

On the Periphery: Graduate EAP Student Experiences of Language Socialization

Timothy J. E. Neufeld and Christine Doe

Many Canadian universities actively recruit international students but do not adequately explore or support their unique needs. This article investigates the early stages of additional language socialization occurring among international master's students in an English for academic purposes (EAP) program. Student perspectives on community membership and characteristics of language socialization within an online asynchronous discussion forum were gathered to understand students' sense of membership. Collected discussion-forum transcripts, stimulated recalls, and interviews were used to examine these concepts. Data were processed using thematic and discourse analysis. Multiple data sources were utilized to form a holistic perspective and highlight participant interactions. Two participants and their respective experiences were explored and contrasted, demonstrating different engagement strategies, both resulting in the same assertion of marginalized membership within immediate and broader academic communities. The findings revealed that participants perceived themselves as members of the EAP program and the university, but only peripherally, highlighting the challenges international students face. Linguistic, social, and cultural difficulties contributed to their status as members in the margins, which prompted further reliance on connections with other international students to co-construct meaning and socialize into the new community. The implications suggest the broadening of EAP objectives and a call for further exploration of graduate EAP programs.

De nombreuses universités canadiennes recrutent activement des étudiants étrangers, mais n'explorent pas ou ne soutiennent pas adéquatement leurs besoins particuliers. Cet article examine les premières étapes de la socialisation en langue additionnelle chez les étudiants internationaux à la maîtrise inscrits à un programme d'anglais sur objectifs académiques (AOA). Les perspectives des étudiants sur l'appartenance à la communauté et les caractéristiques de la socialisation linguistique au sein d'un forum de discussion asynchrone en ligne ont été recueillies pour comprendre le sentiment d'appartenance des étudiants. Des transcriptions de forums de discussion, des rappels stimulés et des entretiens ont été utilisés pour examiner ces concepts. Les données ont été traitées à l'aide d'une analyse thématique et d'une analyse du discours. Des sources de données multiples ont été utilisées pour former une perspective holistique et mettre en évidence les interactions entre les participants. Deux participants et leurs expériences respectives ont été explorés et mis en contraste, démontrant des stratégies d'engagement différentes, aboutissant à la même affirmation d'appartenance marginalisée au sein des communautés académiques immédiates et plus larges. Les résultats ont révélé que les participants se percevaient comme des membres du

programme AOA et de l'université, mais seulement de manière périphérique, ce qui met en évidence les défis auxquels les étudiants internationaux sont confrontés. Les difficultés linguistiques, sociales et culturelles ont contribué à leur statut de membres en marge, ce qui les a incités à s'appuyer davantage sur les liens avec d'autres étudiants étrangers pour coconstruire le sens et s'intégrer à la nouvelle communauté. Les implications suggèrent l'élargissement des objectifs des programmes d'AOA et soulignent la nécessité d'explorer davantage les programmes d'AOA adressés aux étudiants des cycles supérieurs.

Keywords: academic discourse, English for academic purposes (EAP), international students, language socialization, student identity

Universities in Canada have made efforts to support and prepare international students for study; however, despite such scaffolding, international students often have a weak sense of belonging while studying at the tertiary level. Student belonging has previously been identified as motivating and influential in student success (Finley, 2018). As diverse international students enter new and unfamiliar academic contexts through English-medium universities, many encounter unanticipated challenges such as low intercultural communicative competence, minimal conversational capacity, or increased time required to complete assignments (Douglas & Rosvold, 2018; Wang, 2016; Xing & Bolden, 2019). These challenges stem primarily from issues of access and participation within a university community. English for academic purposes (EAP) programs attempt to address such challenges and enable admission for students who do not meet a university's English proficiency requirements at enrollment. While historical data from 2019 showed a growing proportion of master's-level international students in Canada (Crossman et al., 2021), this demographic's importance has been formally recognized by recent federal policy that reserves a substantial dedicated quota for graduate student admissions. As the proportion of master's students climbs, institutions and educators may benefit from increased awareness of how students are socialized into academic communities, especially against the backdrop of recent discourse around international students and the accompanying changes to student visas and postgraduate work permits that favour PhD, master's, and specific undergraduate applicants. Further, although students come from numerous countries to study in Canada, in the 2015–2019 cohort, over 40% of international university students arrived from either India or China (Crossman et al., 2021), making the perspectives of students from these regions particularly valuable to instructors and institutions, even more so against the backdrop of alternative participation and education norms (Yang, 2010; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). This study focuses on two Chinese students and their unique experiences and expectations of Canadian tertiary education against the backdrop of their previous academic engagements.

In order to explore such perspectives and experiences, the language socialization framework is useful to describe how students are integrated into new academic communities. The framework is characterized by a shared purpose or interest, frequent interaction, and continual development through practice (Duff, 2010; Wenger, 1998). Initially developed with first language learning in mind (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), language socialization has been expanded to investigate additional language learners and academic spaces (Duff, 2010; Duff & Anderson, 2015). Additional language socialization explores this process of increasing participation in such communities by describing multiple forms of knowledge and learning beyond the purely linguistic elements (Duff & Talmy, 2011). Recently, research into the language socialization of university students has grown, yet it minimally explores the context of EAP programs or

the experiences of graduate students from this perspective (Douglas et al., 2022; Duff et al., 2019; Hyland & Jiang, 2021). Exploration into language socialization in academic contexts is increasingly important, as exemplified by Canadian universities, which have seen heightened graduate international student enrollment in recent years, diversifying and changing the student demographics of many academic institutions (Anderson, 2017; King, 2019; Larsen, 2015). Stemming from the context of increasing international enrollment, this study aims to describe the lived academic integration experiences of two international EAP students through the lens of additional language socialization. Further, this study explored how two Chinese master's students utilized different strategies for engagement in the early stages of an EAP program and how these experiences mapped on to the additional language socialization framework.

Theoretical Background

Pre-Sessional EAP Programs

For many international students, EAP programs are the first point of contact with the university. EAP programs focus on meeting admission requirements and preparing students for tertiary study by identifying specific language features and skills necessary for proficiency and communicative competence as students position themselves as growing experts within their fields (Feak, 2016; Hyland, 2006). However, the field of EAP is not without its shortcomings. Common criticisms include EAP's hypothetical status as a service activity, a profit-oriented avenue for universities, or a homogenization zone where student creativity is stifled for the sake of particular academic genres and registers (Hyland, 2018). Within the field there is additional debate as to approaching EAP from a general (EGAP) or discipline-specific (ESAP) orientation, of which the EGAP approach has been generally preferred within Canada (Marshall, 2024). Despite these potential issues, the young and growing field of EAP continues to develop through research and practice, linking international students to their studies and their desired communities of practice (Hyland & Jiang, 2021).

The EAP program explored in this study is a one-semester-long intensive preparatory course for graduate students to develop key skills deemed necessary for general multidisciplinary master's study. This program is a small (< 100 students) EGAP program in a Canadian university, situating it among the smaller programs nationwide (Corcoran et al., 2022). The EAP program is a bridging-style program, with a non-credit-bearing graduate component alongside a credit-bearing undergraduate course (Douglas & Landry, 2021). Students must pass the assessments within the EAP course in addition to successfully passing the companion undergraduate course to begin full-time program study. The unique mixture of master's and undergraduate elements differentiates it from other similar Canadian EAP courses, which contain EAP and companion courses at the same level along with disciplinary streaming options (Viegen & Russell, 2019).

Additional Language Socialization

One angle through which international student bridging efforts can be observed is the language socialization (LS) framework. This concept broadens the view of additional language acquisition to expand beyond the linguistic elements of language and includes cultural and communicative competencies that are developed as individuals are socialized into identities, ideologies, and communities (Duff, 2010). Together, these forms of knowledge comprise what it means to know a language and participate in the ever-changing, dynamic communities of practice where language is used (Duff & Talmy, 2011). As this

knowledge formation and transfer occur, individuals increase their community participation and sense of membership (Duff & Anderson, 2015). Members are procedurally socialized and can exercise their agency to accept or resist norms and standard practices of the target community, negotiating the terms of membership and participation within the community in tandem with an individual's identity (Duff & Anderson, 2015). LS is a diverse process, often facilitated through various interactions with members of the community, such as novices guided by experts, peers negotiating with other peers, and sometimes self-socialization (Anderson, 2017; Duff & Anderson, 2015; Kobayashi et al., 2017). These sources of socialization are dynamic and multi-directional, as identities and practices are often contested or co-constructed (Friedman, 2023). LS is often used in tandem with communities of practice (CoP), which describes participation within a community through the three elements of mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). These communities offer defined environments for language socialization, where individuals shape their identities through engagement and participation.

Previous research on academic language socialization in Canadian universities has revealed crucial aspects of student experiences across various student populations. Studies involving undergraduates highlight and legitimate the role of peer socialization in integrating international students (Kobayashi et al., 2017; Landry, 2023) and provide evidence of the multiple sources of socialization across individual networks of practice (Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). Research including Canadian master's and doctoral students corroborates such findings among undergraduates by confirming the impacts of both internal and external sources of socialization (Anderson, 2017; Rajendram & Shi, 2022), as well as emphasizing the influence and active negotiation of written and verbal feedback as a source of socialization (Anderson, 2020; Kim, 2018). Feedback and participation contributing to socialization have also been shown to take shape in online contexts, such as online discussion forums, which can exhibit a more equitable environment for students to negotiate and enact agency to construct identities (Rajendram & Shi, 2022; Yim, 2011). These collective studies show the complexity of the socialization process, particularly in the varied sources and agentive actions individuals take in asserting their membership in specific academic communities, prompting more research to examine how students are socialized into new communities.

Despite some overlapping findings between undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students, master's-level students are distinct in their linguistic needs and specific CoP. Master's students come from increasingly diverse backgrounds, spanning recent recipients of undergraduate degrees to those who have taken multi-year gaps between previous degrees and graduate study (Polson, 2003). In addition to diverse backgrounds, such students often envision different objectives for their studies, as some desire to enter academia and others are practitioners seeking more hands-on applications of what they learn (Aspenlieder & Vander Kloet, 2014). Although the diverse entry circumstances and exit trajectories have been documented, further research is needed to specifically examine their unique experiences and language socialization processes. This study aims to address this gap in the literature by exploring the earliest stages of additional language socialization within the EAP context.

Previous research that includes EAP environments has demonstrated that pathway courses positively impact English academic writing skills and academic engagement (Floyd, 2015; Fox et al., 2014; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011). In addition to academic transitions, EAP programs have also been shown to facilitate friendships and community engagement through strategic pedagogical planning (Landry, 2023). In contrast, some other EAP programs are reported to omit a focus on socio-emotional or community connections in favour of a strict focus on academic objectives (Boz et al., 2018). EAP students also perceived themselves as more confident in their academic skills, including using sources, structuring writing, and accessing stronger study skills when entering their programs after taking an EAP course (Douglas et al., 2022; Dyson, 2014). However, issues of identity, belonging, and participation still exist despite engaging and strengthening such aspects through EAP programs.

Although recent research has made efforts to gather evidence of the language socialization of international students, there is limited focus on the importance of early-stage EAP programs or the specific

needs of master's students in such contexts. Students have been shown to experience different perceptions of membership when participating in diverse contexts such as online communities, EAP classes, or university courses (Soltani, 2018). Further, some graduate-level students encounter significant difficulties related to language, culture, or social aspects when attempting to gain access to and participate in new academic communities (Bond, 2019). Obstacles like these can lead to diverse, sometimes fragmented identities under constant negotiation, varying from expert and central participant to peripheral engagement or outcast based on hyper-localized contexts.

Extending to the design of EAP courses, some graduate students have had conflicting views toward academic writing style, struggling with losing their identity while integrating into a desired context (Garska & O'Brien, 2019). However, due to increased flexibility, one context that has been shown to be a more equitable environment for students to engage in is online forums (Beckett et al., 2010). Students generally report overall positive perceptions of forum participation and involvement (Beckett et al., 2010; Yim, 2011), providing a potential context to explore language socialization in greater detail. These studies provide insight, contextualization, and analyzable artifacts to highlight the struggles of graduate EAP students and their related experiences of participation, negotiation of identity, and use of feedback.

While previous research has begun to explore online forums and language socialization among students, this study focused on the lived experiences of Chinese international master's students engaged in the underexplored context of a Canadian graduate EAP program to identify the early features of language socialization, including the online context as a distinct environment for socialization. This specific demographic and early-stage EAP context complements the more prevalent approach of examining international students enrolled in standard academic programs. In this graduate EAP context, we explore the following two research questions: (1) What are student perceptions of membership within the various communities of practice in the university? and (2) What features of language socialization emerge from peer-to-peer writing in an online discussion forum? These questions target the perspectives of graduate students while revealing connections to additional language socialization.

Methods

This exploratory qualitative study investigates the early stages of additional language socialization among international Chinese graduate students enrolled in a bridging EAP program at a small Canadian university. The EAP context was selected for being an early encounter with Canadian academia. Chinese students are the second largest demographic of international students in Canada (Crossman et al., 2021), positioning their experiences as valuable for exploration. We aimed to take an in-depth exploratory approach of two months of an EAP program to highlight the perspectives of the two participants through rich description of their lived experiences and individual approaches to socializing interactions.

Graduate EAP Program

The EAP program is a one-semester graduate-level course designed to equip students for their master's-level study, offered online for this particular cohort of students. In addition to academic English, the program focuses on critical thinking, research, and practical skills deemed necessary for graduate-level study. This course is required for any prospective students who do not meet the specific language test requirements. EAP program students are recommended to have an IELTS score of 6.5 or above but can be admitted with a score as low as 6.0. In addition to the graduate EAP program, students must take an undergraduate elective in the same semester. For the two participants in this study, these electives were in-person courses, resulting in a mixture of online and offline engagement during the semester. Ideally, the

companion course would be in the student's desired field of study. However, due to the intensive scheduling of the multiple graduate EAP course sessions every week, many electives cannot be selected. Upon successfully completing the EAP course and companion course, students gain full entry into their desired academic program.

Participants

This study's participants were two international students enrolled in a graduate EAP program at a small Canadian university. The participants were relatively new to Canada, having lived locally for four to five months before attending the EAP program. Both participants were Chinese, the second largest nationality of international students in Canada (Crossman et al., 2021). Following ethics clearance, recruitment occurred directly from the graduate EAP course by giving a brief presentation on the research project near the beginning of the semester. Both participants engaged in forum-post gathering, interviews, and stimulated recalls, creating a rich dataset to analyze from multiple angles. Member checking occurred after collection, with transcripts sent to participants for clarification and confirmation. The two participants are described below under their given pseudonyms.

Ying

Ying arrived in Canada with his wife and baby five months before the beginning of data collection. He came to Canada to complete a Master of Education degree in lifelong learning. Before studying in Canada, he had completed a bachelor's degree in China and had begun a master's degree in German. Ying was taking a public speaking course in addition to the EAP program. After graduation, he hoped to stay in the local area and planned on finding work and starting new community initiatives.

Jin

Jin came to Canada with her husband four months before the beginning of data collection. She arrived to undertake a Master of Education degree in TESOL. Jin is from mainland China and had previously completed a bachelor's degree in Chinese. After her current degree, she hoped to find a teaching job locally. If unsuccessful in securing local employment, she planned to return to China to teach English.

Data Collection

This study gathered data from multiple threads in a discussion forum, stimulated recalls, and semi-structured interviews to elicit rich linguistic data on critical features of language socialization in addition to perception data focusing on the lived experiences of international graduate students. The data were triangulated through three forms of collection (forum threads, stimulated recalls, and semi-structured interviews) over the first months of the 2022 EAP course (see Table 1 for details).

Discussion Forums

The discussion forums were a required component of the EAP program where students were tasked with answering questions to promote critical thinking and exploration of course topics. This was a low-stakes activity with minimal impact on students' final grades that took place four times throughout the semester, two of which were collected for this study. Students completed each discussion forum task in two parts. First, students were required to post three responses to any of the seven instructor-posed questions in the

Table 1

Data Sources and Collection Timeline

Method	Data collection timeline (2022)
Discussion forum post collection	Weeks 3 and 6
Stimulated recalls	Week 7
Semi-structured interviews	Week 8

given week. For part two, students were tasked with replying to two of their classmates' posts. The lead researcher was invited to join the forum with a view-only account to collect forum threads for this study. In total, the participants contributed between five and six submissions each week, resulting in 21 posts.

Stimulated Recall Protocol

The second form of data collection was a stimulated recall, which is a form of a retrospective verbal report that utilized the script of the online discussion forum to provide insight into what participants were thinking when interacting with others and completing a task (Mackey & Gass, 2022). At this stage of the semester, participants were also given instructor feedback on their posts and could reflect on such comments in addition to their forum contributions. The stimulated recalls took place approximately one week after participants received feedback from the instructor, coinciding with recommendations to collect stimulated recall data relatively near to the initial event (Mackey & Gass, 2022).

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Digital semi-structured interviews were the final source of data used in this study. This form was selected to elicit participant perspectives about socialization into communities of practice. The protocol included several questions about academic and social participatory actions, community membership, and exercising agency, as these are prominent themes in language socialization research and are essential to understanding students' lived experiences of academic integration (see Appendix). The interviews occurred approximately one week after the stimulated recall, the eighth week of the EAP course. This form of data collection was conducted and recorded through Microsoft Teams, with each interview lasting 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

After the stimulated recalls and interviews had been transcribed, sent to participants for member checking, and entered into MAXQDA, the lead author familiarized themselves with the data and inductively assigned codes using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). This multi-stage process of analysis was recursive and iterative. Salient texts pointing to the participants' understanding and experience of the new communities were identified. Codes included items such as "interaction with international students" and

“expert status positioning.” For example, an excerpt from Ying’s stimulated recall included a quote where he said students not answering his questions “makes me, uh, not to ask to much question anymore,” which was coded as resisting peer engagement. These codes were grouped into emerging themes, including “peer connection” and “membership perceptions” and were then reviewed through the lens of language socialization and the posed research questions. The codes and themes were recursively checked against the gathered data and targeted research questions to ensure fit. This process resulted in the eventual naming of two overarching themes: recognition of a new academic community and student peripherality.

In addition to the thematic analysis described above, the discussion forum transcripts were analyzed to consider the socio-cultural contexts and aspects of language use and function (Paltridge & Prior, 2024). Eggins and Slade’s (2004) moves framework provided the basis for coding the forum transcripts in conjunction with categories suggested by Yim (2011). Although the moves framework is based on casual conversation, it can offer significant insight into the online discussion forum setting (Yim, 2011). Forum posts were categorized by the function of participants’ utterances, such as expressing knowledge/opinion, making requests, and social formulas (Eggins & Slade, 2004). Each post’s message and purpose were determined by evaluating the content of the post, most commonly containing individual opinions or student explanations of personal experiences. These coding decisions were combined to analyze forum roles. Students exhibited markers of five roles: information provider, information seeker, evaluator, socializer, and motivator. However, many posts incorporated role switching due to the nature of the long-form posts in the examined threads. For example, as shown in Table 2, a student’s post may begin with providing information followed by seeking further information on the topic. After analyzing the forum threads through discourse analysis, the participant posts, stimulated recalls, and interviews were comprehensively used to elucidate student perspectives and participatory actions within the EAP course.

Findings

Both participants in this study shared experiences of socializing into multiple academic communities with significant overlaps. First, participants were situated within the immediate community of their EAP course. Second, participants were in the process of being socialized into the wider academic community of this specific university. Students in this study were keenly aware of the aspects where these new communities diverged from their previous academic experiences, leading to changes in how they could participate in various parts of the EAP program and beyond. This understanding and behavioural change culminated in each participant firmly asserting they were peripheral members of these new communities, despite personal attempts and university programming efforts to enable fuller participation. Two major themes of new communities and peripherality were identified to work together, unveiling social and academic language socialization challenges as new students enter a fresh academic context.

New Academic Community

The data indicated that students recognized the academic environment they were socializing into as significantly different from their previous undergraduate experiences in both expectations and personal experiences. This theme emerged primarily from our analysis of the forum data and stimulated recalls, with some support from the semi-structured interviews. Participants’ discrepancy between experiences and expectations manifested through their framing of their new community and agentic negotiation of their forum participation.

Table 2

Example Analysis of a Forum Post

Forum role	Utterance function	Message content	Forum post (Jin, forum 1, post 5)
Information provider	Initiation	Opinion/personal experience	I think mind maps can help language learners set a systematic knowledge network, and students who summarize mind maps by themselves can help them improve their critical thinking ability.
Motivator	Reaction	Acknowledgement	You mentioned that you are thinking about the help of a mind map for teaching Chinese as a foreign language.
		Suggestion	I wonder if you have considered whether a mind map can be equally helpful for students whose native language is not English to learn English or study abroad?
Information seeker	Request	Question	And can you give me some advice on how to make great mind maps?
Socializer	Social formula	Signoff	Jin

Transitioning to a New Academic Community

Participants quickly pointed out that “university life is very different in Canada” (Jin, interview) compared to previous academic communities and experiences. Participants emphasized that “this course involve some critical thinking” (Ying, stimulated recall) and introduced higher expectations of student work. Ying and Jin indicated that their previous academic experiences had shaped their ideas of graduate study within the EAP program and in their new university.

Jin described that the EAP program bridged textbook learning and real-life academic needs, noting stark differences with her previous academic environment. She portrayed universities in Canada as easier to enter but more challenging to graduate from than in China. In a forum post, she said she felt “strange, nervous, and did not know how to do it when the instructor required you to do some group tasks” (Jin, forum 1), contrasting her previous experience where she was “used to a class atmosphere that the instructor is the leader ... students do not need to discuss or share their ideas, they just need to listen carefully and take notes” (Jin, forum 1). These quotes exhibit that she recognized the student-centred approach of the new academic community and blended what she knew from previous experiences with the expectations of the new community.

Forum-Post Strategies

Within the discussion forums, students write for both their peers and instructor, as they cannot control who reads or interacts with the posts within the class. With this in mind, Jin described her strategy of observing her peers before submitting her answers and commented that “after I answered, I will [check] frequently to see the old questions to see what other students post their answers” (Jin, stimulated recall). In contrast, Ying preferred completing the task early declaring he didn’t want “to wait until the last minute because I can free more time to do our other homework” (Ying, stimulated recall) and engaging only with the threads where he had posted, never returning after completing the assignment requirements.

While reading forum threads, Jin was exposed to student and instructor feedback posts as sources of socialization. She found instructor feedback influential in “giv[ing] advice about our homework or maybe some meaning, help us to structure our essay” and helping her write her thoughts in a “Canadian style” (Jin, interview) in contrast with her experience in Chinese education where “instructors only gave us grade. Many scores I will g[et] and do not g[et] many feedback” (Jin, stimulated recall). On the other hand, her peers were pivotal in finding “some grammar mistake I cannot find by myself” (Jin, interview). Both students explained that feedback was valuable but challenging due to limited previous experience. Ying indicated he valued feedback when it is done “with effort” or when students are “serious to do it” (Ying, interview), but when asked about reading feedback from the instructor in the stimulated recall, Ying said “no ... I can read it now” (Ying, stimulated recall), evidencing further that he had not returned to read instructor or peer feedback due to lack of time.

Participants asserted their academic identities within the forum by utilizing varying approaches to editing and timing posts. Ying and Jin described writing in the forum as a particularly laborious process involving multiple procedural steps and revision. Jin explained that besides reading others’ posts, she also “needed to read her answer again and again. Maybe three times or two times to check whether I have some grammar mistakes” (Jin, stimulated recall). She appreciated that this assignment didn’t have stringent academic formatting and style requirements, allowing her to show her writing skills in a lower-stakes environment. However, Ying expressed that he still felt pressure to write academically and tended to use software editing programs to ensure his posts were error-free. He said this was a “good practice for us to train our writing skills” (Ying, stimulated recall). These comments could indicate that Ying and Jin are positioning themselves as grammatically and linguistically capable members by holding themselves to perceptions of academic membership rather than instructor-defined assignment requirements.

These different approaches to assignment completion could indicate these students’ perceived expert or novice status. Jin said she had not done an assignment like this before and showcased a reactive stance to participation. In contrast, Ying explained he had much prior experience in “co-learning activities” (Ying, interview), including a similar forum in a previous course that led him to become proactive in the observed forum task.

Transitions in Forum Expectations

Over the course of the two collected discussion forum weeks, both Ying and Jin changed their expectations and behaviour in this online context. Ying’s posting habits represented a striking transition from the first week of the forum, where, due to his curiosity, his responses to his peers included questions prompting for more information and extensions of opinions. Ying varied between asking basic questions, including “What is your best experience of active learning?” (Ying, forum 1) and significantly more complex questions such as “What are the deep seated values you treasure in education?” (Ying, forum 1). Despite these strategic actions exhibiting a desire to connect, Ying changed his strategy and expectation of mutual interaction. He elaborated that “in the first assignment, I may ask questions, but later on, I did not do so because I don’t

want to add extra workload to my classmates" (Ying, stimulated recall). Ying also revealed that brief and non-existent responses from students in forum one reduced his enthusiasm for engagement and made him "not want to ask too many questions anymore" (Ying, stimulated recall). Ying's new strategy was exemplified in the following post from the second forum exercise, where his desire to connect is present through the use of a social formula and drawing connections to his own knowledge through use of "Just like you" in his response: "Thank you [Student] for your sharing on how you commemorate Remembrance Day. Just like you, I also visited the Stanley Military Cemetery in Hong Kong once, alone, when I was young. I still remember ..." (Ying, forum 2).

Jin's experience was similar. She had expressed interest in opinions from diverse nationalities as "most of [her] classmates are from China, only [Student] from Korea and [Student] from Hong Kong, so so I'm very interested in the answer" (Jin, stimulated recall). To address this, she attempted to ask questions to these students, one of which went unanswered. These experiences established emerging community norms and may have contributed to the reserved participation within the forum. For the second forum assignment, Jin and Ying decided not to ask any more questions. These decisions could indicate some internal struggle between efforts and desires within the forum and peers' reactions as norms and practices are constructed in this context.

Stemming from the discourse analysis of the forum roles, we found the two roles were eliminated in the second forum week. In week one, both participants took on the role of information seeker twice, with Ying acting as a motivator two times and Jin motivating discussion once. However, in the posts gathered from the second forum, these roles were absent and rather replaced by increased positive evaluation of peer posts. Compare, for example, Jin's responses to her peers across forum weeks: In the first week, she directly engages with the subject at hand: "I think mind maps can help language learners set a systematic knowledge network ..." (Jin, forum 1). However, in the second week, she begins with a social greeting and agreement statement: "Hi [Student], I agree with your idea about feedback ..." (Jin, forum 2), displaying the new formula Jin used for her recent responses.

Through the collective decisions made by the students in this course, the implied use of the forum was to complete the assigned requirements and not go beyond those specifications to interact with or foster a community. Ying attributed this to a "misunderstanding or it could be because we don't have time to do so much work" (Ying, stimulated recall), as this EAP program has numerous assignments with little time in between.

Peripherality

The second theme elicited from the data was the participants' peripheral membership status and ultimate desire for more access and opportunity to integrate into the community. This sense of peripherality was observed primarily in the interview answers about the greater university community. However, this was also reinforced in some respects through the described community forming within the EAP program. The participants wrestled with community practices and expectations through the EAP program and beyond, weakening their sense of belonging. Within this theme is the concept of inaccessibility – each interview suggested there were perceived hurdles to full membership in this academic community that could not be surpassed without support. When faced with challenges, participants indicated a preference for interacting with international students due to being readily accessible and perceived as sympathetic. Both students also described that they desired to increase their participation, moving toward being central community members.

Inaccessibility

When Ying articulated his peripherality in the broader university community, he indicated that all students are members of this academic community, but “some are marginalized ... we are not all equal” (Ying, interview). He included himself as one of these marginalized, peripheral members due to lacking access to aspects of the university community through cultural and linguistic knowledge. Despite gaining more access through the EAP program, Ying simply stated that “words are not enough” (Ying, interview) to fully participate in the EAP program or the university at large. Ying described a circumstance where his professor used local sports as a context for an in-class discussion, resulting in higher engagement with local English speakers while he was excluded due to the missing cultural and social information needed to participate, so he “just sits there and waits” (Ying, interview) in anticipation of a shift to a more accessible topic.

Jin’s perspective on her position within the university community is that she, too, was at the edge of the community. Jin believed she was at the beginning stages of her time at this university with a limited sense of membership and participation. When asked about involvement in the university, Jin shared that she didn’t “know too much about this; I think ... in September, I will have a chance to learn more about our school community. Maybe [at] that time I will, I want to join another group” (Jin, interview). This quote highlights that Jin didn’t feel a strong sense of involvement beyond the EAP program, including being unaware of opportunities to change her position. Within the EAP course, Jin’s sense of membership was peripheral primarily due to the short time frame and personal expectation of the course as a stepping stone toward her target community rather than an integrated component of her university experience. Her enthusiasm was for the potential engagement coming in the fall, drawing a distinct line between the community forming in the EAP program and the community she would create in her program.

In contrast, Ying viewed the EAP program as a part of his broader experience at this university, considering it a tailor-made component of his degree. He desired deeper connections with his peers and community members but was uncertain if he could obtain what he deemed to be full membership by the time he finished his degree. In this manner, his desire to remain in the city of the university was helpful, extending and broadening his value of membership. He described his view on community building: “I [am] always looking for long-term engagement and relationship building. Making friends in the long term, so in this aspect, I think it’s something I need to do myself rather than through the [EAP] course” (Ying, interview). At this point in the participants’ academic journey, they had limited interaction outside the EAP program and companion course, reducing potential engagement and socializing opportunities.

Reliance on Peer Networks

The participants’ engagement with other university students followed a trajectory in which they valued the opportunities they were given but believed they were both challenging and insufficient to integrate into the university community. When asked about participating in her new community, Jin contrasted and described her Chinese undergraduate experience as more social than academically oriented, prompting her to re-evaluate her priorities while studying this degree. During the interview, she described this by saying,

At first, I think academic is very important for students. Uh at a school—that you just focus your study, your learning. Uh. But now I have changed my mind. I think social skills is also important because when you graduate from school, you need to work, you need both.... I will focus both my academic and social skills. (Jin, interview)

Despite the self-described challenge she faced conversing with local English speakers, she hoped to balance her social and scholarly pursuits and ensure she could engage with others within and outside of her courses. With this in mind, Jin wanted to take her first program course with a professor from her home country, believing that a professor like this could potentially function as both an interlocutor and community expert to facilitate her academic socialization further, easing some of her perceived challenges.

Ying's experiences with native English speakers outside of the EAP context were also difficult. He participated in a Toastmasters speech group and wanted to start a book club as strategies to socialize himself into the community. However, he found it challenging to engage with the Toastmasters and did not know the steps necessary to form a campus group. In his required undergraduate companion course, he could not always follow class conversations, presenting a stark contrast against his assertion that he was generally the first to respond in EAP classroom discussions.

Both participants conceptualized local students as native speakers of English, ignoring the more realistic heterogeneity of domestic students (Jones, 2017). This description of language users has been problematized due to vague definitions and potentially harmful outcomes (Cheng et al., 2021). Therefore, the concepts of "domestic," "Canadian," and "native" reflect the participants' perspectives rather than those that are supported by contemporary literature.

Jin and Ying emphasized their peers' roles and contributions rather than their instructors' in their membership and participation efforts, potentially indicating the increased impact of peers (novices) over instructors (experts). For example, Ying stated that he perceived "native speakers they have in common knowledge experience in all sorts of life when they were talking something. I don't understand. I cannot participate, and I can't ask all the time asking question" (Ying, interview). Therefore, he preferred interacting with other international students when possible, explaining that all international students from various countries can only communicate with each other through shared English and are more likely to "have patience with one another" (Ying, interview). Jin and Ying noted that international friendships developed within the EAP program helped them practice and enhance their English ability, possibly indicating peer-to-peer language socialization within this community.

Discussion

This study explored student perceptions of university community membership and identified features of language socialization within online discussion forums. Students at this stage in their study engage in early-stage academic socialization scenarios where they are beginning to acclimatize to the expected practices and functions of a specific university community, recognizing the heavily negotiated nature of entering a master's program as an international student. In this study, the findings supported other research observing progress toward socializing into specific communities (Anderson, 2020; Landry, 2023; Rajendram & Shi, 2022) while perceiving obstacles limiting membership within the EAP program and the university at large (Bond, 2019; Wang, 2016; Xing & Bolden, 2019).

The participants described engaging in different ways during their first months of study. Ying presented as an eager student with proactive participation and decision-making attempts. Jin, in contrast, participated cautiously and tended to be more reactive, seeing what others were doing and responding accordingly. Despite distinct strategies to socialize into university communities, both asserted perceptions of marginalization and a gravitation toward other international students. The perceptions and actions described by participants resulted in co-construction of meaning being identified as the main feature of language socialization in this context. In an absence of perceived experts, blurred experienced and novice roles were an emerging marker, with the discussion forums acting as an arena for strategic participation and the development of individual identities.

Student Perceptions of Membership

The participant interviews and stimulated recalls painted a picture of the ideal master's student as someone with full lexical, grammatical, academic, and cultural access to the university community. For the participants in this study, this ideal was out of reach. One research question for this study asked: What are student perceptions of membership within the university community? The data examined in this study show that instead of being the central members they desired, the participants indicated they exercised agency but faced complications restricting full participation and membership, similar to the involuntary isolation detected in Xing and Bolden's (2019) study. Ying succinctly described his membership perception in the following:

I think all are members but. You know, uh, there is also, just like this society, right? Some people living in the downtown some living outside? Some are marginalized, living nowhere in the street, so it's like the same where we are all members. But we are not all equal ... you cannot participate if you are marginalized. (Ying, interview)

This sense of peripherality began with repeated remarks contrasting their past academic experience and emphasizing the unique needs of this educational setting, including critical thinking abilities, new academic genres, and other methods of participating within course spaces. Participants wrestled with previous experiences in contrast to what they perceived as valuable in this new university community, resulting in some negative socializing moments. Other research including international students in Canada found similar events, reporting that such negative experiences may create opportunities for students to exercise agency and instigate a long-term contribution to their socialization (Anderson, 2017; Okuda & Anderson, 2018). Although it is possible among these participants, it is too early to determine the resulting effects.

While Ying recognized a dynamic CoP including his EAP program, undergraduate course, and general university participation, Jin recognized smaller, more defined communities. She was focused on becoming a member of her graduate program community, paired with a lower desire for membership within the EAP program, perceiving them as divergent environments. Observations such as these begin to address whether participants have made connections between their EAP program and their process of socialization into target communities. Ying indicated an internalization of this continuity, whereas Jin may not have perceived interactivity between her EAP course and program study, viewing them as separate phases and communities.

Despite attempts at strategic participation, factors of inaccessibility, exclusion, and unawareness pushed Ying and Jin to the periphery at this stage of study. Ying's proactive engagement within the forum and his described participation in both Toastmasters and classes were insufficient in yielding a strong sense of belonging and membership. While he felt most engaged during EAP class sessions, other contexts resulted in more exclusion. Ying's reflections complement Soltani's (2018) findings, where participants engaged dynamically from major participation to marginal participation in different contexts. As the participants thought through their own actions, they described a lack of cultural and social knowledge, such as pop culture and local sports, limiting their ability to engage with students and instructors within the university, similar to Bond's (2019) findings. This gap extended to an unawareness of university programs, groups, and opportunities to address such concerns, according to Jin.

Stemming from participant perceptions of inaccessibility, participants expressed some level of self-socialization through the interviews, positioning themselves against peers and internally negotiating changes to accommodate participation. Such perceptions of agentive self-socialization appear to align with Anderson's (2017) findings that PhD students measure themselves against other members as they integrate

into a new community. However, when considering engagement with others, both Ying and Jin indicated stronger feelings of membership within groups of higher international student concentrations, including their EAP course. They perceived clustering with students of shared nationality and other nationalities to be helpful as they socialized into the community, as these students were considered more patient and supportive, corroborating findings in other university settings (Bond, 2019; Yang, 2010).

Language Socialization Features

The closer examination of the discussion forums and the stimulated recall activity assisted in answering the second question of this study: What features of language socialization emerge from engaging in peer-to-peer writing? The student-centric design of the forum resulted in primarily peer-to-peer socialization and collaboration to determine and reify standard practices. As a result, the first forum assignment was generally more exploratory, while the second forum tended to be more established. Participants engaged within the discussion forums of this study dynamically, revealing identity development and language socialization. Here, the blurred and co-constructed roles resulted in participant attempts for engagement and the reactive changes that followed.

Within the discussion forums, posts and engagement can significantly impact further interaction among peers, reinforcing the forum as a co-constructed space within the course. Participants perceived that the forums represented an equalized zone with lowered barriers to participation, enabling them to situate their identities and supporting Yim's (2011) finding that online discussion forums can embody a level playing field that is comfortable for diverse English speakers. By enabling students to develop their interaction practices within the forums, the roles of expert and novice were frequently blurred as participants attempted to situate themselves as capable and contributing members in the course, providing positive experiences which may have contributed to their sense of belonging (Finley, 2018). Ying and Jin situated their identities through strategic post selection, varying speed of engagement, and positive appraisal of peer ideas. However, the uncertainty of who was an expert or novice differs from the findings of Beckett et al. (2010), where more experienced students socialized novices, and more closely parallels the establishment of peer support structures in the EAP program explored by Landry (2023). The structure and timing of this task is similar to Soltani's (2018) context, where he also found that a more collaborative environment strengthened students' ability to self-position as competent members without clearly defined or readily available experts. This absence of perceived experts reflects the constant and dynamic negotiation of membership and identity described elsewhere (Duff & Anderson, 2015; Kobayashi et al., 2017; Rajendram & Shi, 2022).

Although the writing process is primarily individual, tension existed when participants seemed to rely on observations of their peers' rules, language use, and practices. Jin tended to scrutinize her peers' actions through efforts to read all the forum threads. In contrast, Ying reacted to peers who neglected to respond to his questions in the first forum by not asking any questions in the second forum. These experiences are consistent with Zappa-Hollman and Duff's (2015) findings on impactful and multidirectional peer socialization through observation, sharing, and direct engagement.

The discourse analysis contributed to recognizing contested identities in the discussion forums. Jin's and Ying's engagement with others seemed to result in a notable change in post content and intent, as both students ceased asking forum questions. In a previous study, students adjusted post content to simply pass on required information rather than engaging collaboratively to prevent losing marks due to strict instructor guidelines (Yim, 2011). However, the flexible standards in this context may have prompted participants to explain that this change was externally motivated, as they did not want to increase peer workload or potentially harm others' grades. It is likely that negative feedback in the form of rejection also

played a role, as both participants had asked questions to classmates that were ignored. Similarly, one of the participants in Anderson's (2020) exploration of Chinese PhD students was strongly impacted by negative feedback, resulting in social withdrawal, pointing toward the strength of such feedback as new students make initial attempts at participation.

These described elements of language socialization imply that the transmission of knowledge within the EAP program may go far beyond the objectives outlined by the university or in the course description. New students immersing themselves in a preparatory EAP program experience linguistic, academic, and social learning exposure. Some of these elements are rooted in the program curriculum, whereas others are underexplored aspects of socializing into a new academic community. This study's findings indicate that other forms of knowledge seem to be transmitted in this context, especially concerning student identity positioning and established norms of participation, prompting further exploration of how such knowledge can be targeted and integrated into the curriculum (Boz et al., 2018).

Limitations

The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the early stages of language socialization within a graduate EAP program as experienced by Ying and Jin. However, due to the small sample and the significant diversity among Canadian EAP programs, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other contexts. Although there are numerous graduate-level EAP programs across Canada, limited research explores this unique context, favouring undergraduate programs for exploration (Corcoran et al., 2022; Douglas & Landry, 2021). Further, the short two-month span of data collection does not track changes as students participate in university communities later in their program. Future research could address this by incorporating long-term ethnography, following students from early EAP courses into program study, reflecting the guidelines for language socialization research outlined by Duff and Anderson (2015).

Additionally, the EAP program was offered as an online synchronous course instead of an in-person course. It likely impacted student participation and perceptions within the course as well as within the university community due to less time and exposure to the physical university campus, as participants were required to be on campus only for their companion course. This study is also limited by the small sample size, which resulted in a more in-depth look at two participants from China, the second-largest nationality of international students in Canada (Crossman et al., 2021). However, this up-close look at Ying's and Jin's experiences lacked a broader representation of students from other cultural and academic backgrounds.

Conclusion

Despite the substantial limitations of this study, the data from Ying and Jin enable a rich description of this early stage of academic language socialization in line with the exploratory approach grounded in lived experience rather than generalizability. This article argues that the contrasting accounts of and strategies used by these two Chinese graduate international students in the early stages of an EAP program at a small Canadian university culminate in one result: peripheral membership. Academic language socialization was observed through agentic participation, complex identity formation, and the desire for full membership contrasted with cultural knowledge gaps. Due to the outlined limitations, we cannot make specific recommendations for universities or EAP programs. Instead, we broadly encourage recognition and exploration of outcomes beyond academic language in bridging programs as a starting point (Douglas et al., 2022; Marshall, 2024). If the consideration of extra-linguistic objectives is outside the scope of a given EAP course, we echo recommendations outlined by Boz et al. (2018), who encourage facilitating opportunities for socialization outside of the classroom, including volunteer programs or guest lectures as

examples. However, our primary suggestion is to encourage additional research on this specific demographic and context to ask questions such as these: What role do graduate EAP programs play in broader university integration? How does the preference for international students to cluster together impact academic language socialization? What is the impact of hybrid learning on academic identity formation and community engagement for international students?

Findings such as the ones in this study provide evidence that international student programs may still be somewhat segregated from the mainstream university community, advocating more research to be undertaken in complex and diverse graduate EAP contexts. As universities in Canada and abroad continue to accommodate international student enrolment, it is crucial to consider how students can be integrated more holistically and equitably into the academic community with EAP programs as a starting point. The participants' experiences have shown that academic language and objectives were not enough to fully facilitate their integration, prompting heightened focus on the factors inhibiting socialization at this early stage to facilitate a swift integration into the academic community of practice.

The Authors

Timothy J. E. Neufeld is a PhD candidate at the University of Auckland. His current research interests include international student experiences, English for Academic Purposes, translanguaging, and language socialization.

Christine Doe is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. Her research examines language testing across multiple contexts, including higher education and workplace settings.

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Appendix: Sample Individual Interview Questions

1. Could you please describe your previous academic experience?
2. What did you expect EAP to be like? University life?
3. How do you expect courses after EAP to be different?
4. Has anything been difficult for you during university life so far?
5. How do you participate in your EAP class? Other classes?
6. Where do online discussion forums fit in your learning?
7. Do you feel comfortable participating in classes? With international/Canadian students?
8. Is anyone else helping you adjust to university life? If so, how do they help?
9. What is it like for you in the EAP?
10. How do you engage with students?
11. What community do you want to be a part of while attending university?

12. What does it mean to be a member of that community? What does an ideal member think/say/do?
13. What is different about this community from a previous community?
14. Who do you think is a member of this community? Why?
15. Do you think you are a member? Where would you place yourself on the spectrum of membership?
16. Do you have to change or give anything up to participate in this community?
17. How is instructor feedback helpful in your journey to become a member?
18. What do you think your course instructor(s) value?
19. How does feedback from your peers help you to engage with the university community?
20. Have you done any other preparation for university life in Canada?

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