</td>
<td>Irene, Jill, Vicky, Neil</td>
<td>The best method for me to understand the course is to review textbooks because after I read the books, I can easily understand what professors say and some academic words. (Vicky) If I don’t preview, I only understand 50%, but if I preview, I understand 80% of a lecture. (Vicky)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read novels for spoken vocabulary</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record class lectures</td>
<td>Jill, Joshua, and Vicky</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refer to a dictionary app</td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search the Internet</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>In the Strategy class, I have to do some research for a paper then I need to Google the main idea about the cultures. (Helen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sit near native speakers</td>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>If I’m interesting in that question that he or she ask, I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
will try to ask why, what are you asking and they might explain in more detail because I asking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Watch movies</td>
<td>Jill, Adam</td>
<td>Last week. I had a lot of free time. I watched a movie every day. That's why my listening is improving... Movie pass is very good.(Jill)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend workshops for IMBA program</td>
<td>All</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Drawing upon previous knowledge.** The participants were asked to what extent their previous classes and work experience in their home country facilitated comprehension of lessons. Under social constructivist theory, people co-create knowledge in a context drawing upon previous knowledge. In this study, the content of courses already taken assisted comprehension. Work experience did not apply in terms of subject matter but did lessen the challenges of performing similar tasks for academic requirements.

**Prior coursework.** The participants agreed that the same subjects previously taken in Mandarin were easier to understand because of the background knowledge. When asked if her prior classes in China helped her at UMSL, Irene agreed, saying, “Because before, my major was finance, and I think it also helpful for me to learn the classes here like accounting or finance.” Several mentioned the accounting class was easier at UMSL than in their home universities, especially since previous coursework in the subject had prepared them. It may be assumed that technical subjects with less language and culture are simpler to comprehend. Even though the participants’ classes were taught in
Mandarin, many of the textbooks were in English, so they were familiar with academic terms and theories in English vocabulary. Vicky reported:

This semester, I took the accounting class in Taiwan when I was a freshman. I had learned the kind of academic book before, and it is English book, too. So, I came, I come here and start my accounting class. I think it was very easy…It’s not very difficult because I major in finance, so when I read the personal financial textbook. It is many academic word I know before, so, I think it’s easy for me to read the textbook.

Vicky’s comment indicates previous disciplinary knowledge impacts comprehension of course material.

Work experience. The participants were asked whether they had professional work experience, and if so, whether it assisted their comprehension of course content. Only Irene and Eric possessed career experience, but most of the Taiwanese had held part-time jobs, such as working in restaurants, tutoring, or assisting at a school. The responses revealed that their professional experience was unrelated to topics in class and minimally assisted listening or content comprehension; nevertheless, participants benefitted from work experience in their ability to complete tasks. For instance, Irene had worked for a pharmaceutical company, where she gained experience with delivering presentations. Helen had had a part-time job at a school office, for which she wrote proposals, created and delivered presentations, and learned office systems like Excel and PowerPoint. She felt these skills helped her in classes because every course required papers and presentations. She also had worked as a teaching assistant for calculus and statistics, which helped her listening comprehension in some classes. Only Neil had
experience working in an English-speaking setting at his campus job. He said speaking with the administrative assistant helped him improve his listening skills and ability to understand professors. Eric, who had worked the longest of any of the participants, said his career in IT was helpful for courses:

> My work experience taught me some skills like information searching, technology use tools with a computer or some other form of recording to help me improve my study skill…Maybe the PowerPoint is the same here and in our home country classes. I mean this experience is useful to have you understand the classes, to express your ideas and to pass the presentation or final exam. It’s very useful to all - it’s very useful, to enhance your skills and the academic to finish the classes here.

Since most of the IMBA classes included delivering presentations using PowerPoint, prior experience with this proved useful, especially since many people are uncomfortable with public speaking, and doing so in a second language can be even more challenging.

**Improving speaking skills.** Improving speaking skills was a major goal for the participants, who viewed strong oral communication in English a means to academic, social, and future career success. However, as discussed in the section Challenges of Speaking, overcoming barriers such as vocabulary, fear of making errors, and lack of confidence was not easy. This section discusses the theme that the goal and motivation to improve speaking skills, ways the students increased their levels of confidence, and strategies they developed to increase their skills in speaking a second language all helped the students improve their oral communication abilities.
**Participants’ goals for speaking English.** Communication with native speakers was a desire for all the participants. Two primary reasons emerged: oral fluency in English could help one perform academic tasks and it would improve opportunities for future success. Whenever a native speaker approached me wanting to be a volunteer conversation partner, the participants in this study were eager for the opportunity. Helen’s conversation partner could not meet face-to-face due to her work schedule. Their solution was to use video chats throughout the day. Helen appreciated the practice and connection with a local student.

The ability to speak English was an important goal since it is the international language used in business. In fact, the participants who procured internships primarily had positions utilizing their language skills in Mandarin and English. Adam said knowing English would help him find work in Mainland China since opportunities would be limited in Taiwan. He said:

My goal is that I can be a bilingual because my country is an island. For instance, lots of information won't transmit by Mandarin quickly, or the domestic market is too small and then we need to trade with foreign country. Hence, the ability of speaking (a) primary language will give me advance to get an offer.

Table 4-5 summarizes the reasons the participants were motivated to speak English. They include goals to achieve social, academic, and long-term career success.
Table 4- 5

Types of Motivation to Speak English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve oral communication skills</td>
<td>Irene, Helen Jill, Joshua</td>
<td>Improving my English skill is the key for me to reach my goals. If I want to have a job in an international company, it is vital for me to speak and understand English very well. (Irene) If I don't grab this opportunity, I won't get it anymore. (Jill) If I don’t talk, I cannot get the opportunity... to know more people, get to know more American things (and) how to have a conversation with a native speaker. (Joshua)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve oral communication skills</td>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>My goals for speaking English was that I could be able to chat with natural speakers and do the presentation with confidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve oral communication skills</td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>My dream for speaking English is understand topics and becoming a fluent speaker. In class discussions, I join to help me improve language skills and understand the topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain opportunities/work success</td>
<td>Adam, Jill, Eric</td>
<td>It is important in daily life and work in USA. (Eric)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Increasing confidence in speaking English.* One theme the data presented was the lack of and improving of confidence while speaking, from asking questions to making small talk or participating in group discussions. As Joshua said, “One of the biggest obstacles for international students is lacking of confidence.” Naturally, feeling
comfortable is important for an international student to engage in conversations. Adam remarked:

The native speakers can respond to professors or classmates promptly and add their opinions. I am not able to do that, so I still a little afraid to speak English in class. When I just arrived St. Louis, I had no any confidence to speak in the class. Since confidence can help second language learners begin and continue conversations, learning ways they overcome insecurities offers insight into tools for language acquisition. Table 4-6 lists various methods the participants developed to improve their confidence. The comments show additional insight into the reasons why each factor was effective. In some cases, a participant listed more than one factor, or reason, that increased the level of comfort with speaking.
Table 4- 6

Factors that Helped Increase Confidence to Speak a Second Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>Drinking. I think I will say, drink the alcohol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to experience the U.S.</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>(Wanting) to know more people get to know more American things, get to know how to have a conversation with a native speaker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades</td>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>Maybe after you finish your presentation you are very exciting about your score. A high score also increase your confidence. It is another encouraging way too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group projects</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>After work with the group project, I have more confidence work with native speaker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of People</td>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>One by one, I will talk more, but in the group I cannot do that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Talk</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Small talk helps. I have more native vocabulary and communication. Yeah, and talk about the St. Louis things, the Cardinals, the Blues, and the restaurants, the Garden, the Galleria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>Small talk (improved her confidence). We have a roommate from Vietnam. Yeah, we speak English almost every day. Talk about our lives, the culture,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s encouragement</td>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>Encourage is very useful is the best way to improve to increase your confidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the culture</td>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>The most rewarding might be acknowledging the diversity of the culture. The more culture you know, the less nervous you get.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the topic</td>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>For me, it depends on how I understand the questions and how I familiar with the subject, such as Supply Chain, Finance, or</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Oral Academic Discourse Socialization and Workplace Enculturation

The reason is because of the characteristic. I am less confidence person who do not do things that I am not sure. Therefore, I usually join the class discussion when I am 80% sure of the answer or the subject I am familiar with.

Coping strategies to improve speaking skills. A factor repeated by almost all the participants was their fear of making errors, which Park-Saltzman, Wada, & Mogami (2012) also discussed. It was stronger the first semester but had decreased by the second semester, due to the encouragement of the local classmates. Whereas the participants worried about imperfections like grammar in their English, they soon realized native speakers were not focused on errors, and this made them feel more relaxed when speaking. Irene said, “I found in most cases I could achieve my goals by communicating in English, and other people didn't care how poor my English was. So, I was not as afraid of speaking English as I did before.” As mentioned before, the participants felt discomfort making small talk with strangers, but were likely to practice speaking with native speakers they had met in group discussions and projects. Neil and Helen commented that preparing for presentations was very helpful to improve their English language skills. Neil searched for words on the Internet to check his pronunciation and thus was motivated to improve his clarity in speaking.

Keeping a written record of new vocabulary words and phrases is an effective strategy. Neil, whose level of fluency appeared higher than that of the other participants, took notes of phrases he heard on video blogs and movies. He wrote the phrases and practiced them. “Most of my part is listening and make the note once I don’t know the meanings. (If) I think this is a good sentence when I was watching a movie, I will keep
down a note for myself,” he explained. He gave an example of the expression *Is it possible to deliver something?* to illustrate this. He wrote and practiced it until it sounded smooth, and then used it when possible.

The following table (4-7) lists strategies the participants employed to help them improve their speaking skills in English, from practice speaking in conversations and presentations to explicitly studying vocabulary and working on paraphrasing. The comments detail how the participants were able to improve their oral communication. Again, increasing fluency in English would help them achieve success in their academic, social, and workplace settings, so motivation was high. As they improved their English with others in an academic context, they learned the pragmatics, or culturally appropriate norms used when interacting in academic contexts.
Table 4-

Strategies Employed to Improve English Speaking Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy Discussed</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask questions of native speakers</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>I will ask my classmates who is native how to speak it better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find opportunities for small talk</td>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>While I am waiting for the shuttle, I will talk to the person who is closest to me. When I am in the classroom, I will ask them about their ideas of assignments. When I have leisure time, I will participate in activities which are held by school clubs. There are many ways to learn and improve my English speaking, so as long as I can grasp the opportunity, it could change me a lot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitate native speakers (on videos)</td>
<td>Helen, Neil</td>
<td>I don’t need to worry about any grammar, just copy it and say it again and again, and I could have more courage to talk with others. When I catch the phrase that I want to learn, I will stop and play and practice the word.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase vocabulary</td>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>I schedule to remember vocabulary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn pronunciation with websites</td>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>If there is a word I don't know. So I can Google it. I think this is the way I can... a pronunciation website, yet dictionary website, and now I will understand how to pronounce it. So this is kind of the way I can improve my English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase terms</td>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>Even if they couldn't understand, I can use other words and body languages. I found in most cases I could achieve my goals communicating in English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliver presentations</td>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Via preparing the presentation, I feel more confident in speaking English.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

Over the course of the spring and summer semesters, from February to July 2018, the eight participants shared their experiences in graduate-level coursework in another language and culture. Each participated in both group and individual interviews plus sent reflective journals answering questions. Having already spent one semester in the U.S., they were in a position to reflect on linguistic and cultural challenges in their listening and speaking skills, coping strategies they developed to overcome these difficulties, their experiences with classroom interactions, interactions outside of class, and awareness of cultural differences in methodology. The themes derived are explicitly listed after each research question.

Through the lens of language socialization, the participants increased their second language skills in listening and speaking by interacting in the norms of a U.S. academic context. Fluency in English improved from input of higher-level vocabulary, such as from the course materials and listening to native speakers, thus exemplifying Vygotsky’s the ZPD. Language weaknesses created exclusion from their community of practice while group work with local students facilitated inclusion. As theorized in social constructivist theory, the students developed appropriate coping strategies based on previous knowledge and experience in the home countries and through EAP coursework. They developed individual networks of practice by relationships with classmates and faculty members and increased their level of confidence in interacting in English. Because of these, the participants extensively talked about interacting in group projects, talking academic tasks, and the necessity to learn how to make small talk. All were highly motivated to improve their speaking skills in hopes to socialize more in English and gain
better future career opportunities. The participants succeeded in graduating with an IMBA degree and were thus in a position to try to next enter a career in which they could utilize their skills in a second language and culture.

The participants highly appreciated the teaching style in the U.S. over that in their home countries due to less formal relationships with faculty members, interactive group and class discussions, active learning, less focus on exams and theory, and practical applications relevant to future work. A few commented they did not benefit as much from online classes and preferred face-to-face classes. The amount of class time was less in the U.S., yet the workload higher, so they felt they had learned a considerable amount about business administration during their academic year in the U.S.

The data from the interviews and journals generated much evidence that the process of oral academic discourse socialization is indeed a complicated road. Overcoming insecurities of English language skills and learning to navigate cultural differences in academic communication and relationships with peers and faculty takes time and confidence.
Chapter Five

Findings of Workplace Enculturation

The second part of this research focuses on workplace enculturation. The IMBA program at UMSL consists of two to three semesters of coursework and a summer internship so that students may benefit from both study and work abroad experiences. Chapter Five presents the findings from the data collected of eight individual interviews, one focus group session, and seven reflective journals during the summer of 2018. From the overarching research question of how speakers of another language and culture adapt to oral communication in their academic courses and workplace settings, in this chapter findings for four of the five research questions are discussed. They are:

- What linguistic and cultural challenges do transfer international graduate students from China and Taiwan face?
- What coping strategies do these individuals develop to overcome challenges and how do they change over time?
- How do previous disciplinary knowledge and experience impact performance at work?
- How does the process of oral academic discourse socialization compare to and prepare one for workplace socialization?

The data were coded for all the factors related to the linguistic and cultural challenges faced in looking for an internship and starting and continuing the jobs. Participants were interviewed at the beginning of their internships and again two months later, after they had adjusted to the work environment. Also examined were the coping strategies, influence of previous knowledge and experience, and comparisons of and
preparation of oral academic discourse with workplace communication. This chapter is organized in the order of the findings according to the topic of the research questions.

In short, entering a new job can be overwhelming for a person of a second language and culture, in particular the linguistic challenges of understanding new vocabulary, adapting to the faster pace of speech and activity, and having to interact frequently with colleagues. Unlike the classroom, responsibility to perform a job is higher because it affects colleagues and company. Thus, the importance of asking questions overcame discomfort of interrupting colleagues and supervisors.

Included in this chapter are the communication challenges met interviewing and adjusting to internships in a second language and culture. They include listening comprehension and speaking skills required to use a telephone, make small talk, interact in meetings, and ask questions of colleagues and a supervisor. These functions are then contrasted with similar ones in academic settings. In addition, the extent to which the IMBA program prepared the students for workplace communication is examined. To the best of my knowledge, little literature has been conducted on the transference of oral communication skills from an academic to a workplace setting, in particular for those in a second language and culture. Implications from the data may serve MBA faculty, administrators, and employers of international workers, and offer an applied examination of intercultural communication in the workplace.

Indeed, working in the U.S. proved valuable to gain a deeper insight into the U.S. business culture. Joshua said he was impressed with the amount of community engagement of local companies, who seek to establish relations with their local communities. Helen remarked it was rewarding to work in a second culture to see the
different ways people deal with the same circumstance or obstacle. She also felt she understood the U.S. culture beyond what she learned in college. She cited, “Working in another language and culture is that you will know about the other country closely and detailed.” She switched internships over the summer and compared the two companies. She found the first one with primarily Taiwanese coworkers to have a formal ambience, while the second company was casual. “Everyone is more like family,” she claimed. Of all the internships, Eric’s company was the most globalized, with startups in Russia, France, Germany, Canada, and St. Louis, Missouri. “The best reward of working in another language and culture is open his mind.” He said communicating in English every day taught him different ways of thinking “in different language contexts and cultural backgrounds. Figuring out how others think and act broadened my horizons.”

It was more difficult for the IMBA graduates to procure internships in 2018 than in previous years. Many companies claimed there were increased number of restrictions for them to issue work visas to J-1 students under the political administration. Eric said companies preferred someone with a green card or citizenship. Thus, three of the eight participants were unable to find a position: Adam, Irene, and Joshua. Adam applied to over 100 companies and did not receive an offer. He said it was because he did not have the right visa, and some financial firms could only hire U.S. citizens. Another reason was that some companies did not want to invest in hiring and training an intern that could not stay with them an extended amount of time. Adam returned to Taiwan in the late summer, as did Irene and Joshua. He thus planned to look for a job in China because he felt the investment market was too small in Taiwan. The other five participants procured
internships working in St. Louis. Primarily through face-to-face interviews, conducted over the summer of 2018, they shared their perspectives.

The ability to speak both English and Mandarin was the major reason the participants were hired. Vicky’s and Helen’s internships were at an import company at which the supervisor and most of the coworkers were Taiwanese. Jill said she obtained her job because the company had wanted to hire a native speaker of Mandarin for their Asian customers. They felt it was more professional to have a native speaker help their clients. Her position was as an administrative assistant, which required her to enter orders from customers, file documents, and help customers on the telephone. Helen arranged deliveries by ships to the U.S. and then from coastal cities to St. Louis. She booked trucks to transport goods, as did Neil. His company worked with Chinese companies, so knowing Mandarin helped him procure the position. He also arranged transportation of goods, and sometimes he had to translate documents. Despite increasing obstacles to gaining employment in the U.S., their procurement of positions implies that bilingualism will continue to be an asset in the globalized workplace.

The first two sections address the research question of what linguistic and cultural challenges are faced by international transfer students from China and Taiwan in the workplace.

**Challenges of Listening Comprehension**

One theme from the data was that understanding English in the workplace proved to be challenging, more so than in graduate-level lectures and discussions. The comparison between the two settings will be expanded upon later in this chapter. The major factor was the complexity of vocabulary, including workplace jargon and
colloquialisms. Also, colleagues spoke quickly and did not repeat or rephrase expressions; in fact, all the participants claimed colleagues spoke faster than their U.S. classmates, who had often modified their speech when speaking with second language learners. Eric commented, “In work meetings, the pitch is faster, the vocabulary is more, and there is no chance of repetition.” A third factor was the participants felt more pressure to understand everything. Job performance seemed to have more at stake for them and their colleagues than academic performance. For instance, while Neil felt comfortable not understanding everything spoken in class lectures, he wanted to grasp 100% of what was said at work. Thus, he asked others to repeat themselves. Eric also felt intense pressure to comprehend what was said. The participants claimed listening during meetings was especially hard. Helen and Vicky felt that weaknesses understanding colleagues impacted their ability to ask questions.

Each industry contains its own jargon, or technical vocabulary, which created a difficulty during the initial adjustment. Neil felt uncomfortable his first day of work because he had to focus so much on understanding others. He said, “It was so scary, but I don’t know how to talk, just watched people talk.” Vicky commented, “Sometimes the professional words I cannot understand because this is a logistic industry, and I’m not quite familiar with the logistic industry.” Although Helen’s listening skills had improved over the year, she felt she still could not understand and speak as fluently as a native speaker because of the amount of academic and technical vocabulary in English. In addition to jargon, the second language learners were challenged by colloquialisms. Neil claimed that his colleagues used more slang and spoke less clearly than did professors and students. Vocabulary was repeated daily so over time, this challenge lessened.
Another theme that emerged was the fear of inconveniencing a supervisor with questions and not understanding the subsequent answers. All the participants strongly wanted to avoid asking multiple questions, so they felt stressed trying to comprehend exactly what their supervisors said the first time and made an effort to concentrate deeply while listening to him or her. Jill, Neil, and Helen said they found comprehending their supervisors to be difficult. Helen felt it was because she was not familiar with some of the professional words.

Fortunately, listening comprehension improved after the first month. Although Neil said his level of listening at work was similar to that of in class, about 70%, Helen said by mid-summer, she could understand 80% to 90% of what people said at work. On the telephone, she could understand others if they spoke clearly. Eric reported that language at work was repetitive and thus easier over time. The others echoed that observation.

**Challenges of Speaking**

Speaking English was a requirement of all the participants. The oral communicative tasks were initially very challenging, but their complexity eased over time since the same expressions and functions were used repeatedly. Using the telephone, however, remained a difficult task. More on this topic will be discussed when comparing difficulty in vocabulary use between academic and workplace.

The participants discussed various communicative tasks at their internships. Vicky and Helen worked for a company that imported MSG. They spoke primarily in Mandarin with colleagues but used English to communicate with customers. Vicky had to type in English and upload files to her boss. Helen used English to write emails and speak
with others via Skype. At her second position, she had more speaking requirements in English. Jill said her speech was slow at first because whenever a client asked a question, she could not respond. Working in an English-speaking environment was challenging and therefore likely helped advance the participants’ speaking skills. Full-time office work required the participants to converse extensively in English. Jill could avoid speaking English in most classes because she usually interacted in Mandarin with other international students. She only talked when required during group work, presentations, and Mr. Castel’s law class. At work, however, she had no choice but to speak English every day with colleagues, engaging in more small talk and deeper conversational topics. Her customer service position indeed proved useful for her speaking skills since she also spoke with clients and used a telephone. The skills the participants discussed most included interviewing for jobs, using the telephone, small talk, meetings, and interacting with supervisors.

**Difficulty interviewing for jobs.** The challenge of the job interview process emerged as a theme in that it was shown to be very difficult for the participants, as was revealed by Duff, Wong, & Early (2002). To prepare students for the workplace experience, the IMBA program coordinators arranged monthly workshops to help students with cultural adaptation, communication skills, understanding the recruitment process and their J-1 visa status, designing their resumes, and interviewing for jobs. The coordinator at the university sent their resumes to companies, some of which replied to schedule interviews. All the participants in this study applied for other internships as well, and most hoped to procure one that would last beyond the summer, up to a year. The interview process for summer internships began early, around February. The
participants had practiced phone and face-to-face interviews with the IMBA job coordinator and Career Services, which also helped them write their resumes. Nevertheless, the search was an arduous process for the participants. During the interviews, speaking English was difficult; the students commented on cultural differences and their preference for interviews in the U.S.

The job interviews were often stressful for the students primarily because of having to express themselves in English without time to prepare speech. Vicky had an interview in Mandarin, which she found much easier than in English since she did not have to translate from Mandarin to English. The rest, however, had to speak English. Irene commented, “English is not my mother language, so it is challenging for me to answer the questions which I don’t prepare well. I will feel nervous and speak in a halting voice.” Adam, who did not receive any job offers, felt he did not speak well during the interviews. “I must enhance my English as soon as possible to cross the barriers of the language.” Joshua added, “During the interview, answering the question they are looking for is the most challenge thing for me…this is my first interview in my life; therefore, I really do not how to prepare and be confident during the interview.” Eric commented, “Always the big challenge is language.” Another difficult situation was being interviewed by more than one person at a time. Helen was interviewed by three people at the same time, which had never happened to her in Taiwan. Fortunately, she was provided a list of the questions they would ask, which helped her prepare.

The first interviews were often preliminary, through a computer program or over the phone, both of which were much more difficult than face-to-face ones. It was hard to prepare answers to questions in a second language with so little time. The participants all
felt an interviewer could better understand their pronunciation if they spoke in person. All the participants had an initial interview with Express Scripts, a pharmaceutical company on UMSL’s campus. It was conducted on a computer with timed answers. Participants had 30 seconds to prepare an answer to each question before replying. Helen said, “The question will show on the screen, and I have certain time to review the question and think about the answer. It is a total brand-new way for interview and it is a challenge for me to do so.” She added, “In my hometown, we did not have phone interview before the on-site interview.”

Irene had an unfortunate experience where she received a phone interview while riding the subway. The background noise and location made it difficult for her to express herself clearly and for her to understand the person asking her questions. She reported:

Just one phone interview. I failed. HR asked me about 20 questions. And I think a lot of. I think some of this is just typical of question like What is your biggest success? or the largest problem and how you solved it. Like this. I haven't prepared it. Unfortunately, I received the telephone call on the metro link (subway). So it was not quiet and I don’t prepared it…The HR repeat the questions maybe three or four times, so I think I don’t think I perform very well.

The comments from Irene demonstrate the stress a second language learner may face during the interview process, especially over the telephone.

**Differences in interviews between cultures.** The participants were asked how the experience of the job interviews compared with their home countries and the U.S. Eric felt interviews were similar in the U.S. and China. He explained:
When I attend job interviews, I wear formal, bring my resume, and do my best. The big surprise is that different employers ask almost the same questions. As my respect, the interview experiences are not different than that of my country. Employers all want to see through interviews the values you can bring to them. Some of the participants felt interviews in the U.S. were tailored to their individual experience. Helen commented that in Taiwan, they were more formal with a pre-arranged list of questions while in the U.S., they were based on her resume and experience. In her second interview, the supervisor went into more detail from the answers she had provided earlier. Adam had several interviews and found them different than those in Taiwan because questions focused on his characteristics of his personality, whereas he had expected them to be about his ability to perform specific job duties.

Preference for interviews in the U.S. Despite language difficulties, the participants generally preferred the face-to-face interviews in the U.S. because they were not as stressful. The interviewers were less formal and even used small talk to help the interviewees feel at ease. This was illustrated by Irene’s comment: “I like the interview atmosphere in the U.S. because interviewers always talk about the weather and introduce themselves at the beginning of interviews.” Vicky discussed the process of interviewing at length. She said:

The difference of job interviews between Taiwan and the U.S. is the interview atmosphere. The interviewers in the U.S. are more kind, and willing to have a conversation with interviewees, so that the atmosphere during interviews would be comfortable and relaxing. In the contrast, the interviewers in Taiwan are more serious and keep asking questions so that interviewees need to be well-prepared,
or they will fail to get the jobs…I like the interview atmosphere in the U.S. because interviewers always talk about the weather and introduce themselves at the beginning of interviews.

The participants found jobs that extended past the summer, which they had hoped for. They were told that after a few months, if they were considered valuable to the company, their visas could be extended for up to a year. Jill said she felt working at a U.S. company was as important as studying, and three months was too short for her to really have a strong experience. Helen and Vicky worked for the same company, and after a month, Helen left it for another internship that was more interesting to her. Neil and Jill each found a job midsummer. Neil initially had a part-time internship, but because he was such a hard worker, the supervisor created a full-time position for him until the end of the calendar year. However, he decided to return to Taiwan in November for his required military service. Eric did not receive an offer until August, when he suddenly had a number of interviews; his background in IT was considered valuable.

**Difficulty using the telephone.** One of the hardest oral tasks in the workplace was a skill the participants did not practice during their academic studies: using the telephone. Currently, many people speak less often on the phone than in the past. Young people usually communicate in writing by texts, email, discussion posts, and social media. Written language is less spontaneous than speaking; it can be prepared and edited. The participants thus found it harder to communicate in English on the phone. Irene commented, “I have more difficulties when I take a phone than face to face.”

The internships required the interns to use the telephone. Jill, Helen, and Vicky obtained customer service positions. Prior to working, Jill’s only experience using the
telephone was calling customer service at a hotel. Helen once had to call the utility company to transfer her phone number. Neil had some exposure using English on the telephone at his campus job answering inquiries or transferring a caller. However, it did not prepare him for his corporate internship, where he had to prospect for new clients, arrange transportation, and barter with companies. He said the first time he had to use the telephone at work was “terrible”; he was so nervous his first day that he closed the door so that his coworkers could not hear him speak on the phone.

Calling someone is easier than answering a phone, observed Helen. If she called a customer, she could prepare what she would ask; she said her name, the name of the company, and asked how she could help. Answering the phone proved more challenging as she did not know what would be asked of her. Often, it was customers calling for a specific department. Jill’s company, which did not teach telephone skills, worried about her accent on the phone because it was hard for customers to understand her. Therefore, they limited her phone duties to times when they were very busy.

**Difficulty engaging in small talk.** As in the findings on oral academic discourse socialization, the participants frequently discussed small talk and its constant occurrence in workplace communication; thus, it was another theme that played significant importance, more than I had anticipated before beginning this research. The participants considered it to be a very important in the U.S. culture and a daily part of communicating in an office setting. Eric said coworkers in the U.S. had casual conversations with him every day, unlike classmates. He claimed, “We need to speak with coworkers.” Also, the workplace required daily and often long interactions in English with coworkers, which was good practice.
Adam claimed learning to make small talk would be a huge advantage in his future. He needed to work on this skill so he could have a better chance to get a job. Vicky said at work, people would engage in light conversations before transitioning to work topics such as package deliveries, contacts with carriers, and demanding customers. Neil used it to enter a conversation between two people. For instance, he would compliment a man on his shoes. The man would then tell him where they were purchased, which led to further discussions. Helen said at her first internship, at a Taiwanese company, small talk was discouraged because everyone just focused on their job. At the second internship, people felt freer to chat. They talked about lunch and what they were doing after work. She said, “They encourage questions.” The friendliness of her coworkers made her feel more confident and able to ask questions. This is similar to the reports of the patience and kindness of the U.S. classmates, which helped the participants feel relaxed and less worried about errors in their speech.

Cultural differences in small talk. The participants claimed small talk was used more often in the U.S. than in their home countries, which they had also stated in Chapter Four when discussing speaking with local classmates in and outside of classes. Despite its importance, cultural differences in small talk perplexed the participants. As mentioned in Chapter Four, Neil found making small talk difficult at first because he had not made much small talk in Taiwan. Eric also said it was not something he had done in China; if he knew somebody well, there was no need to chat about random topics. It is primarily used to help strangers relax to a better relationship with them. For this reason, Vicky actually found it could be insulting in her culture. If someone made small talk with her,
she might interpret it as condescending, as though they were strangers, a perception which is quite the opposite as in the U.S. culture.

**Difficulty in topic selection.** At work, conversations in English with colleagues were more challenging than what the participants were used to. Also, when the coworkers were older and owned homes, their topics often pertained to situations Jill could not relate to like gardening, pets, and their children’s weddings. Neil claimed if one does not know much about American culture, it would be hard to understand small talk and jokes. In addition, cultural topics, such as television shows, holidays, customs, and places, posed some trouble for the participants.

In summary, the participants claimed making small talk was imperative when working in the U.S. and finding appropriate subject matters proved challenging for the language learners. Thus, the information gathered on topics is presented in Table 5-1 below to clarify them. The most common topics their St. Louis colleagues discussed are listed, and the comments the participants made when explaining them are summarized.
Table 5-1

*Small Talk Topics at Work*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Name(s)</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>Lunch. “People talk a lot about what they ate for lunch and why they like salads,” confirmed Vicky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardening</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Planting, choosing flowers and growing vegetables. Jill lives in a student apartment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holidays</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Sometimes coworkers discussed the day’s holiday. “They will say, oh, today is Ladies’ Day, International Ladies’ Day because they will check Google and Google will show them. Or International Barbeque,” said Jill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Taking pets to the vet and animal hospitals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Colleagues asked her about UMSL. They had attended colleges in big cities including New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television shows</td>
<td>Eric, Jill</td>
<td>Popular shows. Like most international students, the participants do not have a television set so they cannot contribute to these conversations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>Places around the U.S. Neil said he was unfamiliar with places coworkers talked about.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weddings</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Shopping for their daughters’ wedding dresses and decorating. Jill is not married.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Difficulty communicating with supervisors.** Relationships with supervisors emerged as a theme because the participants felt intense anxiety communicating with people of higher levels of authority. There was a strong fear of inconveniencing them.

Neil spoke at length about his discomfort while speaking with his boss. He said that in Asia, one must show strong respect for those in superior positions. Neil said he could never interrupt someone of higher status for clarification. Fortunately, his supervisor had
worked in Asia and was familiar with communicating with non-native speakers. When someone spoke in slang, he would explain the message to Neil. He could also read Neil’s expression whenever Neil did not understand something he said. He would then speak slower or explain it. The two traveled together to another state for a meeting. Neil felt quite nervous about being alone with his supervisor. Since Neil was driving, his supervisor opened his sandwich wrapper for him, handed him his sandwich, and later disposed of his trash. These gestures made Neil uncomfortable because in his culture, a person of higher status would not do those for someone of lower status. Helen’s first supervisor was Taiwanese and more formal, but the second had been in the U. S. since she was 15, and thus “the culture is more like American. It is very relaxed and free.”

Jill experienced chatting informally with those in higher positions at her company. She said, “In Taiwan, you need to more respect your supervisor. Not really talk like friend, just act like senior, like older people you need to respect.” Jill observed that while American culture was less formal, she still found it hard to overcome her cultural values. She wanted to ask many questions of her supervisor but felt impeded, which is addressed in the next section.

Asking questions of a supervisor was an important theme because of the anxiety felt about inconveniencing a person of authority. The participants felt it was important to know how to perform a task. Nevertheless, they were considerably nervous asking questions of a person of higher status. Neil admitted:

I will be very nervous, very very nervous when I cannot understand them. They will try to explain it one more time and I will feel nervous because I can’t get
it…Some supervisors don’t try to explain and that’s scary like they don’t have much patience…I will still ask but I will feel really bad. Like Neil, Jill was concerned about her supervisor’s busyness and understanding something the first time it was said. She tried very hard to grasp an answer to a question. She did not want to repeat her questions, so she asked her colleagues instead, feeling more comfortable with them. She commented:

My manager is very kind. He’s willing to teach me but only because he’s going to be busy…My supervisor is in charge of whole staff. I can’t ask my supervisor again and again because that bothers them. So I push myself to understand one time.

Vicky was not afraid to ask a question but had such difficulty understanding her supervisor’s English that she could not speak easily. “I try to get all the information into my mind, but I cannot…but I don’t have any output,” she explained. She would think of questions after a conversation. She also was hesitant because she did not practice asking questions in a class setting, stating, “In Taiwan, we just try to know as much as we can, but the professor didn’t encourage us to ask the question during the class.”

The most dominant challenges in workplace communication. As in the section on oral academic discourse socialization, the participants were asked what their biggest communication challenge was. I aimed to learn what obstacles presented the most difficulty in the workplace, and the answers are listed in Table 5-2. When asked this question, each responded without reflection. Neil provided more than one answer, and Eric’s answers were all related to his lack of fluency in English. The answers were all related to language skills.
Table 5-2

**Biggest Communication Challenges at Work**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entering a Conversation break into</td>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>At a sales event I noticed it was harder to conversations (of) groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking Fluency</td>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>Express my idea clearly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Speaking is the most significant communication challenge at work. The substantial reasons are less vocabulary and practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with a Supervisor</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Getting my supervisor to understand what I say. The words, the pronunciation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the Telephone</td>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>First understand what they’re talking about and then you’re going to organize what you’re going to talk to them because they are the customer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>Sometimes I can’t understand the person said on the phone. (If) they’re Mexican and they have their…so I can’t understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>Sometimes my job on campus also require me to make reservation…when they speak and I say their name and I couldn’t tell them their English name.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In summary, among all the speaking tasks that challenge international interns, the most difficult were fluency in English, using the telephone, and approaching a supervisor. The first two are related to language, and the third is related to both language and culture. While a native speaker may also be intimidated by a person of authority or higher rank, the international interns shared intense fears of inconveniencing a supervisor by asking questions or for repetition of an answer. This was compounded by their lack of listening comprehension in English as second language learners. Figure 5-1 offers a brief
summary of the comparison of classroom communication challenges with the similar ones in the workplace. While the language functions were similar, they proved to be more difficult in an office setting.

Figure 5-1

An Overview of Classroom and Workplace Communication Challenges

Coping Strategies

This section addresses the research question of coping strategies developed to perform job tasks. Despite initial struggles, the five participants all managed to perform their jobs well and were thus requested to stay past the initial summer probationary period. The themes that emerged from the data were the international interns succeeded by developing coping strategies similar to the ones they used during the academic semester and relying on asking their colleagues for help. At the beginning of the internships, learning how to perform their job was more difficult than learning subjects in their graduate classes. Jobs typically require one to quickly learn many tasks. Vicky thought learning the work tasks was a slow process because she had little time to learn the products, their functions, and their names in Chinese and English. She relied on
Google Translate for help, which she had also done for her class content. Jill, Vicky, and Helen used Google to find information about products; Internet searches and Google Translate were tools used at school. Jill was the only non-native speaker in her office; she searched for the names of products by translating them into Chinese. She needed to understand the products and their functions well, so she could help customers.

Over time, the jobs became easier. Eric commented, “I need to spend time to learn a lot of things about the job. But maybe after that, I can more easy to handle the job.” Jill, who worked for a flower company, said the start of her internship was challenging because “I’m not familiar with my company and system. But for now, it’s kind of easier because I know the system, how they use that, and how they check the items and what customer need.” She was also challenged because she was the only second language learner and was not provided training

**Requesting assistance from colleagues.** The necessity to ask for help from colleagues was a theme because it was a crucial aspect to succeed in performing a job. Nevertheless, the participants found it awkward to ask questions of coworkers. They feared losing face asking a “silly” question and disrupting others, the same feelings in the experience of classroom discourse. One of Helen’s colleagues from Taiwan had worked in Australia for one year and was thus comfortable asking questions, but Helen struggled with interrupting a native speaker for clarification. Nevertheless, she felt it was important to do this at work. “If don’t ask the question, I cannot know how to do my work…yes, still hard for me, but I’m trying.” Eric said it was important to ask questions right away, and that questions did not inconvenience colleagues because of the importance at work
that one can do the job. Everyone is part of the team. “You are part of the group. You are part of the job, so they need to let you know how to do it,” confirmed Eric.

Colleagues were a major source for learning how to perform job tasks. The participants said coworkers taught them how to perform job tasks. Jill said that her coworkers taught her how to have patience to talk to local clients and how to use a typewriter. She asked a colleague who worked in sales about finding clients, how to reply to questions, and what questions she would receive. She had to learn because she had no sales experience nor formal training.

The interns implemented a number of useful strategies. Neil created ways to improve his speaking while talking with colleagues. One was interrupting those at his level or below to ask about his comprehension of what they had just said. Neil found organizing his questions before speaking helped him. Another useful strategy was asking coworkers to explain vocabulary. Neil’s colleague said, “I’m not looking forward to it, I’m dreading it.” Neil asked him to explain, and he replied, “Dread is a big word for me to try to explain.” Jill did this as well; she mentioned having her colleague define the word “scorching” while discussing the weather.

In addition, some interns received help from colleagues and supervisors. Neil was taught how to barter with clients for lower prices. He said, “At first, I was so nervous.” He was informed that small trucking companies were more likely to negotiate prices, and his side manager said he could add himself to a conference call to help. He initially did not feel he could express his ideas clearly to the native speakers of English, but his oral communication in English improved over time. Vicky would confirm what her supervisor wanted her to do to make sure she understood her directions. “When the boss teach me to
do A, B, C, so I just confirm that if I do A, B, C right.” She also practiced speaking in front of her manager before she contacted a client for the first time. Vicky’s supervisor also assisted her by correcting her emails before they were sent to clients. These quotes suggest the roles of managers and supervisors are essential for successful job performance. They can guide interns, offer language support, or serve as mentors.

**Improving telephone skills.** Some techniques were developed to help improve telephone skills. All the other employees in Jill’s company were native speakers and had not thought to implement training on answering a phone in English. Jill was embarrassed the first time she used one. She put the customer on hold and asked her supervisor a question, who then asked for the name of the customer. Jill did not realize that she needed to ask and record names of caller. She also observed that the other coworkers changed the quality of their voices to sound more professional when they answered the phone. Jill learned to write down what she wanted to ask and repeated it several times before making a call. Then she had to remember what questions were asked of her. By writing notes, she could be prepared the next time the same question came up. This strategy would make her more comfortable speaking with customers on the phone.

Helen and Vicky received some training on how to use the phone. Helen reported they received training from a coworker in English about how to answer the phone and deal with customers, which made the task easier. They were explicitly taught how to greet, say the name of the company, and check a customer’s name. Vicky created a document to help her with customer service. At the start of her internship, she could not understand customers on the phone and would have to ask a coworker for help. She then prepared a document listing answers to commonly-asked questions. She also prepared
appropriate replies. While her listening comprehension and skills improved considerably over time, she still found using the phone to be difficult. A colleague suggested that Neil say “Please excuse my Chinese accent,” while talking on the phone with native speakers, as this would make people sympathetic and receptive towards speaking with him. Neil claimed it proved to be effective.

Strategies and training were necessary to perform job duties. Insight into these functions may be insightful for those entering a job market. Therefore, the various techniques, most of which are discussed above, are abbreviated into the Table 5-3. The strategies were either individual or social, which was also the case with the coping strategies developed for oral academic challenges.
Table 5-3

*Strategies Used in Workplace Communication*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Participant(s)</th>
<th>Explanations and Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask questions and for clarification</td>
<td>Vicky, Helen, Jill</td>
<td>Interrupt for clarification. Check how to perform job functions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave messages</td>
<td>Vicky, Helen, Jill</td>
<td>State numbers clearly and repeat them. Spell out names using equal stress on letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Small Talk</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Forms relationships, helps break into conversations. Learn to add comments or ask questions to continue the conversation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare speech</td>
<td>Jill, Neil</td>
<td>Write questions and check them for accuracy before asking a supervisor or coworker a question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearse speech</td>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>Practice a client presentation with a colleague or supervisor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search the Internet</td>
<td>Jill, Vicky, Helen</td>
<td>Find information about products. Translate from English into Mandarin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take notes</td>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>Organize meeting notes into outline form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use telephone skills</td>
<td>Jill, Vicky</td>
<td>Introduce yourself and the company. Prepare questions and possible answers. Ask a customer for their name and how to spell it. Create a document of answers to common customer questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use typing skills</td>
<td>Jill, Vicky</td>
<td>Learn to type quickly in English. Take a class or practice extensively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask about vocabulary</td>
<td>Jill, Neil</td>
<td>Ask coworkers what words and expressions mean. This increases fluency in English and can lead to interesting conversations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One theme is that some of the skills learned in academic settings to pass classes are also useful at work, including asking questions, preparing speech, taking notes, typing, and writing numbers. The challenges were often more difficult at work because of the complexity of tasks like using the telephone and keeping up with a faster pace of native speakers. While it is necessary to ask others how to perform a job, the participants were sometimes reluctant to interrupt native speakers to ask them for clarification. Summarizing afterwards, like Vicky did, was important to confirm comprehension and avoid errors. Friendliness of coworkers made the international interns more comfortable with workplace communication; this finding paralleled with the kindness of U.S. classmates.

### Drawing upon Previous Disciplinary Knowledge and Experience

This section addresses the research question on the role previous disciplinary knowledge and experience impact performance at work. In terms of previous disciplinary knowledge, coursework in the MBA program did not apply to entry-level administrative positions. Vicky commented that the subject matter in her classes had not prepared her for internship job duties. Her supply chain management class, for example, showed the necessary documents such as commercial invoices, packing lists, or delivery orders. In reality, however, her company had its own system that was completely different from what she had learned.

Naturally, prior work experience of tasks performed can apply to a new situation. The Taiwanese participants had not worked professional jobs, so not much was reported;
this did not present as a strong theme in a study of new graduates with little professional experience. However, it is important to note that prior knowledge and experience can transcend into a new linguistic and cultural environment. Vicky recalled observing marketing techniques in Taiwan she shared at her new internship, such as a salesman who provided free samples. Helen had learned some helpful telephone skills in Mandarin that could translate into English. Eric, who had worked for years in information technology (IT), said that this past experience was the reason he had several job offers. His background that appealed to his new employer in addition to his ability to speak Chinese and English.

Although the content learned in graduate studies in the IMBA program had not yet applied to the workplace, the communication obstacles the participants overcame during the academic year were instrumental in helping the participants navigate speaking challenges in the workplace. They are discussed in the following section.

**Comparison of Oral Academic Discourse with Workplace Communication**

Most of the same communication skills in the classroom were needed in the workplace: vocabulary selection, making small talk, participating in group discussions, and asking questions of peers and people of higher authority. The same functions and difficulties due to linguistic, interpersonal, and cultural factors existed and were even heightened. Fortunately, the participants succeeded in overcoming these challenges.

**Comparing vocabulary use.** In terms of vocabulary, interactions in the workplace were more challenging than in the classroom but over time, speaking became easier because the topics were consistent. In academia, subjects and vocabulary expressions change according to the class one is taking. Classroom language varied and
lecture discourse was explicit with repetition, paraphrases, and exemplification of concepts. As many MBA classes at UMSL consisted of a number of international students, with classes sometimes consisting of 50% speakers of Chinese, the native speakers in academia were more likely to have had exposure communicating with non-native speakers. Participants commented that language at work was easier over time because it had the same vocabulary and was repeated. For example, Neil said the vocabulary at work was more complex, but over time he grew less nervous speaking than in the classroom. Vicky commented that in academic group discussions, the topics change, and therefore vocabulary was often unfamiliar to her. At work, however, the people and the vocabulary expressions were the same. “It’s more relaxing at work because sometimes speaking you are more familiar with the topic might be the question you have, so the thing is more familiar. You’re with the same people all the time for months, unlike a group project.”

Comparing making small talk with colleagues vs. classmates. The participants all commented that people made far more small talk at work than at school. Compared to coworkers, the U.S. classmates had spent less time conversing. They did not live on campus and were busy full-time professionals with families. Once classes finished, they quickly left to go home. Eric confirmed said there was more time and necessity to speak at work. Vicky said that in her office, she talked to everybody; there were only ten people, far fewer than in classes. Jill commented the only time she had chatted in English at school was during the ten-minute break, whereas she spent forty hours a week with colleagues. Eric felt more comfortable speaking with colleagues because students in classes were often separated by language; the Chinese speakers sat apart from the others.
He feared approaching U.S. students would bother them. In terms of relationships, Neil felt they were more superficial at his job than in classes. When people smiled at his company, they did not appear sincere, only polite. He claimed his classmates were honestly friendly while people at work were “not down to earth.”

Neil found small talk topics at school simpler than at the workplace, as they often pertained to contextual subjects, such as the assignments, professors, cafeteria, and gym. Plus, students typically have more in common with each other than coworkers, who are usually of various age groups. This proved true for Jill as well. With classmates, daily conversations were easier because the topics were things students have in common. She was familiar with the weather, parties, karaoke bars, movies, travel, and other topics she could then follow up with questions to learn more. Jill commented, “I can ask them Oh, what kind of movie you saw? Where you go?” Many of the international IMBA students traveled to Memphis, Kansas City, and Niagara Falls, Canada. Likewise, in their home countries, people sometimes asked general topics similar to a U.S. classroom, such as where someone was from, or one would try to get information to find out what they had in common.

**Comparing workplace meetings vs. academic group meetings.** At their internships, the participants attended group meetings with coworkers and a supervisor or manager. Most of the participants had mandatory weekly meetings. Vicky’s company had meetings on Mondays at which they learned about a new product. Follow-up meetings on Fridays included discussions of their experiences with selling that product. While comparing meetings at work with those for a class project, Eric discussed several differences. One was that work meetings were longer. Preparing a group presentation
usually took one or two hours, but at work, this topic required at least four hours. Work meetings were also more formal. While Eric felt that teamwork was the same as in the class group discussions, it took longer to be accepted by workmates. In terms of turn-taking, none of the participants felt the interactions of group discussions were different between school and the classroom. Eric said, “The topics are the same. Group discussions, the methods are the same. The language come from your ideas.”

Also, the rate of speech coworkers used was faster than that of classmates. In the section on oral academic discourse socialization, the participants said that the native speakers in their group discussions were patient and would modulate their speech by speaking slowly or summarizing information for the international students. Perhaps the local graduate students had more exposure to second language learners; some of their classes consisted of 50% speakers of Chinese. The coworkers likely had less experience communicating with foreign-born speakers of English. They were also more used to speaking with each other, whereas groups in classes consisted of different members for each project.

An additional difference was that classmates in group discussions were of an equal status, whereas work meetings often included people of hierarchical positions. A cultural factor was the one-direction mode of communication from the supervisor, similar to the lecture styles of the professors in the home countries, as discussed in Chapter Four. The participants were thus reluctant to ask questions or offer comments in classes for fear of being disrespectful in the presence of a supervisor. Neil confirmed that he was less likely to voice his opinion during meetings because of the presence of his supervisor. In classes, however, he felt he could speak freely since everyone was at an equal status.
Adam noted that in the U.S., employees voice their opinions to those of higher status. He said, “In the United States, the employee will have talk, give suggestion to their manager but in Taiwan, we will follow the manager.”

Comparing asking questions of coworkers vs. classmates. Compared to the other topics in this section, asking questions of peers had less correlation between academia and the workplace. This was because the participants did not ask many questions of classmates, preferring to learn about course content from instructors. As stated above, asking questions at work was considered necessary because one must know how to perform their job; the others in a company depended upon it. Therefore, it was more important than at school, and likely easier than in a lecture setting in which one should not talk to others while the professor is speaking. Nevertheless, the same reluctance in the classroom carried over into the work environment; no one wanted to waste others’ time. In terms of potential embarrassment and being the focus of attention, these were lessened in a work environment, according to Eric and Neil, because there were fewer people in their compared to a classroom. In other ways, asking questions was more stressful at work. They had to focus more on comprehending others and did not feel as comfortable asking a question of colleagues as they did of classmates. However, the desire to perform a job well overrode their apprehension.

Comparing asking questions of a supervisor vs. professor. As discussed in Chapter Four, asking questions of faculty was encouraged, and the participants did so after class and during office hours. They did not ask during class for fear of wasting others’ time, which was confirmed by Parks & Raymond (2004). Eric claimed he would ask a question of a supervisor right away but would avoid so during a class. Some grew
in confidence to pose questions because the professors were encouraging, patient, and welcoming of all questions to which they provided detailed answers. In short, they seemed to enjoy helping the international students. In the workplace, however, supervisors were less accommodating because they were busy and less patient. This was a major difference in the workplace compared to the classroom. Jill and Neil discussed feeling intimidated asking questions of their supervisors. When asked whether relationships with supervisors were more or less formal than with professors, Eric said it depended upon the culture of a company.

**Preparation of Academic Studies for Workplace Communication**

One research question was how the process gained through oral academic discourse socialization at the graduate-level prepared one for workplace communication. The participants discussed linguistic challenges but very few cultural ones compared to the data on academic discourse. Each work environment was different, and only one of the participants had worked full-time in the home country, so there were fewer cultural comparisons.

During the academic semesters, the students engaged in coursework, received training sessions, created strategies to learn material, and performed required speaking tasks using English, all of which helped to improve their language skills. I wanted to examine the challenges of performing a job, in particular oral communication, and which tasks and strategies learned at school were used at work. Every IMBA class was useful, according to Josh. “Each class has their advantage and disadvantage. But the most important thing is that all of the classes will help students to be familiar with the (work) environment and fit in the workplace.”
Useful listening and speaking skills for internship duties. Studying in the IMBA program helped the participants improve their English language skills tremendously, as detailed in Chapter Four. As for listening, Eric said building listening skills in the classroom had been very important to prepare him to work with native speakers. Notetaking and other listening skills in her EAP academic listening class helped Vicky at her job. As discussed in Chapter Four, she learned to distinguish important points from details to organize notes, a skill that benefited her in school and subsequently at work during training sessions. She felt the stakes were larger at work and thus paid more attention to the quality of her notes. She would type them and check their content with her supervisor. Understanding and writing long numbers spoken quickly in the class was also something Vicky had to do at her job. Another useful assignment in that class was leaving a phone message for which she had to clearly spell out her name and address. This required practicing clear pronunciation of the alphabet. Vicky added the amount of typing in English she did in the MBA program was useful at work.

Speaking tasks and other communicative functions. Speaking tasks of small talk, group work, and asking questions were compared above with their functions in the workplace, with its extensive opportunities and necessary conversational contexts and meetings. Presentations were also considered useful for the workplace. The week-long intensive course all the participants took offered ample communication practice with its opportunities for small talk during the gatherings and at meals. The group work in the seminar, as discussed earlier, had day-long meetings to share ideas about the proposal they were preparing to present. Indeed, group discussions in classes were a helpful preparation for work meetings, the participants commented. Eric said that class
presentations and feedback from faculty were useful preparation for workplace training on how to improve this skill. At his job, every week there was a “Pitching Day” program, at which everyone delivered a speech and received suggestions on ways to improve.

The supplemental monthly workshops were considered quite helpful, in particular the ones conducted on small talk and intonation and another one on writing formal work documents. The IMBA sessions and previous jobs proved to be useful training for the internship duties. Eric commented that the training sessions on small talk helped him at work. Vicky also benefitted from the small talk sessions and learning about the culture of the U.S.; they made it easier for her to communicate with local people. Gaining the confidence to ask questions of professors likely helped the participants do this of supervisors in the workplace, although they were more hesitant.

Table 5-4 presents a summary of the comparison of the oral communication skills needed in oral academic discourse and workplace settings and common coping strategies used.
Oral Communication in MBA Classes and the Workplace and Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Understanding Vocabulary Expression</th>
<th>Small Talk</th>
<th>Participating in Group Discussions and Meetings</th>
<th>Asking Questions of Persons of Authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MBA Classes</strong></td>
<td>Vocabulary varies according to subjects. Native speakers tend to repeat, paraphrase terms. Professors speak slower than students.</td>
<td>In the U.S., it is an important skill, though students can limit social interactions. Topics pertain to student contexts and experiences.</td>
<td>Groups consist of members who are of equal status and vary for each project. U.S. students are often patient and modulate speech.</td>
<td>Professors of business welcome questions, hold office hours, and offer clear and detailed answers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Workplace</strong></td>
<td>Much of the vocabulary is technical or colloquial. Coworkers speak faster than students. Comprehension of jargon is difficult at first but easier over time because terms are repeated.</td>
<td>Small talk conversations are necessary with U.S. coworkers. It is done more frequently than in China or Taiwan. Topics vary across age groups.</td>
<td>In meetings, supervisors are often present, which can be intimidating. U.S. colleagues tend to know each other well and speak quickly with less modulation for second language learners.</td>
<td>Supervisors are hurried and speak quickly, so interns feel anxious to bother them with questions and feel they should understand everything said the first time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coping Strategies at Work</strong></td>
<td>Use Google, take notes, check comprehension</td>
<td>Practice, ask questions</td>
<td>Interrupt if needed to perform job</td>
<td>Listen carefully, confirm comprehension</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lack of preparation for workplace communication.** The language practice at school offered a good foundation for workplace communication, yet the participants offered a few ideas for improvement. When asked how the IMBA program could have better prepared them for communicating at work, the participants replied that speaking on the telephone was especially hard. “Using the telephone is really different. We have to make a lot of phone calls. Not only at work but also we have to call customer service.” Being able to understand long numbers was challenging, and Vicky was grateful to have
learned that in her EAP class, as mentioned above. Neil agreed that numbers were tricky. “When there is a lot of numbers, I don’t know how to say it,” replied Neil. Eric said the IMBA program should help prepare students “how to talk to HR, how to express your ideas, job interview, small talk, use the phone to do something.”

Summary

This chapter has examined the process of working in a second language and culture. Five of the IMBA graduates held administrative internships in which they spoke Mandarin and English. They all worked in St. Louis, Missouri, a Midwestern city. They shared the experience of interviewing for jobs and oral communication at work. The participants generally felt their graduate studies had prepared them for workplace communication, though previous practice of job interviews and using the telephone were inadequate. While listening and speaking skills had improved considerably over the academic year, communication in the workplace was more challenging. The functions of making small talk, sharing ideas at meeting, and asking questions were more difficult than in academic settings. Supervisors and colleagues were perceived as somewhat less sensitive than professors and local students when communicating with non-native speakers. Despite cultural barriers of not wanting to lose face asking a simple question or interrupting a busy colleague or boss, the desire to understand the tasks usually overcame any trepidation.
Chapter Six

Discussion

This final chapter presents summaries of the findings on oral communication in academic and workplace settings. Results are interpreted and related to relevant literature. Recommendations are made to faculty, academic administrators, prospective students, and international employers. Offered are suggestions for future research of this important topic in our ever-growing global community.

Summary of Findings

This qualitative study analyzes data from eight participants from Taiwan and China. The data includes two focus group discussions, 18 interviews, 34 reflective journals, and notes from eight class observations. The analysis reveals answers to the questions of how speakers of another language and culture adapt to oral communication in their academic courses and workplace setting. The sub-research questions are:

▪ What linguistic and cultural challenges do transfer international graduate students from China and Taiwan face?

▪ What do transfer international graduate students from China and Taiwan experience in IMBA oral classroom discourse?

▪ What coping strategies do these individuals develop to overcome challenges and how do they change over time?

▪ How do previous disciplinary knowledge and experience impact performance in class and at work?

▪ How does the process of oral academic discourse socialization compare to and prepare one for workplace socialization?
The twenty themes that are presented in Chapters Four and Five are combined below by the questions they pertain to. Again, the over-arching research question is: What linguistic and cultural challenges do transfer international graduate students from China and Taiwan face?

The themes show that weaknesses in oral language and comprehension of culture create academic and social challenges, which are lessened by coping strategies. Lecture comprehension is negatively impacted by both low levels in listening skills and a lack of understanding cultural references, but it can be greatly improved by previewing posted class lectures and reading the textbook. Lack of comprehension also creates feelings of exclusion from group discussions. In terms of speaking challenges, newcomers to the U.S. culture may be challenged by small talk conversations. Class participation is impeded by low levels vocabulary and cultural differences in the bi-directional classroom discourse the international students may be unaccustomed to. Nevertheless, encouragement of faculty to ask interact increases confidence of international students to become peripheral participants, and the class participation of other students helps lecture comprehension. The participants also appreciate focus of lectures on practical application over theory. Group work with native speakers greatly assists the process of oral academic discourse socialization due to the encouragement of native speakers, who were patient while listening to the second language learners and help them understand the discussions. Coping strategies may be independent, such as using online resources for practice and taking notes, or social, such as asking questions and seeking opportunities to engage in conversations. Previous knowledge and experience are very helpful to understand course content and perform oral tasks.
In the workplace, the linguistic challenges increase in difficulty while cultural ones do not impede efforts. Job interviews are more challenging in a second language, and new technical vocabulary at a worksite initially impedes listening comprehension yet eases with time. As in the classroom, small talk, group interaction, and asking questions of a person of authority are challenges but at a deeper level of difficulty. However, the desire to perform a job well overcomes cultural feelings of trepidation to perform these acts. As for coping strategies, those created for academic purposes are also helpful. Prior work experience helps one perform similar tasks for academic work.

**Oral academic discourse socialization.** While the participants’ listening skills in lectures improved considerably over the first semester, all of the students still struggled with understanding lecture content during the second semester. Comprehension was aided by previewing course material before lectures, generally from 50% to 80%. The students appreciated that the U.S. instructors regularly posted PowerPoint presentations and other materials on the class websites. The participants used Internet searches to find answers to questions about courses, and most used Google Translate as needed to read articles and information about companies. Cultural references such as those to local companies impeded comprehension. This was especially true in less technical courses such as Business Strategies and Business Law. Lack of listening comprehension negatively affected the ability to answer questions or participate fully in group discussions. The participants developed coping strategies to help comprehension; they included asking questions of both English-speaking and Mandarin-speaking classmates, using Google, previewing material, and increasing conversation practice. Participants who took a course in English for Academic Purposes (Grammar, Academic Listening, or
Reading and Writing) during their first semester felt they highly benefitted from the support for their listening, writing, and vocabulary skills. Comprehension was also aided by knowledge from previous coursework and work experience.

Required speaking skills in the IMBA coursework often included oral participation in class and group discussions as well as presentations. The participants struggled with academic speaking functions because they lacked listening skills, confidence, knowledge, relevant work experience, and vocabulary. Their biggest challenges were asking questions, intimidation by those of high status (i.e. older, more experienced classmates), delivering presentations, and vocabulary expression. Also, small talk was considered difficult because it is used more in the U.S. than their home countries and requires finding topics and techniques to continue conversations. Workshops delivered on it were helpful but not enough practice.

Interactions with native speakers was desired by the participants, who wanted to improve their speaking skills for social, academic, and professional reasons. However, classmates only met with them outside of class to discuss group projects because they were full-time employees who did not spend time on campus outside of class time. Some participants found opportunities to speak with roommates, students at the gym, and to a lesser degree, host families and conversation partners. To improve their English-speaking skills, the participants employed a number of strategies, including asking questions, imitating videos of native speakers, delivering presentations, increasing vocabulary, and paraphrasing. Confidence in speaking was boosted by many factors from speaking practice gained through small talk and group discussions to increasing knowledge about topics and the U.S. culture.
The next section focused on classroom interactions. In the graduate classes in Taiwan and China, there was little interaction between professors and students; lectures were typically one-directional. In the MBA program at UMSL, participation in class discussions was encouraged or required. The bi-directional style was new to the participants. They benefitted from their classmates’ questions but never felt comfortable asking or answering questions and adding to class discussions. They feared they would make errors in English, lose face by asking a “silly” question, or bother others by taking up class time. Nevertheless, they did feel comfortable asking questions of professors after class and during office hours. Group discussions were often required for projects and presentations, more so than in the home countries, and these interactions were highly rewarding. Interactions were somewhat difficult due to the fast pace at which local classmates speak English and cultural references. Initial fears of making errors were alleviated by the kindness and patience of the native speakers. Presentations were also difficult yet helpful to improve speaking skills.

Variations between the programs in their home countries and at UMSL were discussed. The courses in the U.S. had fewer weighted grades on final exams and more assignments throughout the semester that included exams, group projects, and presentations. Other discrepancies included having different classmates in each course, the presence of online classes, a shorter amount of class time, an increased workload, and methodology that was less theoretical than in their home countries. The participants generally preferred the U.S. style of teaching due to the interactive teaching methods and practical application.
Workplace enculturation. Over the summer, the participants shared their experiences with job interviews, communicating in their second language and culture, and the degree to which oral communication compared with and differed from that in graduate studies. Language skills were considered more difficult as work tasks require deeper fluency, and colleagues were less sympathetic communicators than classmates and faculty accustomed to international students. The job interviews were also harder in a second language. Most difficult were the initial screening ones over the phone or online audio recordings requiring answers to prompts. Face-to-face communication was preferred. There were cultural differences in that the questions in the U.S. seemed more tailored to the individual’s character.

Communication in the workplace required a higher proficiency of listening and speaking skills than the classroom did. Initial challenges with vocabulary and job tasks took more time to grasp than in academia. After a while, though, these were generally found easier because they were repeated, whereas in classes, vocabulary changes in each subject. Small talk emerged as an important skill, even more so than in an academic setting, since the participants had to use English all day. Topic selection was harder as often the colleagues were older and had less in common with them compared to fellow students. Meetings were similar to the group discussions in classes though the participants were generally more likely to interrupt and ask questions. They felt more responsibility to understand their tasks for this than they had in academic group discussions because completing job tasks was important for the company. Neil, however, was more reluctant to share his opinions due to being intimidated by the presence of his supervisor.
At work, the participants felt intense pressure to understand exactly what someone said, especially a supervisor. The participants focused intently while listening to prevent having to ask for clarification; they wanted to avoid inconveniencing a person of higher authority. Supervisors were generally perceived as less patient than professors, who were available to explain something after class, during office hours, and by email. The biggest communication challenges were using the telephone, asking a question of a supervisor, entering a conversation, and verbal fluency to express ideas correctly.

The participants took their language skills more seriously in the profession than they did in the academic setting. For instance, Vicky would rehearse before asking a question, and she would take notes during the meeting at work and then type them in a computer, print them, review them, and confirm whether she understood everything that was said. For classes, she would simply take notes. Many of the participants said they felt it was important to organize what they were going to say to supervisors and customers. In particular, they found speaking English on the telephone was a challenge and a task that was not performed in an academic setting. Speaking strategies included asking questions for clarification, vocabulary items, and summarizing instructions; making small talk; leaving clear phone messages; and rehearsing a conversation for accuracy. Others were note taking, typing, and researching products on the Internet. Job training was appreciated.

In conclusion, oral academic tasks of small talk, discussions, and presentations were useful groundwork but more challenging in a workplace setting. They felt positive about the oral communication skills developed in the MBA classes and the training
sessions. Nevertheless, they recommended more help with practicing job interviews, using the telephone, small talk, and understanding numbers.

**Discussion of Findings**

**Linguistic and cultural challenges.** In summary, in the academic setting, challenges in communication enter language and cultural barriers. Then psycho-socio filters enhance this process. Motivation, confidence, and encouragement enhance the likelihood of success. Fear of making errors, inconveniencing others, and losing face discourage the action. The participants either take action, create a strategy to do so, or decide to not meet the challenge. In the end, they may succeed in meeting the challenge, became more peripherally engaged, or decided not to act on the challenge.

The participants experienced difficulties with listening comprehension and speaking in English in graduate-level classes. Morita (2000) confirmed speaking requirements of Chinese MBA students are harder for second language learners for both language and cultural factors. During their second semester, the participants understood at least half of the lectures, but lack of cultural knowledge continued to impact lecture comprehension. One factor was that local companies were often used as examples. In the study of 18 Chinese students at a Canadian MBA program (Parks & Raymond, 2004), cultural references also confused the international students. Previewing material helped the participants understand and predict lecture content, a strategy likewise used in the study by Parks & Raymond (2004). The participants appreciated that course content was less theory-driven and more practical with examples and practical applications, a topic not found in the literature on academic discourse socialization.
Speaking was challenging for several reasons including difficulties due to a lack of vocabulary, weaknesses in understanding spoken English, and fear of making errors. These factors impacted the ability of participants to fully engage in class and group discussions. The same reasons also accounted for problems faced in group discussions by Chinese MBA students in the U.S. (Shi, 2011) but that study was only over one semester. This study was during the second semester, when participants had improved listening and confidence in expressing ideas. The participants in Shi’s study also felt a power distance with native speakers due to language, which was not reported in this research. However, Adam was intimidated by group members who possessed more work experience. Such attitude of hierarchical positionality may relate to his collective culture; Park-Saltzman, Wada, & Mogami (2012) reported that in the Asian culture, those of less experience may withhold their opinions. More on group discussions is in the subsequent section on the experience in IMBA oral classroom discourse.

Small talk with classmates and native speakers outside the classroom presented itself as an important aspect to acclimating to the U.S. because it was used frequently when socializing with native speakers and was rarely used in the home countries. Training in small talk skills, which included selecting topics and initiating and continuing conversations, proved helpful. Still, it was a challenge for their listening, speaking and confidence. In the workplace, it played an even more important role in workplace enculturation process since small talk topics were of wider range and coworkers often spend more time conversing than students do. Further research on this topic could be useful to helping prepare international students for overseas studies and work as it is apparent that making small talk is a useful skill to interact in a new country.
Experience of IMBA Oral Classroom Discourse. The participants shared their perspectives of the teaching methods, class interaction, group discussions, and delivering presentations. These varied from the classroom experience in the graduate programs of business in the home countries.

Methodology. The participants cited that the methodology in graduate schools in their home countries focused on memorization of theories and definitions for exams. They felt the program in the U.S. had more practical application. The participants observed their U.S. professors were more interested in expanding on the textbook and assisting comprehension than finishing a chapter, whereas instructors in their home universities were focused on getting through the material. Thus, questions were discouraged as they would infringe upon the schedule. Not mentioned explicitly in the literature on academic discourse socialization was this difference in the aim of faculty across cultures.

Interactive class discussions. Listening and spontaneous speaking are required to engage in class discussions and these are challenging, as discussed above and by Lee (2009). Indeed, the participants reported these reasons inhibited them from participation. Language reasons included needing time to formulate questions and answers, as Eric and Irene stated, so by the time they could prepare language, the instructor had moved on. Also, Jill and others commented on the need for advanced vocabulary to express ideas, which Ho (2011) confirmed. While fluency improved over two semesters, cultural factors proved harder to overcome than linguistic ones, as was found by Choi (2015). A study conducted on six Korean students over a semester determined that oral participation was
mainly influenced by sociocultural differences in education, the class learning environment, gender, and individual characteristics (Lee, 2009).

The participants were also surprised at the amount of interactive class discussions and speaking requirements of presentations. For instance, a professor of Business Law, Mr. Caster, required oral participation from every student in each class. It was hard to overcome reluctance to ask questions and add comments due to fears of preventing their instructors from getting through the material. Morita (2009) commented that Japanese students felt the instructor was the authority while Canadian students contributed to class discussions and asked for feedback from both their peers and teacher.

Concern for peers also was a factor in reluctance to orally participate. Repeated by participants was fear of wasting their classmates’ time, a reason also reported by Parks & Raymond (2004). They also worried about asking an obvious question and that their peers would perceive them poorly for doing so. The research backed these reasons. They include seeing avoiding asking questions out of respect for the instructor’s time and position (Kwang and Smith, 2004), fear of making a mistake (Park-Saltzman, Wada, & Mogami, 2012) and not wanting to embarrass a teacher or another student (Brown, 2000; Parks & Raymond, 2004). Shi (2011) reported graduate students from China were uncomfortable initiating conversations in classes.

During class discussions in which the speakers of Chinese remained silent, an observer might assume the international students were passive learners, did not understand the content, or did not speak English well enough to ask or answer questions. However, according to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), the participants were involved in a crucial step before being fully
engaged in the learning community. They actively engaged in listening and sought opportunities to ask questions of classmates and the professors after class, via email, and in office hours. They used other resources such as the writing lab and participating with group members outside of class, techniques of LPP discussed by Morita & Kobayashi (2008). The participants perceived that they interacted in Mr. Caster’s class, but I did not observe any sharing of ideas, only simple answers to questions when called on. Still, it is unfortunate that the speakers of Chinese did not share more ideas and experiences. More participation from the international students could have helped advance their language skills and confidence as well as provided local classmates with global perspectives.

Nevertheless, the participants appreciated when other students asked questions and made comments; it helped their comprehension of the material because the students restated content in easier language and instructors repeated what had been covered, correlating with Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). As in the study by Choi (2015), the participants were surprised when U.S. students asked basic questions, which the instructors welcomed. Plus, interaction made classes more enjoyable. They appreciated the cultural difference in academic discourse and methodology of sharing experiences and practical application of theory.

**Group discussions.** This study showed that group discussions were paramount for the academic socialization of the participants. The participants were more likely to speak in groups than class discussions, and other studies confirmed this by Choi, 2015; Ferris, 1998; Ho, 2011; Kim, 2013; Kim, 2016; Lee, 2009; and Parks & Raymond, 2004. Many of the MBA classes required group projects and presentations, more than at graduate programs in their home countries, and these offered the participants opportunities to
interact in English with local students and other international students. The participants were more comfortable interacting in small groups than in full-class discussions, which was determined in several studies. Ho (2011) studied the effects of graduate students from Taiwan, China, Korea, and Thailand working in groups with native speakers, which advanced their critical thinking and understanding of texts, which helped their process of academic discourse socialization. Group discussions played a vital role in the oral academic socialization process. Sometimes participation in groups was impeded by a lack of listening comprehension and fears of making errors, but by the second semester, the students grew more confident upon realizing that the native speakers did not care about their flaws and were patient, which encouraged them to speak more. Encouragement also helped Korean students speak in a study by Kim (2013). A week-long intensive course with daily group discussions empowered the participants to develop closer relationships with classmates and more confidence in speaking.

English fluency was improved due to the discussions with classmates. The native speakers often communicated on a level the Chinese speakers could understand, especially when the groups had more than one second language learner. Joshua commented they summarized main points and encouraged them to share their ideas. All of these enabled the participants to improve their speaking skills in English. Stephen Krashen theorized that comprehensible language input, when language is slightly higher than the level of a language learner, is how the language advances fluency (Krashen, 1982). The native speakers modulated their speech to make it comprehensible for native speakers but was still a higher level. Other non-native speakers such as Europeans also assisted this process because the participants felt at ease expressing their ideas with them.
Aligned with language socialization theory, the students improved their fluency in English by communicating for real purposes in social contexts with input of higher language levels from texts and native speakers of English. These included making small talk, interacting in groups, and delivering presentations. These contexts provided practice in pragmatics, or the speaking and learning of social norms, such as turn-taking, making small talk, selecting appropriate topics, collaborating, and asking and answering questions. The group discussions were also an example of Vygotsky’s ZPD because the native speakers, both professors and classmates, were at various levels of English, knowledge, and experience. They helped the participants reach higher levels of knowledge and fluency in English.

The importance of group discussions was confirmed in this study and by the literature. Parks & Raymond (2004) found that some local students welcomed interactions, of group work with Chinese graduate students in Canada, while others did not, a factor was not revealed in this research. Yanagi & Baker (2015) found fluency of Japanese students in Australia improved due to group work with native speakers.

Learning through the socio-cultural contexts of discussions and projects is a tenet of social constructivism (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996).

Group projects increased the confidence to work with native speakers. Besides the gym, the only time the participants interacted with their U.S. classmates outside of class time was for meetings and rehearsals with their groups since their classmates lived off campus and worked full-time. Zappa-Hollman and Duff (2015) investigated how international students succeed in classes through creating networks to seek help from
friends, classmates and study groups. An additional advantage was the likelihood that
group discussions help prepare one for meetings in the workplace.

This study revealed an important factor not mentioned in the literature: the
participants only felt comfortable asking questions of and interacting with native speakers
they had met previously in group discussions. These classmates were sought during
breaks when the international students had questions about course content, and they were
more likely to engage in small talk with them.

**Presentations.** Group and individual presentations provided many benefits for the
international students. Helen and Neil claimed preparing and delivering talks helped them
improve their English language skills, which was also a conclusion in a study on Chinese
MBA students by Morita (2000). The participants claimed these were challenging,
requiring more up to three times the amount of preparation time as they would in their
first language.

**Coping strategies and changes over time.** Creating strategies was examined
through Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory; the participants used their experience,
previous knowledge, and problem-solving techniques to succeed in academic
coursework. As a result, the participants were successful students; one faculty member
commented to me that despite language difficulties, the international students generally
earned better grades in his course than the native speakers. Another long-term study
viewed under the framework of social constructivist theory analyzed strategies of a
Japanese doctoral student in Canada (Morita, 2009). His strategies to acclimate and
succeed in his program over the course of a year included asking questions of English-
speaking classmates and coworkers, taking ESL courses, and increasing conversation
practice. The participants in this study also utilized tutors, took ESL/EAP classes, practiced presentations, and talked to classmates outside of class. EAP classes were reported to help immensely with listening, writing, and vocabulary skills, even if the class did not focus on listening skills but in Morita’s study, the student did not find them helpful because the language and skills in those courses did not match his doctoral studies. Perhaps as a doctoral student, his level of English was higher than the participants in this study, or his ESL courses had less applicable content than those at UMSL.

Tutorials were also used in Zappa-Hollman & Duff’s (2015) study. An effective strategy in this study was previewing material, a technique that Chinese MBA students in Canada employed (Parks & Raymond, 2004). Neil and Helen imitated native speakers, also done by participants in studies on international graduate students Morita’s (2000) study on oral presentations, and Neil asked coworkers about colloquial language, a strategy included in a study by Zappa-Hallman & Duff (2015). Explicit learning of note-taking lessons enabled Vicky to understand a lecture without having to record it, saving her much time, and at work, Vicky created materials to help her with customer service on the phone.

Previous studies on oral academic discourse socialization, to my knowledge, did not discuss longitudinal changes in strategies. One finding revealed was Jill’s reliance changed from asking questions of classmates in Mandarin to native speakers they had met in group discussions and to seeking help from a professor after class. She found answers from professors to be more detailed. Morita (2000) also reported that some graduate students preferred to seek help from professors over classmates. Although the
participants were shy to speak in class discussions, the encouragement of the faculty made them comfortable seeking help after class and during office hours. This peripheral engagement was mentioned above as aligning with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of legitimate peripheral participation. During workplace enculturation, the participants drew upon and even expanded some of the coping strategies they developed during the academic semester. These included asking questions, adding comments at meetings, making small talk, and taking notes while on the phone and at meetings. As there is little research on this topic, these findings reveal new insights.

**Impact of previous disciplinary knowledge and experience.** The participants shared less on this topic than others, but previous knowledge made courses much easier to follow. Some had taken a lower-level course, such as accounting, in their home countries. The more difficult courses in the U.S. were those with cultural contexts, new information for the international students. Likewise, experience with tasks at work helped the participants perform those for the classroom. A few examples were Neil’s telephone tasks at his campus job and Irene’s delivering presentations. Work experience also gave them tools used for classes like finding information, problem-solving, and discussing topics. Literature was not found on the transference of workplace knowledge to academic settings.

**Comparing the process of academic discourse socialization to workplace enculturation.** The participants improved their aural and oral language skills in social and cultural contexts, of which academic and workplace ones were examined in this study. This was true in both the academic and workplace setting, but it appeared the English skills advanced faster in an office setting. This may not be true in other contexts,
but the participants worked with native speakers of English and held administrative and customer service positions for which they utilized oral communication skills. They spoke on the phone, assisted customers, and attended meetings.

The process of interviewing in a second language was stressful for linguistic reasons; interviews offer little time to prepare language. However, students remarked on some cultural differences in the questions, often focused on their character instead of the position, which may be cultural or specific to a company. The participants felt positive about these, even preferring the informality of U.S. interviews. Cultural differences in job interviews were also found in studies by Bayliss (2010) and Sarangi & Roberts (2002) but in those, the result was unfavorable because the interviewees were perceived inadequate due to nonverbal differences. In this study, cultural differences in nonverbal communication were not revealed.

Interactions with colleagues were favorable yet different than those with classmates. Understanding jargon and workplace duties went from being more difficult than at school to easier because over time, they were repeated daily. Still, using the telephone remained a challenge. The colleagues spoke faster and with more slang than classmates and professors. Small talk interactions were more difficult since the interns had less in common with older colleagues than students. However, there were more interactions than in classes since the participants spent more time at work. Relationships were different in that the interns were new arrivals while coworkers had been there a longer time, even years. Eric commented that it took him longer to be accepted by colleagues than classmates perhaps because they had already forged relationships.
While concern for bothering others prevented them from asking questions in a classroom, it prompted them to do so in a workplace setting. At work, asking questions was necessary because not performing a job would inconvenience others. In other words, the participants were more inclined to ask questions of colleagues and supervisors because they felt it was better for the group if they knew how to perform the job duties. Nevertheless, Neil felt less inclined to speak at work meetings because he was nervous having his supervisor there, due to his cultural deference for authority (Park-Saltzman, Wada, & Mogami, 2012). Eric was quite forthcoming; his age and experience may be factors that affected his confidence since his verbal fluency was lower than Neil’s.

When asked what their biggest communication challenge was in oral academic discourse, the answers were divided between linguistic and cultural factors. However, with workplace socialization, all the answers were related to language. The fear of not expressing oneself clearly to a supervisor could be both related to weaknesses in vocabulary expressions and to cultural factors. Overall, the cultural differences in communication (losing face, interrupting, and bothering others) posed fewer obstacles; they were likely overcome in part by having done so in graduate studies and by putting the importance of performing a job for a company over one’s uncertainties.

Findings correlated with Li’s (2000) study of a Chinese woman who worked in Canada. She received training and became assertive at asking questions, similar to the participants in this study, and her communication impacted that of the work place because she asked colleagues to be courteous. Newcomers bring new perspectives to a group (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996). It may be assumed that the international interns helped native speakers gain insight into their linguistic needs. Some asked for
explanations of slang and repetition of fast speech. Neil’s coworker wanted to learn Mandarin words. They undoubtably shared perspectives, alternate problem-solving, and experiences. Perhaps the interactions implemented intercultural awareness in local colleagues or sensitivity when speaking with second language learners. The MBA classmates and Neil’s supervisor had learned to modulate their speech due to exposure to communicating with non-native speakers. Indeed, training, answering questions, and even small talk and meetings were examples of Vygotsky’s theory of ZPD, which influenced language socialization theory. The participants improved their second language skills within a social environment through the process of enculturation in their workplace.

**Recommendations**

**Faculty.** Findings reveal useful methods for professors of international students to implement. Posting an outline or PPT of academic lecture content helped the language learners preview material, which was very helpful for listening comprehension. Also, instructors should make a list of cultural references; these could include local companies, policies, and practices. If relevant, instructors could share their topics in a global perspective. The international students appreciated feeling included in the lectures about global law and customs; this also would offer global information and cultural awareness to local students.

When teaching second language learners, professors should employ some modulation to assist comprehension. Instructors and local students should be careful to use a reasonable rate of speech and avoid colloquial language, such as phrasal verbs and idioms. This could be suggested to the native speakers regarding interacting with their
new international classmates. Also, rephrasing questions in simpler language may be helpful. Group work should be incorporated as the international students were more likely to engage in small group discussions. Mixing native and non-native students in as equal number as possible was shown to be most effective. Students interact well when they have a common goal; plus, groups help students improve language skills and offer opportunities to interact with classmates whom they would not otherwise sit with or talk to. The students were comfortable asking their teammates questions about course content.

To create a more interactive class, which can be a challenge with international, shy, and disinterested students, the following points may prove useful. An instructor could offer students time to come up with answers, questions, or comments. Ways to do this are announcing in advance that a question will be asked or asking a student to prepare a summary of a group talk to the class. Choi (2015) also recommended giving second language learners more time to think. Offering participation points also helped encourage the participants in this study. Even if the students do not engage in class discussions, this encouragement and openness helps build confidence and empowers them to seek help by reaching out via email, after class, or during office hours. If students are segregated linguistically or by other features, one could assign seats or have them change seats for short discussions.

**Program administrators.** Administrators of graduate programs should consider allowing room in curriculum for their students to enroll in ESL/EAP classes if needed. The students would benefit from a structured sequential learning over tutoring or practice. Not only will this help build their English skills, but they are also more likely to feel more comfortable interacting in class discussions with other non-native speakers.
Opportunities to interact with native speakers would also help advance English language skills and confidence with speaking; possibilities are group excursions to local attractions, arranging English conversation pairs or groups, and host family programs.

As teaching and learning styles in English-speaking countries were found to be quite different, many of the studies cited recommended services be provided to assist the process of socialization. They included seminars, mentoring from faculty, offering training for faculty in intercultural communication awareness, and creating groups of experienced students to interact with new ones. Ahmadi, Samad, & Noordin (2013) claimed organized activities also helped group cohesion in their study of international graduate students. For skills not covered in classes, it would be beneficial to provide training sessions, such as pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, taking notes in lectures and of numbers, initiating and continuing small talk conversations, interrupting for clarification, using a telephone, understanding the culture, and job interviewing. Shi (2011) also recommended instruction of conversational vocabulary and accents, initiating small talk and making others aware of cultural differences and practical skills like how to use public transportation. Seminars like the ones the IMBA participants received are helpful. A seminar taken by doctoral students continued to be advantageous even after three and a half years (Samimy, Kim, Lee, & Kasai, 2011). Note that many MBA programs do not offer these free workshops like the IMBA program does at UMSL.

Coordinators could consider various schedule offerings if possible; the participants in this study preferred face-to-face classes over online ones. Lack of interactions with classmates could have impeded the process of oral academic discourse socialization. Some of the MBA classes only met once a week in the evening to
accommodate professionals. I observed a class that went until past 9:30 p.m. For some language learners, three-hour classes are challenging, so meeting twice a week would have made comprehension of content easier. Also, faculty or administrators may want to create short-term intensive courses of team projects, such as the seminar for entrepreneurial skills discussed in this study. Students may form stronger relationships with classmates they interact with daily.

**Prospective international students.** For international students, before studying abroad, language preparation will help immensely. They should spend time practicing listening to the host language, its various accents and uses of slang, as well as academic language. It would be helpful to find opportunities for conversation practice; even online chatting is useful. Vocabulary was cited in this study as the biggest challenge for speaking, so learning new words, academic terms and expressions will help the process of acclimating to a new linguistic environment. Neil followed video blogs to learn conversational phrases. Imitation of phrases helps with accent and pronunciation.

**Employers of international interns.** For employers, some of the suggestions above could help provide a better environment for international interns. One is adjusting the speech for second language learners; speaking slower and avoiding slang. Creating social activities may help engage colleagues with each other. Also, as the beginning of the internships was overwhelming, employers should create training of tasks, such as telephone skills. Workshops or other forms of support such as tutoring on second language skills may also be useful. While academic communicative tasks help prepare international interns, jobs require more intense skills so one should realize there will be an initial adjustment period for new international employees to learn the tasks and
improve their language skills. It is very important to realize that hierarchical relationships in collective cultures are strong. International interns may feel a strong power distance and intimidation to ask questions of a supervisor. Employees may be hesitant to ask questions, interrupt for clarification, or feel uncomfortable with informality. In this study, Neil was distressed when his supervisor threw away his sandwich wrapper for him. Effort to understand the experience of international interns is worthwhile because diversity in the workplace is valuable. Various perspectives, bilingual employees, and intercultural experiences are beneficial to a work environment.

For local employees, intercultural communication workshops could be helpful. Native speakers would benefit from training in how to converse with non-native speakers, especially supervisors when answering questions about how to perform a job task. One should limit slang and phrasal verbs, speak a little slower, and add examples. Explaining vocabulary expressions and asking how to say them in the native language of the international employee may facilitate communication. The local employees should welcome possible solutions to workplace dealings from those of other cultures, who may have a different perspective and way to address problems. Of course, training in intercultural awareness is useful. Many topics are not covered in this research that most Westerners may not realize. For example, crossing one’s legs or showing the bottom of a shoe could be interpreted as condescending or rude in some cultures. Supervisors should be aware that asking questions is difficult for their international subordinates, who may be afraid to follow up if they do not understand something the first time. Therefore, communication will be enhanced if supervisors show patience, answer questions in clear English, and paraphrase any important points.
Suggestions for Further Research

Some findings in this study warrant more research in the process of oral academic discourse socialization and workplace socialization and enculturation. More studies should examine how strategies change over time and the role of confidence in social interactions in a new culture. Further insight is needed on how faculty can better engage Asian international students from Asia in class and group discussions. Transitions from academia to workplace settings are also lacking in the literature. Insight into ways academia can prepare workers for international settings and how employers can train their new employees and offer staff intercultural communication training are important in this age of globalization.

Conclusion

The outcomes of this study provide further insight into the process of oral academic discourse socialization, weaknesses in listening and speaking skills, strategies developed to facilitate communication, changes over time as one’s language proficiency and confidence improve, influence of previous disciplinary coursework and professional experience, and to what extent the academic socialization process assists communication needs in the workplace.

The study shows the process of oral academic discourse socialization is indeed complex. The participants faced difficulties with listening comprehension and oral communication in academic courses due to both linguistic and cultural reasons, with the latter playing a stronger role in preventing engagement in class discussions. Group assignments were a highly important part of engagement with local students. The academic communicative challenges of understanding English, asking questions, and
making small talk were challenging. In the workplace, they were even more difficult, requiring higher levels of fluency. The participants felt an increased responsibility to perform a job well. Also, the workplace provided more time and opportunities to interact in English.

Also explored are coping strategies in academic and workplace settings, to what extent the prior prepares one for the subsequent, and what the two communicative contexts hold in common in terms of oral expectations and interactive norms. The participants reflected on their disciplinary enculturation. Some felt reluctant to ask questions at meetings, especially if the supervisor were present. Still, solving problems with the help of colleagues was considered important. Failure to perform job tasks would affect the company. Nevertheless, asking questions of supervisors caused distress. The participants sensed their supervisors were busy and impatient, unlike professors, and they felt intense pressure to understand what was said the first time.

Results are drawn by examining perspectives shared in focus group discussions, individual interviews, and journals of IMBA students and field notes of class observations. Qualitative research illustrated individual and collective variations of the socialization process. Students revealed that despite challenges of learning and using another language in the U.S. classroom and workplace, they enjoyed the experience of learning about and interacting in a new culture. The participants appreciated the less formal and more interactive academic and work contexts in the U.S. They overcame their fear of making errors in their second language, and their oral communicative competencies grew as a result.
Results reveal implications for curriculum, methodology, and services that would empower international graduate students to adjust to a new academic and work environment, succeed academically, and feel comfortable speaking in academic and workplace discussions. In particular, professors of MBA students benefit from insight into factors that increase and impede class participation. Faculty and those who assist international students (staff, counselors, and support services) need to understand the experience of the students they serve to find ways to help decrease negative acculturation and attrition. They may examine ways their program is preparing students for professions and areas that may need to be addressed. Furthermore, instructors and U.S. classmates are affected by limited participation from Chinese speakers since they learn less about the knowledge, experience, and perspective of these international students; increased cross-cultural understanding would enhance their perspectives. Outcomes of this study add to the literature on oral academic discourse socialization, second language acquisition, and workplace socialization.
References


enrollments-faculty-grapple-implications-classrooms


Appendix

Questionnaires of Interviews and Journal Prompts

University of Missouri - St. Louis

Questionnaires for Research Project on Oral Academic Discourse Socialization

Researcher: Denise Mussman, Doctoral Student in the College of Education

Focus Group Questions:
1. Comment on the experience of being in classes in another language and culture. To what extent can you follow your instructor and comments from classmates?
2. What makes it more difficult to understand a lecture, the cultural references or speed/accents of the speaker?
3. Does the time of day or length of class affect you?
4. How do you handle understanding cultural references like places, history, or events you’re unfamiliar with?
5. Do you perceive or experience cultural differences in class? If so, what are they?
6. Describe your biggest challenges in classroom communication. How are you trying to solve them?
7. What types of assignments and teaching methods enable you to understand the classes?
8. Tell me about speaking in academic classes in college in your native country. Was this part of your education in your home country?
9. Did you feel encouraged or discouraged to make comments or ask questions?
10. Were there group discussions and projects?
11. What differences are there between the graduate classes you took your first year of the IMBA program in your home university in terms of speaking expectations in the classroom?
12. Do you ask or answer questions in class? Do you want to? What encourages you to speak in class?
13. Tell me about the relationships you have with other students in your classes. How much do you speak with them during, before and after classes? Outside of class? Do you speak for just academic reasons?
14. Do you make small talk with them? Why or why not? How much group work do you have with them?
15. To what extent do your previous IMBA classes in your home country help you understand content here?
16. Have you had a job? If so, what was your position? For how long? Describe how your work experience is relevant to or helpful for studies here.

These were follow-up questions for additional insight. Again, the conversations were semi-structured. Additional topics may have presented themselves.

1. Today, in your classes, to what extent can you follow your instructor and comments from classmates? Do you feel more sense of confidence speaking with or feeling of belonging in your studies with native speakers? How? 2. Describe your biggest challenges in classroom communication. How are you trying to solve them? What areas do you feel have improved for you? What teaching methods assisted you most? Which strategies that you developed helped?
2. How has your previous IMBA classes and/or work experience in your home country helped you understand content in your current lessons?
3. Compared to when you first arrived and earlier this semester, do you feel more, less, or the same level of confidence with speaking in group discussions? Explain. How about class discussions? Do you feel more comfortable conversing with native speakers of English? What types of assignments and teaching methods enable you to understand the classes? What encourages you to speak in class?
4. How much do you participate in class on a scale of not at all, just a little, sometimes, often, regularly? How about for group discussions?
5. Do you feel oral participation is important in your graduate program in the United States? What have you learned about academic speaking in your major through your
coursework? Could you comment on your understanding and adaptation to the business discipline?
6. How has this study helped you? How much has keeping reflective journals influenced your participation and awareness of speaking English in and outside of class?

Individual Interview Questions:
During the semester, I conducted one to three interviews with each participant. I explained that some of the questions are similar to those in the initial focus group discussion, but their answers may change as they have become more accustomed to the language, culture, and academic challenges.
1. Comment on the experience of being in classes. To what extent can you follow your instructor and comments from classmates? What cultural differences are you aware of in speaking in class and group discussions?
2. Tell me if and how your understanding and speaking English have changed. If you feel more confident, can you explain why? What strategies do you find useful?
3. Describe your current biggest challenges in classroom communication. How are you trying to solve them? What teaching styles or methods help you? What encourages you to speak in class? What types of assignments or activities enable you to understand the classes?
3. Do you have any further thoughts about whether your previous IMBA classes and/or work experience in your home country helped you understand content in your current lessons?
4. Are you engaged in work projects or discussion groups? Describe that experience of interacting in English with native speakers. Do you feel more confidence than before? Explain.
5. Let’s talk about your current level of confidence in speaking English in classes. On a scale of not at all, just a little, sometimes, often, regularly, how likely are you to ask a question in class? Answer a question? Make a comment in front of a whole class? What are reasons for any lack of confidence? (perceived language skills, fear of making mistakes, not used to speaking in front of people, etc.)
6. Please comment on the same for group discussions. How likely are you to add to the discussion? What factors make it uncomfortable or difficult for you to do so?
7. Do you read the websites and articles in English or use a translation?
8. How well can you understand classmates’ comments and questions?
9. Have you had a job interview yet for the summer internship? How did it go? How was that different than interviewing in your home country?

Focus Group Questions during Summer Internships
There were pair interviews in May and a final group interview of one focus group discussion during the summer internship. The discussions were semi-structured and guided by the following questions:
1. Now, at your place of employment, what expectations are there for you to speak in English with clients and coworkers? How do they compare to speaking requirements in classes? How comfortable are you speaking in English at work? How does it compare to your level of confidence as a student?
2. What are the challenges in workplace communication? How do they compare to those you had in classes?
4. Compare speaking in group discussions in class with those at work and in meetings. How are they similar? How are they different?
5. Think about strategies you created to follow and communicate in your classes. What did you use? Do you use the same in work environments? Have you created new strategies to help you communicate?
6. Please add additional thoughts about your journey of understanding and speaking English and comprehending ideas and cultural differences in speaking in your classes and at work.

Interview Internship Questions
One to two interviews of each participant were conducted during the summer while they were working in St. Louis. The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face.
Individual Interview of IMBA Interns

1. Comment on your present requirements for speaking at work such as talking with clients, coworkers, and at meetings.

2. Are you becoming more comfortable speaking English at work? How about with coworkers? Clients? The supervisors? At meetings? Do you feel more at ease than when you started this internship? If so, explain what factors have helped you.

3. What are your present challenges in workplace communication? How do they compare to those you had earlier in this internship?

4. Think about strategies you created to follow and communicate in your classes and at work. Which do you currently use? Do you currently use the same in work environments? Have strategies you use at work changed since you began this internship?

5. Describe to what extent previous work experience, if any, in your home country prepared you for this employment. Are your communication needs similar? Explain. Compare your experience speaking at work with in the classroom at UMSL. Which relates most to your current needs at work?

6. Have you had any team projects at work? If so, how are they similar and different from group projects in your IMBA classes?

7. Feel free to add any comments on your journey of understanding and speaking English and comprehending ideas and cultural differences in speaking in your classes and at work.

Journal Prompts during the Academic Semester

Journal #1

1. Think about when you first arrived here last August. What struggles did you have with understanding and speaking English? What did you do to understand classes? Do you use the same techniques today?

2. Describe your goals for speaking English. How important is it to you to be able to speak it? What are the reasons? What strategies have you learned to communicate better in English? How did you learn them?
Journal #2
1. How would you describe the difference between teaching styles between the two countries? Which do you prefer and why?
2. Tell me about your classes. How well can you understand your instructors? What makes some easier to understand than others?
3. What helps you understand class lectures? Answers may include these and others you know of: reading the textbook and other materials before class, having experience related to the lecture, discussing the lessons outside of class, hearing questions, asking questions to the teacher or classmates, recording the class, borrowing notes, and others.

Journal #3
1. Tell me about your classes in which the instructor asks questions. Do the students answer them? To what extent do native speakers answer? Non-native speakers? Do you ever ask or answer questions? Why or why not? If so, how often do you participate in class discussions? Some international students say they are reluctant to speak due to language difficulties and cultural differences. Which do you think is the bigger obstacle for them? Explain.
2. What kinds of help do you get to succeed academically outside of class? Answers may include visiting the writing center, forming a study group, seeing the instructor during office hours, etc.
3. Tell me about your job interviews you have had with potential employers. How did you do? What surprised you? What was most challenging? How is the interview experience different than that of your home country?

Journal #4
1. Tell me who you speak English with outside of class. Answers may include roommates, people at the gym, friends, conversation partners, host families, etc. Also, how many hours on average a week do you speak English? (be honest!) If it varies, guess how many per month.
2. Are any of the people you speak English with are also non-native speakers but of another language? How do you know them? Do students whose native language is Chinese ever speak English together? In what situations?

3. Describe speaking in groups and group projects. What percentage of the other members are native speakers? Did you perceive differences in communication with them in terms of turn-taking in conversations? How comfortable are you speaking in group discussions? What is most challenging about them? What is most rewarding?

Journal #5
1. Were the graduate classes you had back home taught in English or Mandarin? If there was a mix, what percentage were in English?
2. How is your level of confidence with speaking English in class? Outside of class? How has it improved since you first came to St. Louis? What strategies help you feel more confident? What makes you feel less confident about speaking?
3. Comment how group discussions have helped you with speaking. What about presentations? How have any other assignments helped you improve your fluency in speaking or understanding English?
4. Do you ever visit professors during office hours to ask a question? If so, how often? How about before, during, or after class?

Follow-up questions:
1. How did your strategies to understand your classes and speak change over two semesters?
2. In your country, did the programs all have the same students in every class? Were there international students or was everybody local? Did everyone have the same schedule?
3. Did you have online classes in your home country? How many online classes did you take here? Did you prefer face-to-face? Why?

Journal Prompts during Summer Internship
First journal
1. Whether or not you have an internship, think about any work experience you have had and communicating at work. How can you compare communicating at work with the
classroom? Ideas are chatting or trying not to chat with classmates/coworkers, presentations, helping others or asking for help, asking questions of the instructor or boss, intimidation with speaking, meetings and group projects, small talk, and others.

2. How are or might the above be different in Mandarin vs. English?

3. In terms of listening, compare and contrast understanding colleagues and speaking at work with understanding others and speaking in classes.

4. How has your past work experience and IMBA coursework prepared you for your career or internship?

5. Do you use the same strategies and techniques to learn the material, information, or requirements for the job as you did in class? Explain.

6. If you have an internship, describe your position and the requirements for speaking English, if any. Also describe other opportunities for speaking English such as small talk, at lunch, and at meetings.

How are the native speakers at work similar to or different than classmates? Which situations are most comfortable for you? Which are least? Why?

Second journal

1. What native speakers of English do you talk to at work?

2. Describe your level of confidence speaking at work with that at school. Is it higher, lower, or dependent on the situation? Explain. What strategies do you use to communicate effectively? Where or how did you learn these strategies? Have the strategies you’ve learned changed?

3. Is learning the requirements or other information easier than what you learned in classes? How do your strategies compare to the ones you learned earlier this summer? How do they compare to those you used for classes?

4. As time has passed, compare your level of participation and level of confidence in speaking with colleagues with when you first started. Which speaking situations are most comfortable for you? Which are least? Why?
Third journal
Now that you have several months work experience, I’m wondering if you have any changes. I’m curious how your English is at work compared to the classroom. What are the differences between small talk? Strategies to understand people? Meetings vs. group projects? The English of your American coworkers compared to classmates: are they harder or easier to understand? Why? (factors might be slang, their age, their education) Also, how did the IMBA program prepare you for work? How did it not prepare you?

Follow-up questions
Tell me what your job is now and the ways you use English. What is difficult about listening and speaking?
How do work meetings compare and contrast to group meetings for a class project?
What is your biggest communication challenge at work?
How is speaking with your coworkers different than your classmates?
Could you add any comments how working in another language and culture is a rewarding or beneficial experience for you?