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## **Abstract**

Participatory practice of overseas Asian students has been much deliberated over these two decades. Recent studies on the international higher education have proposed new perspectives and analytical framework in looking at their classroom participation, which put the essentialising notion of culture and ongoing misunderstandings under attack. Among these alternative approaches, the proposal for a view on “small culture” and “academic transition” are useful in the exploration of student agency, as it emphasizes variation and variability and is also in line with the perspective that exerting agency is a discursive practice upon contingency. Drawing on Davies’s (1990) view that exerting agency is conditional and requires certain resources, the current study focuses on a group of Mainland Chinese overseas students in a UK university and aims to find out what resources are available for them and how their agency is enacted considering the academic norm in the new community. It is demonstrated that overseas students with an Asian culture have developed their own value during their overseas academic engagement. They choose to mediate between their own culture and perceived norms and act upon the awareness of “interactive others”. Therefore, being agentive individuals, overseas students also contribute to the shaping of international education.

**Key words:** participatory practice, agency, Asian culture, Mainland Chinese students, academic norm, resources, discursive practice

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## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

The issue of overseas Asian students' higher education remains one of the heated topics despite the changing flows of globalization. Problems that influence their academic life, especially their participatory practice in the academic community has been given paramount importance. As a direct and tangible measurement, students' oral participation in the classroom (lectures, seminars or tutorials) keeps attracting the attention of various linguists and educators. There have been numerous efforts went to the explanation of silence, which includes cultural differences and language difficulties. Although there is unanimous agreement that academic transition is challenging for these overseas students with a distinct culture, static views on their silence is problematic. Ellwood& Nakane (2009) argue that the students are aware of the meaning associated with their particular behaviour under a different learning context and show that they are not only struggling to change but also have critical views of what counts as participation. Therefore, the stereotypical view which attributes students' difficulties indiscriminately to cultural difference and language incompetence needs to be re-analysed, as the essentialising notion of "culture" is dangerous (Chang& Strauss, 2010) and the concept of "language" is no longer fit-for-all in the course of current globalization (Blommaert, 2010). In this sense, a conventional and fixed attempt in explaining and seeking solutions in the course of academic participation may miss the point in the complexity of ever changing situations.

Previous studies mostly centre around external factors influencing academic participation, such as intercultural differences ( Kramsch, 1993; Kubota, 1999; Singh& Doherty, 2004), supervisor-student relationships (Belcher, 1994; Cadman, 2000; Edward& Ran 2006) and study support (Chanock, 2007; Jackson, 2005; Hallett, 2010), while students' own perception on what participatory practice is normative in the new community, and the efforts they make that lead to progressive changes were shadowed or overlooked. Although learner agency has been continuously debated in the field of linguistics and education, a meticulous exploration into whether overseas students are an active agent is sporadic. If this is so, what discursive action do the students take that lead to the change, if they perceive any? What resources are available for them and how do they make use of them to exert their agency?

The UK is one of the most popular destinations for international students with a large proportion from Mainland China. Unlike the US and Australia, its educational system for a master's programme consists of two categories—taught and research degree. Typical of being a process of idea exploration while at the same time largely in the form of lectures (seminars, tutorials, etc), the taught programme combines the feature of undergraduate students education and extends beyond knowledge delivery to mind-expansion and discipline specializing. At the transitional phase of studying in a new academic community and entering in a deep exploration of discipline, being an active agent is challenging for these overseas Chinese students.

In view of the controversial understanding on their participatory behaviours and the sporadic research of their agentive aspect, this paper aims to offer a case study and attempts to find out how overseas Chinese students look at the normative practice in their new academic community in the UK and what resources exist for their use in order to act agentively. To summarise, cultural issues will be re-analysed along with the exploration of agency exertion. The following chapter will first review how agency was theorized in the past and frame the approach the current paper is going to adopt. Next, previous studies and critiques on Asian students' academic participation will be reviewed both from sociocultural and transitional perspectives, in order to formulate the specific research questions for this paper.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Approaches to student agency**

The concept of agency comes from philosophy and sociology, which generally refers to the ability to act and make choices. It is applied widely in other disciplines such as linguistics and education. According to Oxford, “agency means the quality of being an active force in producing an effect, and an agent is one who has this quality” (2003: 80). Less neutral definitions are seen in other scholars’ works which take different views on the matter, which range from a psychological perspective to the angle of social power. However, no single definition is satisfactory, since different approach to the study of agency more or less serves its own end. In this section, three major approaches will be reviewed, namely, agency-structure dualism, agency as discursive practice and resources for agency exertion. The rationale behind this theoretical review is to frame the background and specify the author’s own approach for the current study.

#### **2.1.1 Agency-structure dualism**

The agency-structure debate is reviewed in Thorpe’s (1998) study on educational crisis. The two parties on the binary, one who advocates that agency is an “outcome of structural constraints or social forces”, the other who emphasizes on the individual’s innate force and capacity, kept gaining force in different fields of social studies in the past decades. Central to the former claim is that human beings are social product and their actions are socially dictated. It highlights a person’s engagement in social activities and implies orientation and conformity to the society. The latter, in the field of applied linguistics and language teaching and education, mainly finds its voice in critical discourse studies (Morita, 2004). The basic idea, according to what Canagarajah (1999) called “resistance theory”, is that individuals have agency to “resist being positioned marginally in dominant discourses and to fashion alternative subject positions that fulfil their goals and purposes” (Canagarajah, 1999; McKay & Wong, 1996; Rampton, 1995; cited in Morita, 2004: 590). Opposed to the structure proponents, advocates in this perspective stress the individual’s power to against the mainstream society and favour the human capacity as agency to shape structures or institutions. The dualism debate keeps going on because it has raised an unavoidable question on the link between “human activity and social context” (Layder, 1994:5). However, it seems that the weighting and prioritizing of society or individual forces is based on the absolute agency-structure division assumption, as Willmott noticed, this

division is a “Cartesian legacy” which separates mind and body apart and he pointed out that “structure and agency are irreducible to each other but they are necessarily interdependent” (1999:5). Although there were attempts which aimed to jump outside of the debate, failing to realize the long-held assumption behind only led to using one category to collapse another (Thorpe, 1998). The essential problem of this assumption on agency-structure is actually not a late recognition. One powerful and effective criticism on the earlier notion of agency, which emerged from traditional sociology, dated back to Davies (1990). In his study on learner agency, the author criticized the traditional model assuming the non-collaborativeness between individual and others, which is exactly how society is constructed, and thus the individual is “conceived as being in relation to society which acts forcefully upon the individual and against which any individual can pit themselves” (1990: 343). Therefore, in the later agency-structure discussion, more attention is given to the interplay between society and individual instead of favouring one to another. This is reflected in Lantolf and Pavlenko’s argument that “agency is never a ‘property’ of a particular individual” but rather, “a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with the society at large” (2001: 148).

### **2.1.2 Agency as discursive practice**

As the agency-structure debate evolves and increasing agreement has reached upon their interplay instead of taking sides, the notion of agency shifts from being an outcome, or more precisely, “agency effect”, to a discursive practice. Meanwhile, “subjectivity” arose as an alternative term for agency although they are not exactly the same. Butler explained that “subject is the linguistic condition of individual’s existence and agency. No individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing ‘subjectivation’” (1997: 11). Although his argument primarily aims to stress the power relation between an individual and the external force, the point that to have agency, one must go through a subjectivation process, implies the inherent relationship of agency and subjectivity. If agency is understood as an effect, subjectivity is the process leading to that outcome. Hence Thorpe (1998) commented that for any investigation of agency, an understanding of subjectivity is necessary and inevitable.

The emphasis on its nature of being a process also coincides with the discussion of agency in positioning theory. Davies & Harré (1990) integrated the discussion of agency, subjectivity and social positioning together through the investigation of conversation.

Their linguistically oriented approach to social positioning focuses on discourse, which zooms in the specific circumstance and thus creates an amplified lens in looking at human agency. By defining positioning, which refers to “the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines” (Davies & Harré 1990:50), the authors not only initiate a micro-analysis of agency, but also highlight the undeniable nature of agency as discursive practice. This is because all through the process of positioning and acceptance or resistance of other-positioning, individuals orient their historical or biographical self into current order of conversation and the process of orientation itself is a process of exerting agency.

By bridging society and the individual, Davies & Harré’s positioning theory indeed offers an alternative way in agency investigation. Even in the recent studies of student agency, many have been seen following and working under this theoretical framework. These include Stroud & Wee’s (2007) work revealing English classroom realities in Singapore, Menard-Warwick’s (2008) argument for more learner agency in exploring immigrated women’s language education, and Anderson’s (2009) proposal for an expanded positioning theory when looking at how primary school students exert their agency in collaborative learning.

In Stroud & Wee’s (2007) study, students in an English class rejected the teacher’s positioning, for it had a negative association with their ethnic identities. The study demonstrated that in a multilingual Singapore, students were not passive receivers of any social positioning, their resistance either by means of silence or sanctioning group members’ “outside” behaviours (speaking English) actually was a type of self-positioning, in which the students chose to act discursively. Therefore, the authors suggested several pedagogical strategies in the end, such as code-switching, crossing (parodying students’ way of speaking) and occasional use of Singlish. If we spare a moment to look at teacher agency, however, one thing the authors kept implicit is that if the teacher’s downplay of students’ use of Singlish or their ethnic languages are negative positioning, whether it is positive positioning for them to use the suggested strategies?

This question was raised in the author’s former paper (Zeng, 2011) as well. It is necessary to bring it up again because positioning theory is not sufficient enough to explain the psychological aspect of exerting agency. According to Bandura, “a learner is an agent if

s/he acts intentionally, which implied an intention or goal” (1997:3, cited in Oxford, 2003). Actually, Bandura’s statement is not only applicable to learner agency, but to teacher agency as well, since both of them are active participants in the educational system with their own learning and teaching goals in mind. As for positioning, however, Davies and Harre (1990) pointed out that it is not necessarily intentional. The psychological explanation, in a sense, reflected that positioning theory has its limitation for agency study, although the framework is compatible with the view that agency exertion is a discursive practice.

### **2.1.3 Resources for agency exertion**

Another approach to agency arises from the criticism of traditional sociology. Along with the positioning theory, Davies (1990) developed a new model against what he called an “agonistic view” on agency. According to the author, the traditional sociology takes all human action as necessarily agentive while this is not true. He cited feminist scholar Smith’s (1987) metaphor as an illustration:

It is like a game in which there are more presences than players. Some are engaged in tossing a ball between them; others are consigned to the role of audience and supporter, who pick up the ball if it is dropped and pass it back to the players. They support, facilitate, encourage but their action does not become part of the play. (Smith, 1987: 32)

The women’s action of picking up and throwing the ball back to the football pitch, according to Davies, does not ratify them as football players. To the contrary, this action actually constitutes them as non-agent, for they were assigned the role as non-participants in the match. Therefore, following the previous approach that agency is a form of discursive practice, the author argued that “all available discursive practices are not something any individual can automatically take up” (Davies, 1990:342). He further added that “a person is a person by virtue of the fact that they use the discursive practices of the collectives of which they are a member” (1990:343). Consistent with his former study (positioning theory) which focuses on the interplay between society (collectives) and the individual, the point made here not only overcomes the problematic assumption lying behind the agency-structure dualism, but also made clear what discursive resources are needed in exerting agency. That is, belonging to his society/institution/community, a person looks at the practices that are normative to the collectives, and he chooses to follow the code, make an alternative action, or simply resist it. The last two choices—to act alternatively and refuse the discourse, are particularly highlighted, as the author stresses

that “individual as existing not only as a member of one or more collectives, but somehow independently of those collectives” (1990:360). In addition, personal (including knowledge, skill, etc.) and social resources (access to interactive others) are categorized together with the discursive resources as the three types of resources for agency exertion.

In the same vein, the emphasis that exerting agency is conditional was echoed later in Butler’s (1997) book on subjection. Although Butler embarked on a different path (power and agency) in studying the process of being a subject, his central idea that agency is “using power to eclipse power” has exactly pointed out the conditional nature of agency: if one needs to exert agency, he must have access to the power to do so. In explaining how individuals obtain the power, Butler uses the term “passionate attachment” frequently. “If there is no formation of the subject without a passionate attachment to those by whom she or he is subordinated, then subordination proves central to the becoming of the subject” (1997:10). The psychological term “attachment” here reflects the relationship between an individual and the collective he belongs to. In this sense, both Davies and Butler agree that for agency exertion, it is a prerequisite that there exists a common practice in the collective he belongs to, so that he can make use of it, and either orient to it or make alternative choices.

Although the three approaches to agency study may not necessarily follow a chronological way of development one from another, to some extent, they are complimentary in applications concerning the angles they take. Structure-agency dualism hit on the argument on the matrix of agency: whether agency is from the society or the individual, while this sounds like a chicken-egg question essentially. This is because in the same virtue with the fact that individuals are the ultimate constituents of society and they are able to shape and inevitably being shaped by society, the latter has the force both of constraining and enabling (Giddens, 1984). The most extreme example of this dualism is an essentialising view on structure, such as “Durkheimian social facts or Marxist superstructural forces that determine, in puppet-like fashion, working-class kids to 'fail' and ever remain 'failures’” (Willmott, 1999: 6). Fortunately, a structure-agency relativity view can effectively be seen in the second approach: agency is a form of discursive practice. This approach treats agency as involving a discursive process, within which the emergence of the personal choice is well justified, no matter which force –society or individual--played a more important role in it. If the first approach asks the question of where, the second, how,

and then the third one is on what to make use of. The conditions for agency exerting are no doubt what should be mostly asked if further research need practical implications.

In view of the purpose for the current study, which aims to explore the overseas students' self-change in oral participation and the recourses for agency exertion, the second and the third approach will be adopted as the theoretical background in this study.

## **2.2 Changing views on the participatory practice of Asian students**

From the early 20s, much has been deliberated about overseas Asian students' participation in the classroom. Among the most cited problems that influence their classroom performance, educational cultures and overall language competence have been challenged recently. The static views and ongoing misunderstandings around their behaviour incurred critiques and recent studies have embarked on the exploration of new perspectives. The following chapter is going to review two major trends in the changing views.

### **2.2.1 Sociocultural perspective**

Cultural difference, as a blanket-like explanation for students' distinctive behaviour in the overseas education, is accused of being over generalising. Characterised features of Asian learning culture include the disposition of being quite in the classroom, no indication of understanding, lack of voluntary speech and the worst of all, non-participation (Charlmers & Volet, 1997). Gieve& Clark (2005) raised the question of flexibility on the approaches to learning, which is opposed to a culture determined view. The study focuses on a group of Chinese undergraduate students who studied in a UK university and investigates their appreciation of a self-directed programme. In comparison with another group of European students, the result shows that there is no difference between the Chinese and European students in terms of participation degree and more revealingly, Chinese students showed a reactive and productive process of learning in this programme. In the interview with the focal subjects, the difference between Chinese and UK approaches to teaching and learning are noticed and reported. Nevertheless, they did go through a process of adjustment and emphasized the benefit they had obtained from it. If culture played a role in this process, it is the students' expectation for knowledge delivery from the classroom teaching. However, as the programme went on, students decoded the local norm during their engagement of the programme activities. It is a norm which required students to take initiatives. The cultural factor, which is usually reduced to the target of attack for students'

“waste of time waiting for knowledge imparted to them”, cannot explain the variation of their participatory practice later. Therefore, the authors argued that “An appeal to culture as an explanation for variation in learning practices and preferences has the effect of making these practices appear less amenable to variation than if they were attributed to the context of situation, as we are presumed to carry our ‘culture’ with us unchanged wherever we go in a wide range of different contexts” (Gieve& Clark, 2005:274). The proposed view which appeals to situatedness, in this case, the specific situation in a programme which is located in a specific school or university, emphasizes the fluidity and contingent nature of culture. In this sense, a fixed view on culture which ties to a geographical notion of region is no longer suitable for current course of globalization.

In another paper, Gieve& Clark (2006) proposed the notion “small culture” as an alternative explanation. According to Halliday, “small culture” refers to “the sum total of all the processes, happenings, or activities in which a given set of, or several sets of people habitually engage” (1999, cited in Gieve& Clark, 2006:64). Despite the fact that the concept itself is not a new conceiving, the essential idea that “small culture” is co-constructed and even reconstructed in the new environment is revealing. Instead of totally jumping out of the cultural framework as explanation, and neither did the authors try to clarify the misunderstandings associated with Confucius heritage, they highlight the changing and emerging nature of cultures and promote a dynamic view in the exploration of overseas students’ participatory practice. Another fresh idea advocated in this study is to “looking at the identity positions available to the individual learners who happen to be from China”. What is indicated here is that an ethnically and geographically defined notion of culture blurs away from the background and new identities emerge from the current situation which results in a culture of a “here and now” basis. Admittedly, it is an attractive and appealing perspective which responds to the call for a dynamic approach to cultural explanation. However, just as “large culture” is a dangerous label in which any variation and variability are easily lost, without a consideration of how the original culture and the new environment interplay with each other, the notion “small culture” tends to exclude and deny the role that the home culture plays, a culture which has been embedded in students’ “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1990).

Narrowing down from a perspective on a national level to a view which has a local basis, the sociocultural explanation research further zooms in the local community and resorts to an educationally specific term “academic norm” or “participation norm”. Gourlay (2006)

in the study of overseas Chinese students' experience gives a special attention to the discourse practices. The discursive demands, according to the author, need to be made explicit to the students, for a lack of familiarity to the participation norms constitutes a big barrier for the students to the engagement into the local academic community. By conducting an interview with a group of Chinese students in a UK university, the author categorises different types of "framing" issues which were elicited out from students' perception on the academic study, including the students' background in the discipline, their retrospective perception on linguistic competence and awareness of discourse norms. A detailed examination of the interview data finds out that a lack of awareness or unfamiliarity to the academic norm does affect students' participatory performance. Therefore, it is suggested in this study that higher educational institutions need to consider the degree of explicitness in terms of their structure expectation, both to the teaching staff and students, in order to facilitate a faster and effective transition for the overseas students into the local community.

In view of the recent studies, it is not difficult to find that research in the sociocultural aspect of overseas Asian students' participatory behaviour has become more specific, which emphasizes the feature of "mobility" and "transformability". If this approach is largely concerned about the external or structural factors influencing students' participation, another perspective, which will be reviewed in the following, centres more on students' own effort and contribution.

### **2.2.2 Transitional perspective**

Studies on overseas students' participatory practice have witnessed a shift in perspectives. Previous research is largely concerned about what the institutions' expectation is on the overseas students and what they can provide for them concerning their need and cultural features. Whereas, recent studies focus more on what the students actually do to make change happen, either transforming themselves or shaping the structures. Morita (2004), in her longitudinal research into the overseas Japanese students in a US university, provides a qualitative and quantitative investigation of their L2 socialization. Grounded in Lave & Wenger's (1991) "community of practice", the author looks at how the overseas Japanese students negotiate their identity and participation in the process of socializing into the local academic community. The research was conducted through the combination of interviews, classroom observations and students' self-reports on the same group of students in different courses. Although pictured as the classroom minority, as the author pointed out,

the focal students were not always submitting to what was supposed to be “normal” (speaking up). The discursive practices (choosing to speak what they are expert in, keeping silence in front of different interlocutors, taking the initiative to require a slow-down of native-speakers’ speed) are all examples of agency exertion and identity construction. The complexity of students’ participatory behaviour is unpacked in this year-long research, which shows that the transitional process they had been through may differ across the curriculum and the negotiation of identities and the way of exerting agency are also context based. Therefore, the author argued that the same practice may involve different meanings and explanations behind. Of equal importance is that possibilities for students’ self-transformation also depend on various participatory situations.

The recognition that agency exertion is context or situation based, which has been theorized in Davies’ (1990) earlier work, is explicitly applied in Kettle’s (2005) study. Focusing on overseas Asian students’ agency in the classroom participation, Kettle presented a discursive process in which a Thailand student became “somebody” from “nobody” in an Australia university. Drawing on Davies’ three types of resources for agency exertion, namely, discursive resources, personal resources and social resources, the study found out that Woody (the focal subject) was aware of the discursive practice in the Australia academic context and spent effort to respond to it. Meanwhile, the author pointed out that as an “interactive other”, the teacher facilitated the focal student’s legitimacy into the local community. As one of the few articles which delve into the process as well as the available resources behind agency exertion, Kettle’s study challenges the view that Asian students tend to lost in the new environment and emphasizes their own effort in making sense of instead of receiving academic code. However, the data for her study only depends on interviews, which lack a direct observation about what really happens in the classroom. In this sense, it may miss out things that can be hardly recalled.

If we take a moment back to the discursive resources which is proposed by Davies (1990) for agency exertion, we may notice that access to alternative positioning or choices are particularly emphasized apart from orienting to the existing norm. While Kettle’s subject was largely taking the effort for self-transformation in order to adapt to the local norm, there are increasing voices which argue that students have critical views on the existing norm and may choose to act differently.

Ellwood & Nakane (2009) demonstrates that overseas Asian students' participatory practice is not as simple as the explanations which resort to cultural diversity. Students' desire to speak up in the classroom and critical perceptions on what counts as real participation have complicated the situations. In their interviews with two groups of Japanese students, one enrolled in EAP universities and the other, mainstream, it was found that their perceptions on oral participation differ with each other. The degree of oral participation in the class, according to the authors' discussion, is subject to their purpose of study as well as language competence. More competent students may have developed their own sense of judgement and tend to assess the quality and appropriateness of speech. Implicit in this study is an idea that even in the transitional phase, students may value the discursive practice in the academic community instead of simply following the stereotypical "western norm".

The changing views mentioned above, admittedly, have not only clarified a couple of long-held misunderstandings on overseas Asian students' participatory practice, but also provided more feasible analytical angle for further research. Concerning what have been reviewed in this chapter, there remain some questions unasked. For example, the proposal for an analytical view based on "small culture" emphasizes the constructed and locally emerging nature of culture. Then how does the students' home culture interplay with the local one or a mixed one with students from diverse countries? If Asian students are pictured as the minority in the classroom, is it from the angle of student demography (the actual constitution of students from different countries) or the participation degree? If it is the former one, is the presence of native-speaker students a factor that influences their participation? The current study attempts to answer these questions through a case study, which focuses on a small group of Chinese students studying in the UK. The research questions are presented in the following:

1. How do the overseas Mainland students perceive their academic study norm in terms of oral participation? How do they react to it?
2. Do they experience a phase of change under this norm if they perceive any? What resources do they employ to exert their agency in this process?
3. Is there any difference between the situation when there are native-speaker students involved and when without?

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Data**

The focal subjects in this study are made up of five students from Mainland China. They are currently pursuing their Master's degree in Applied Linguistics in one of the UK universities. Before the matriculations, they had finished their four-year undergraduate education in China and all of them were English major students. The data used in the current study consists of two parts. One is a collection of classroom discourse, which was self-recorded in the semantics tutorial classes in the first semester of their enrolment. Another is from a semi-structured interview conducted by the author. It aims to teasing out their perceptions on the participation of this particular course. The combination of the two types of data in the current study has two merits: 1) as the students' perceptions elicited out from the interview are largely based on their memory and experience, while looking at the discourse in the classroom simultaneously is conducive to a more comprehensive and accurate account of the realities; 2) although the focus of the current study is on the students' agency, an analysis of teacher's voice in the classroom discourse is helpful in finding out whether the academic norm perceived by the students is actually the case. The five students and the course lecturer will be named as T, G, H, F, R and L separately in the following chapters. The course tutor and the students involved have given their consent to the use of the recordings and the focal subjects are willing to take part in the interview.

### **3.2 Method**

#### **3.2.1 Self-recordings**

The classroom discourse took place in the first semester of the taught programme. According to the course tutor's requirement, the students enrolled were supposed to have a self-arranged discussion in small groups every week before the tutorial session. As one of the teaching material, set questions would be listed each time for the group discussion and the tutorial was arranged to bring them up to the classroom. Nevertheless, it was not a requirement for each group to present their discussion and the whole session was largely informal. Everyone is free to talk except the course tutor remained the role of leading speaker (native speaker). The class was approximately made up of 40 people with several audit students come and go. The places of origin are diverse with student coming from America, Swiss, Singapore, Mainland China, Taiwan, South Korea and Thailand while the

Asian students constitute the majority. For the purpose of the current study, situations when the focal subjects as well as other native-speaker students made speech or attempted to speak, either it was initiating a question, presenting an opinion, challenging others' answers or attempting to compete for the speakership were extracted out (sample transcripts of classroom discourse is given in Appendix A), which was played to the subjects in the interview and some will be analysed along with later findings.

### **3.2.2 Semi-structured interview**

The interview was conducted separately with each student. To contextualize the interview and provide an open platform for them to speak out, the five subjects were asked general questions firstly on their experience of one-year study in the UK, especially the oral participation in class (see Appendix B, part 1). In the second part of the interview, relevant clips in the recordings were selected and played to them with the comparison of those from native speakers' speech. Upon their listening, general impression on the semantics tutorial class was given. Meanwhile, the discussion material (the question list corresponding to the session played) was provided, which aimed to help the recalling. The further step narrowed down their perception on the oral participation with specific circumstances in mind. In the following, the interview probed into detailed aspects of their perception using pre-structured questions in Appendix B (part 2). The whole process of the interview was conducted in Chinese, as the interviewer (the author) is from China as well and it is conducive to providing a comfortable linguistic environment using their mother language.

## Chapter 4 Findings and analysis

### 4.1 Perception on academic norms—originality of thinking matters

In the casual conversation at the first stage of interview, the five students expressed their general feeling towards the academic study. When asked to talk about any requirement they met in the programme, there was little indication of requirement on oral articulation. The preference for speech, which is claimed to be prevailing in the “western” universities (Ellwood& Nakane, 2009; Kettle, 2005), is not well perceived according to their response. Instead, what has been explicitly noticed and reported is a preference for academic originality:

Actually, no one tells us what’s their expectations are in this programme. No specific criterions either, as long as we follow our interest within the range of the discipline subject. But I feel that independent thinking is given much importance. I can sense that from the feedback in teacher’s response. For example, new ideas and critical thinking are encouraged and teachers are willing to discuss.

Independence and well-prepared background knowledge are always pre-assumed because what is talked or discussed in class is far more than that, they want something beyond the handout, beyond the paper and beyond the book.

I think it’s the originality that matters. You need to create something new of your own.

When in class, personal view is expected and highly valued. Even though sometimes it’s not so convincing, it is acceptable to the teacher if you have your own reason.

Academic originality is known to be much stressed and encouraged in higher education, especially in academic writings. Its influence, according to what has been reported here, extends from writing to oral production. The students noticed that expressing personal views and discussing beyond given materials (handouts, books, and journal articles) are what expected in this community. When asked to comment on the classroom participation in general, all the five students made a comparison, either to their own expectations, or to their former learning situations in China:

Well, it’s not as active as I thought before. Perhaps we’ve watched too many movies and TV programmes about the Western style of study. I fancy there is heated discussion in class. Plus, I’m not an outgoing person. I expected to get motivated if there is a good atmosphere.

Sometimes, I don’t have the feeling that I’m abroad. We had discussions in class as well in college back home and the atmosphere was even better. Probably it has something to do with the discipline or the people around you. You know, if you know each other well, you feel freer to talk.

According to the students' account, they have already had pre-concept of what it would be like in the "new" environment, since the frequent contact with foreign media at home has provided them a chance to "feel" the learning atmosphere in the English-speaking countries. On the other hand, high expectation on classroom interaction made them picture a scene of heated classroom discussion in mind while it turns out not to be so. A revealing fact here is that the privilege for speech is conditional. It is based on the prerequisite that the students are expressing original idea, even though the participation degree is lower than their own expectation.

As the interview went on and detail questions extended into the semantics tutorials, perceptions on the classroom participatory norm are more specific. Before listening to the tutorial recordings, the five students unanimously agreed on its high degree of participation compared with other similar discussion classes. Their general comments include "the atmosphere is active", "students, both native and non-native speakers are involved", "there's much interaction in this class and the teacher is good at motivating", "it is an interesting class and it's easy to have different opinions on the same thing in this discipline". It seems that the Semantic tutorial class stands out as a course which has more active interactions, although the overall impression on that of the whole programme is under average expectation. What is striking in their further account on the semantic course is an awareness of the native and non-native speaker distinction, which is shown in the following quotations.

After the selected clips had been played to them, detailed and specific perceptions on classroom participations were given:

The atmosphere in this particular course is quite active. I think the non-native speakers are as much active as native speakers if you look at times when they made speech in class. The semantics course is quite interesting. But sometimes, I don't think we are asking questions, but checking for our own understanding. So the professor's responses are just feedback or redirection. While as for some of the native speaker students, they can situate the semantic question into their own language well (English) and the teacher's response are more like a real and deep discussion...The fluency of English may influence the tempo of the class but not the discussed content.

There's much interaction in this course. I think the class is more than teaching since the professor herself is sometimes not sure about an issue or a problem. So it's more like doing study together with both the professor and students involved, rather than being a one-directional process. When she encouraged us to speak, I felt that I was part of this class too.

Compared with other courses, this class went on fluently with students' as well as the professor's thinking flowing freely. In other courses, the lecturers may follow a plan, either in the form of PPT or teaching arrangement. As for this one, I feel it is the professor who followed us. Whenever the students initiate a fresh idea, the professor would integrate it into her teaching. In this sense, I'd like to say she's discussing with us, not teaching.

In line with their previous impression on the taught programme as a whole, emphasis on expressing original ideas is deemed as normative practices in the semantics tutorials. As is recalled in the interview, students from different countries, both native and non-native speakers, shows little difference in terms of participation degree. What put the native-speakers in a better position is that they can easily situate semantic questions into their own language (English). It is largely to do with the nature of the discipline, for English is taken as the example language in this course. Therefore, it gives the native-speaker students much advantage to grab attention and develop a deep discussion with the professor. Nevertheless, it is pointed out that fluency of English is not a decisive factor in oral participation. Instead, it is the discussed content that matters. Meanwhile, the teacher's response, according to their account, also gave the students hint on what is normative--independent thinking and fresh ideas are more preferred than merely being able to "speak up". For example, any initiation of fresh idea is encouraged, which can be indicated from the professor's ongoing discussion of it and her move to integrate it into her teaching. The following example is extracted from the tutorial recordings:

### **Extract 1**

(The professor and students are discussing how to present the sentence "Marcia usually buys a hat when she shops" in logic formula using quantifications. When they have reached an agreement on a proper way of presentation, student F initiated a question)

1 L: Is there any other question about this

2 F: yeah (.) I'm just wondering if we use usually to quantify the time (0.1) which is interpreted as most

→ 3 of the time (.) then could it quantify the number of hat↑ Say I have another reading of this sentence (0.1)

4 most of the hat Marcia's got is from the time she shops

5 (1.0)

6 F: does it make sense↑ heheh

7 (2.0)

- 8 F: it's like [a result]
- 9 L: [ahhh↑ ] say your interpretation again
- 10 F: most of the hat Marcia's got is from the time she shops
- 11 L: o:k (0.1) right (.) sodoes any one see: that (.) I think you can get that meaning (0.2) what we got i::s
- 12 (the professor picked up a pen and started to write something on the board along with ongoing
- 13 explanation of the student's reading. She even came up with different examples trying to get the students' point)
- 14 L: well our interpretation is that most of time when Marcia shops she buys a hat (0.1) your
- 15 interpretation is that let's say if we could find a good example she buys a hat when she goes to London
- 16 S: but she changes buy into get
- 17 L: yeah right but we could get the meaning say when she shops most of the time she buy a hat not
- 18 other things (.) that means usually can not only quantify she shops but buy (0.1) so here you get the
- 19 restriction differently and sometimes I think you can get different restriction through intonations for
- 20 example...well that's something discussed in some literature I didn't expect you to notice that (.)
- 21 very well done

The above dialogue demonstrates a preferred mode of interaction or classroom participation norm, which can be told from the teacher's response. When student F expressed her notice of a sentence ambiguity (line3), which extended beyond the current topic, the teacher seemed surprised at the initiation of this fresh idea (line 9) and were interested to talk about it. Even though the native-speaker student S challenged F and pointed out her potential inappropriateness of changing a word in the sentence (line 16), the teacher maintained its reasonability and expressed her surprise explicitly (line20). The student's move of idea exploration was encouraged by the teacher's positive remark "well done" in the end.

Similar dialogues are found in the recordings throughout the whole course session. Although it seems that every higher educational institution is supposed to achieve the goal of mind-broadening and idea exploration among students, it has become a noticed norm for oral participation in this particular course.

## **4.2 Critical view on oral participation norms—content of speech and way of presenting**

Despite of the positive comments on the participation degree, critical views are also expressed concerning what the students deemed as “real conversation”.

Sometimes I think I have explained clearly enough, but my way of asking is still confusing to other people, especially to non-native speakers of other countries. As for other native-speaker students, they may be actively involved, but I don't see the point of their participation sometimes. They asked something which is literally irrelevant to the topic in question. Sometimes I feel it's totally unnecessary. But generally speaking, the atmosphere is good and I'm more willing to speak out my idea.

The thing is sometimes even though there were people asking questions, speaking out personal opinions or just giving comment, I don't think they are having real conversations. But there were some occasions when the interaction is quite effective, especially when the American students are at present. I'm always motivated by their questions to think deeply. That's what I think real discussion is.

Native speaker can easily express their idea clearly while it takes time for us to prepare our sentence and to make an idea clear. But if you consider the content of their speaking, it's not necessarily better than ours. No offence, but sometimes I feel the answer to their questions are too obvious and you may wonder why they ask in the first place.

It is not difficult to find that these students hold a complicated attitude towards other students' as well as their own oral participation. In the judgement of their own speech, no self-disparage is expressed and one of the students even stresses that native-speaker students are not necessarily better concerning the quality of their speech. However, they do express the extra time needed for structuring their sentences and getting them across. On the other hand, they are all agreed on the positive influence of native-speakers' activeness, which helps to create a good atmosphere in class, while doubt is cast on the worthiness of their speech sometimes. As two of the focal subjects explicitly point out, some questions raised by the native-speakers are simply “irrelevant” and “unnecessary” and they deem thought-provoking speech as real conversation.

In their perception on the oral participation, the interviewees have also touched upon the way how Chinese students and their native-speaker counterparts present questions:

I think Chinese students are quite cautious when asking questions. Sometimes, I don't think we are asking questions, but checking for our own understanding. We like to find a possible answer and try to check its correctness instead of presenting our puzzle directly.

Well, we (Chinese students) tend to be very polite when asking questions or expressing our own views. For example, we always begin our sentence with “excuse me can I”, “could you please”, “sorry may I” or

“I’m just wondering”. But the foreign students are quite straightforward. They just say “I’m confused” “I don’t understand” plainly.

Further explanation on the noticed difference is given as follows:

We received an education from the very beginning in China which emphasized on correctness. We tend to think there’s only one answer to the question. We experienced lose of mark for failing to present the only answer and even in the classroom, every speech you made is supposed to hit the right answer. The teacher’s response gave us much pressure. It’s like that you should not answer the question if you are not sure about it.

I think those native-speaker students are quite comfortable with the way they speak in class. Even sometimes it sounds too straightforward to us. Maybe in their own country, no one would judge whatever they say and how they say it... Here in the UK, probably we should follow their way of doing things, but we still got so many Chinese classmates here and I don’t feel I could be that straightforward in front of them. But anyway, I don’t feel it’s inappropriate, that’s just our way.

Consciousness of educational culture and environment is reflected in their perception here, which emphasizes how their way of speaking and the content of speech are received in their country: In China, the prerequisite of knowing the standard or correct answer legitimates them to speak in class while in the English-speaking countries, students feel at ease about any speech they made since no sanction is perceived. Based on what they had said about the educational difference, they were asked why they didn’t feel at ease to present the question in mind directly rather than thinking over, preparing a tentative answer and speaking cautiously. Contrary to the preferred assumption that the peer pressure is from the native speakers, the student explained that it was the presence of their counterparts that made them to choose the way they did in China.

#### **4.3 Perception on self-change—limited idea to expanded thinking**

As the students have noticed a participatory norm in this academic community which privileges original thinking and in-depth discussion, whether they go through a process of self-change orienting to this norm is the question to ask next. According to their account, most of the students do have changed a lot in terms of oral participation while this process is not linear to everyone and the influencing factors behind also vary:

In the beginning, I thought there must be a standard answer to each question on the list. So I rarely give much thought to possible explanations or solutions. Every time I made speech, I just stopped at what I thought as the most relevant answer. That’s it. But as the course goes on, I found there are many questions worth discussing. Plus, the professor encouraged us to think alternatively and deeply. It seems any fresh idea is valuable to her. So I tend to think beyond and question on something else or question on others’ opinions.

At first, I was not so active because I'm afraid of making mistakes. That's not a personal issue. That's something about the image of my country. Well, other people probably thought "how could Chinese students make such stupid mistakes"? But as I got deep into the discipline and did more reading, I became more confident to speak out because I think I have reached a certain level. When I found the professor would spend time having continuous discussion on tricky questions and everyone seemed so attentive, I no longer hide my ideas behind. More importantly, you will involuntarily speak out when the atmosphere is so good. Even the problem I met in the beginning, like I can't get myself across or it's hard to follow the native-speakers' speed, has been solved when we got familiar with the teachers' style and with other classmates.

It may sound a bit strange but I do have this experience. In the very first few chapters, I was quite interested in this course since it's a totally new discipline. Everything is so fresh to me. So I made more speech in the class. When it goes deeper and becomes more difficult, I got lost and couldn't connect the current content to the previous chapters. At that time, I feel myself less active. While later, when the questions listed by the teacher become highly worthy of discussion, I got active again in the class.

Yes, I have changed. Although you may not hear much of my voice in the classroom recordings, that doesn't mean I'm not attentive or I'm not thinking. Sometimes, I'm listening carefully to others and comparing and analysing their ideas. It's just because of my own personality. I tend to wait for others to finish first instead of competing with them. Anyway, I become more active in thinking.

The above report on self-change shows the students' orientation to the academic norm they perceived in the classroom. They were not active enough at the beginning because of limited ideas, sense of responsibility for maintaining national image, and habitual lack of consideration for other possible answers and ideas except the "most irrelevant" one. However, change took place later when they had accumulated knowledge both on the discipline and the academic norm, increased familiarity with the teaching style and socialization with other classmates. Another influencing factor reported by one student is the degree of their interest in the discussed questions. The individual difference reported here demonstrates the heterogeneity not only of the students' participatory practice but also the way of their changes even in the same community and under the same academic norm.

Evidence of the reported change can be found in the recordings. Examples are presented in the following extracts:

### **Extract 2**

(Before the start of the tutorial, T initiated a question which was not on the question list and she kept going deep into relevant problems)

→1T: we are talking about downward entailing

2 L: yes

→3 T: I look up on the wikipedia about the upward entailing but there is not much information about

4 the upward entailing (0.1) so can I uh=

5 L: OK yeah so: let me (.) upward entailing has the opposite (0.5)

→6 T: is it opposite because if we say I ran entails I ran fast can I say I ran fast is an upward entailing

7 L: yes the difference is that...

→8 T: so that means we can use downward entailing to look at negative polar item and we can use the

9 upward entailing but it's the other way around or it's more complex

10 L: so there is the notion that ...

### **Extract 3**

(The session was to address the ambiguity of English sentences. In the middle of the discussion, H attempted several times and tried to bring up his own idea)

11L: We could start by saying (.) what's the ambiguity of the first example (.)David wants to flatter everyone

12 Golden insulted (0.1) what are the possible ways of understanding it

13 (0.5)

14 J: well the ambiguity was whether it was individual that David flattered or it was a group

15 L: [ah:: okey

16 J: ( )

17 L: yeah: that is a possible (.) though that's not the typical reading but it's there (0.2) so: well you treat it

18 as the ambiguity of individual and group (.) that's the distribution or collectivisation (.) we get how you

19 might get there (0.1) wasn't it actually the ambiguity I'm thinking of (.) Does anybody

20 T: uh I'm thinking maybe they wanted to flatter everyone (0.1) it's like the::they want to uh: whenever

21 there's a one Golden insulted he wants to flatter them or it just happens that he flattered everyone that

22 Golden happened to insulted

23 L: uhum

24 T: [something like that

25 →H: [.hhh

26 L: yeah (0.1)[ ye:s so: does someone get something like [that

27 →H: [.hhh [yes yeah I just think one condition is that they

28 themselves himself wants to flatter everyone Golden insulted (.) uh the other perspective is that

29 somebody the other people think he wants to flatter everyone yeah I think it's a propositional attitude

30 L: yes I think both of you are getting on the same thing I think what's going on here is the ambiguity is

31 was a de re de dicto

The two dialogues are extracted from the later period of the tutorial session when the end of the first semester was approaching. In extract 2, T mentioned what had been talked about in the last session and initiated a question which was relevant but not discussed before (line 1, 3 and 4). When the teacher was caught up with this new question and took time to formulate an answer (silence in line 5), T interrupted in with a preliminary idea which remained uncertain (line 6), however. Following the teacher's explanation in line 7, she sought for confirmation again on her own understanding (line 8) and attempted to get into in-depth discussion (line 9), which in turn received the teacher's ongoing explanation (line 10). T's moves (taking initiatives to explore more, preparing possible answers to her own questions, and thinking actively in time) demonstrate exactly what the students perceived as normative practice in the classroom participation—original thinking and idea exploration. In extract 4, H, who used to be less active according to his own account, attempted twice (line 25 and 27) in this interaction to bring up a different idea with J, a native-speaker and T, his Chinese counterpart. Although he is not fluent in English (confusion with the use of reflexive pronouns and imprecise use of subjects), he tried to get him across to his interlocutor so that he summarized his speech with a semantics terminology “propositional attitude” to make it clear what he was getting at.

## **Chapter 5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Resources for exerting agency**

Findings from the students' perception and analysis of the classroom discourse show that students have developed their own view on academic norms, hence exerting agency either to act accordingly or alternatively. The specific account of their views on different aspects of oral participation as well as the process of self-changes provide space for discussion. According to Davies, "agency is enacted through certain discursive, personal and social resources which are contingent upon access. The agentive subject must have access to recognised/recognisable discursive practices, to alternative positionings, and to 'interactive others'" (Davies, 1990, cited in Kettle, 2005). Drawing on these proposed resources, this chapter is going to present the conditions for the focal students to exert agency in this particular case.

#### **5.1.1 Perceived academic norms**

As the call for a dynamic view on the cultural issues has gained momentum, the emerging nature of local based norms is emphasized. Here in this particular community, although no specific requirement is explicitly given by the teaching staff either in words or in document (according to the students' account), a gradually established value which privileges original thinking and idea exploration in classroom participation are perceived. The teacher's favourable response to fresh idea expressing, encouragement for mind expanding and surprised but pleased assessment of new thoughts are taken as signals, which strengthened the students' belief that this is a norm in the current community. The implicit participatory norm, as is recalled in the interview and reflected in the recordings, goes further beyond the long-held western educational preference for "speaking up". Therefore, explanation for silence is much more complicated than ever thought before. Ellwood & Nakane (2009) found that those Asian students actually have the desire to make speeches in the classroom, which is based on the students' notice of the existing norms. Similarly in the current study, the five Chinese students are aware of the norm as discursive practice. What is different is that this perceived norm has little to do with the degree of participation and the reality is much more demanding than the typical assumed western classroom education. To put in another word, merely "speaking up" in the class may not grab much attention and the students have their own judgement on the necessity of "speaking up". As one of the student explained, her participation situation was actually

not as it appeared to be in the recordings (rare speech was found in the recordings). She attributed her “silence” to her own personality (she did not like to compete for speakership if others had touched upon her idea) and she explained her increased “attentiveness” and “active thinking” as the course went on. It seems that the students will weigh or value the content of their “speaking” before making it public. As previous critiques of ongoing misunderstanding on the participatory practice pointed out, “South-East Asian students hold different beliefs from many Western students about the appropriateness of speaking out in class. Many are not willing to draw attention to themselves by asking what they perceive to be an unnecessary question” (Chalmers & Volet, 1997:91). Therefore, the teacher’s response made it more clear what counts as real participation. The perceived norm, therefore, provides a discursive resource for the students to take action and exert their agency. According to Davies, “the person is a person by virtue of the fact that they use the discursive practices of the collectives of which they are a member” (1990: 343). The perceived academic norm here is the practices of the whole class in which the students are a member. This norm is not necessarily pre-existed or fixed but subject to different programmes or courses, and sometimes it is co-constructed both by the teacher and the student. When they have discovered and been aware of this norm, they exert their agency either to take up the practice or choose to act alternatively.

### **5.1.2 Awareness of Interactive others**

As a social resource, “interactive others” are originally defined as “the other members of the group, along with the appropriate context and discourse, who legitimate the positioning of the person as agent” (Kettle, 2005:4). Kettle treated the lecturer in her study as an “interactive other” who can be accessed and is able to legitimate the focal student’s agentive action. The definition implies a power relation which stresses the interactive others’ right of legitimating. However, in a broader sense, other students can be also treated as interactive others considering the informal context of the tutorials, since they are ratified listeners as well as indirect interlocutor who can respond without talking through the teacher.

As shown in the interview, the awareness of other students’ presence in the class has certain influence on the oral participation. Depicted as the classroom minority (Clark & Gieve, 2005; Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Kettle, 2005; Morita, 2004), Asian students tend to be more concerned about their speech when speaking or attempting to speak in front of students from the English-speaking countries. The issue of face (Ho and Crookall, 1995;

Jin and Cortazzi, 1993; Little-wood, 1999, cited in Clark& Gieve, 2005) has been discussed most as overseas students have a sense of national representation and also a concern of their linguistic competence. Different from past studies, the current case shows a reversed situation in which the Asian students constitute the classroom majority. Although a student in the interview commented that the western style of learning is more open and no one would judge what is asked and how it is asked, the reality, however, is that she is still worried about her speech in public and cares about the judgement from others. The reason given by this student, strikingly, is the awareness of their Asian or Chinese counterparts' presence, which constitute the majority of the classroom. She explained that the Chinese students hold the value that questions which assumed to be obvious are not question at all and it is unthinkable to bring it up in class. Therefore, she is afraid other Chinese students holding the same value may judge on her. Nevertheless, another student expressed an opposite awareness. He felt comfortable in front of his Chinese counterparts without foreign students at present in other courses. The pressure, according to him, comes from a sense of national responsibility, especially at the beginning stage when he was not well equipped with epistemic knowledge. He knew the symbolic value of his speech in an international class and had the intention to maintain national image.

The question of student demography is a complicated question. Different students in the study show opposite opinions on “interactive others”: some may feel more confident speaking in front of their Chinese counterparts while the others tend to be influenced by outspoken native-speakers or students who received a speech-privileging education. In any case, the students choose to act differently according to their own perception and awareness of their interlocutors (direct and indirect). It constitutes a social resource for the students to exert their agency.

### **5.1.3 Familiarity to the academic environment**

An appeal to cultural diversity in the past has been accused of being essentializing, which thereafter gave rise to an approach favouring contextual factors. The call for looking at the “small culture” in a particular community emphasizes situatedness, mobility and cultural flows. Clark& Gieve criticised the deterministic view on culture which puts all the Asian or Chinese students under a ethnically and region defined label, as if “we are presumed to carry our ‘culture’ with us unchanged wherever we go in a wide range of different contexts” (2006: 274). The focal students in the current study, according to the interview

and the recordings, have shown a process of transition in which their practice is subject to the academic environment instead of being determined by fixed culture. Contextual factors of environment in this particular case includes the lecturer's teaching style, the interactional mode (between native-speaker student and the lecturer, other Asian students and the lecturer and within the students), and the discourse norm. As one of the students recalled on his personal change, the more familiar he is with the professor's teaching style, the better he can understand what is normative in this academic community (preferring original thinking and idea exploration); the more he knows how the native speakers in the class communicate with each other, the better he can follow their pattern of speech and speaking speed. Meanwhile, based on his knowledge of the discourse norm, he has developed his own perception on what counts as real conversation, in what way he prefers to pose his question in order to get him across. It seems that the students are both participants and observers simultaneously in this community. They take on the identity as an observer when the environment is new to them in the beginning. It takes time for them to adjust, accommodate and to develop a critical view on the acceptability of the academic context. Along with the process of their academic engagement, they gradually obtain the social resources (familiarity with the teacher as well as other students), and proceed to make sense of the discursive practice and make use of it to their own end: exerting agency to be part of the collectives as well as to shape the perceived practice according to their own value.

## **5.2 Discursive practice for change**

### **5.2.1 Mediation between perceived norms and home culture**

Earlier in Kramsch's work, the author noted that international students' learning practice may lie in a "third place between the cultural practices of 'home' and 'abroad'" (1993, cited in Clark & Gieve, 2006: 67). Overseas students nowadays are studying in a world of ever changing situations. Granted with increasing mobility and exposed to no small number of global interactions, the boundary between countries has blurred with numerous engagement of international activities. The danger of resorting to an immovable and a carpet-like notion of culture has been noted earlier by Holliday. He pointed out that "after reification, culture appears large and essentialist, and indicates concrete, separate, behaviour-defining ethnic, national and international groups with material permanence and clear boundaries" (Holliday 1999: 242). Therefore, later proposal for a meticulous view—small culture—admittedly has its advantage in approaching the overseas students'

participatory practice. However, as has been pointed out in the second chapter, how the home culture leaves its trace in the students' trajectory of practice and how it interplays with the current academic norms remained unasked. Li and Casanave note that "postgraduate students are, or should be, active agents of change. They transform the communities by critically and consciously resisting and changing the existing ways of doing things, and more often, by simply being who they are, by bringing their ways of living and coping into the mix" (2008: 6, cited in Chang & Strauss, 2010). According to the findings in this study, the students do play a role in mediating between their educational culture and the norms they have perceived in the new community.

According to the students' perception, they have noticed the preferred pattern of communication between the professor and the general students as well as the particular norm within the native speakers. It is interesting that students in the interview showed no negative perception on their own English competence, although they agreed that fluency is conducive to discussion efficiency. They also admitted the need for time to get used to each other's speech. "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with their own intention, their own accent, when they appropriate the word, adapting it to their own semantic and expressive intention" (Bakhtin, 1981: 342, cited in Davies, 1990). The students stressed the importance of ideas in this community and were confident about the quality of their speech in class, in spite of any claimed "linguistic deficit". The norm which privileges mind-expansion is what they have observed in the classroom practice and they took it up as a practice they should orient to. On the other hand, the way of posing questions and presenting opinions by other native speakers are also noticed, which the focal subjects commented as "straightforward", "direct" but sometimes being lack of consideration for appropriateness. In their home culture, as a decent student, they are supposed to pay special respect to the one who imparts knowledge and delivers instruction to them. In addition, students who have received an education in China are supposed to prepare a proper answer for their speech instead of merely "speaking up". It is noticed that their cultural value in terms of teacher/student relationship and classroom behaviour has been brought in and shaped in the current community. The students choose to maintain their "indirectness" or politeness in speaking and provide a preliminary answer even for the question they intend to post. At the same time, they went through a process from being a comparatively passive listener (only receiving knowledge, stopping at an acceptable

answer) to taking initiatives (asking questions beyond the current issue, being an effective listener or thinking actively). In this sense, a simple view of merely being outspoken and articulated in the class, which is a general norm constructed by the native-speakers need to be mediated since the Chinese students feel they are a part of the community. They appropriate their own behaviour and contribute to the extension of current norm construction. In this process of exerting agency, distinct identity is created and expressed through their mediated behaviour.

### **5.2.2 Mediation between self and the collectives**

Being an agentive individual, one has the choice to act distinctively from the collectives instead of simply orienting to it. Even under the notion of “small culture”, heterogeneity exists. In the current study, although the Chinese students share similar cultural values according to the general Chinese style of education and upbringings, their personal experience and individual personalities differ. The individual difference plays a role in shaping their trajectories of acting. According to Wong, “a student’s previous history and socio-economic background can contribute to the development of very different agencies and learning paths, even though they seem to be in superficially similar circumstances” (1996, cited in Clark & Gieve, 2006: 64). Having noticed the academic norms in the community, the students make sense of these practices and make choices according to the mediated cultural values which have been shaped by the new environment. In the process of self-change, they are aware of the meaning associated with their behaviours, which they choose to mediate between themselves and the collectives. One student in the interview mentioned her own personality, because of which she indicated that there was little change in terms of oral participation. However, she had been trying to be an active listener who can “compare”, “analyse” and “think deeply”. Another student mentioned his past experience when having the undergraduate education at home in China. The classroom participation in his university was quite active and personal interest was largely encouraged. Therefore, as shown in his account of the current study in the UK, the process of change in terms of oral participation is not linear. His participation practice was largely subject to his academic interest (interest on a particular chapter covered in the tutorials) and to the discussing value of the listed questions according his own judgement. As a result, he shows a different change pattern from other students, which is under the influence of his personal experience.

Davies (1990) explained how an individual commit to the discursive constructions according to the notice of current practice as well as his biographical past:

Agency is thus a matter of position or location within or in relation to particular discourses. How that agency is taken up depends on the way in which one has discursively constructed oneself as a moral being, the degree of commitment to that construction, the alternative discursive structures available to one, as well as one's own subjective history-informing one's emotions and attitudes to agentic and non-agentic positionings.

Because the students have their own critical idea and attitude towards oral participation, they bring in their subjective history, in this particular case, how they conceive as being a decent student, what counts as a real question according to the Chinese way of upbringings in education, and of equal importance, their own personalities, historical experience as well as personal values. Therefore, the degree of commitment to the current academic norm is determined both by their past biographical experience and present recognition of community practices. They need to consider how the collectives dictate the classroom practice while at the same time have alternative choices at their dispose to make mediation.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusion**

As voices of criticism have been heard increasingly, which set the pervasively stereotypical view on Asian students under scrutiny, alternative perspectives such as “small culture” and “academic transition” have offered new approaches to the study of participatory practice in the overseas higher education. In view of the rare focus on the students’ own contribution, the current paper provides a study which put their agentic aspect under the spotlight and answered a few questions which had remained unasked in recent literatures. The current study demonstrated that, in the process of academic transition, overseas Chinese students experienced a self-change in terms of oral participation, in which they exerted their agency concerning the gradually perceived academic norms. Different from their expectation on a typical “western style” of classroom participation, the local community did not show a scene of “heated discussion” in general and student participation is subject to the nature of the discipline as well as the course arrangement. One of the perceived norms in this community, according to the interview, is the preference for original thinking. It is alarming that a higher degree of participation does not promise “effective” or what the students called “real conversation”. Therefore, they have developed critical views on the appropriateness of “speaking up”, not only about when but also about what and how. The attitudes and values they hold towards the perceived norms are shaped by their educational culture at home as well as the academic environment in the overseas educational context, which lies in the “third place” (Kramsch, 1993). As agentic individuals, these students choose to take actions based on the perceived norms, the awareness of their classmates (both native speaker and their Chinese counterparts) and the lecturer who can legitimate, hear, encourage, challenge and judge their speeches, and the familiarity to the new environment. With these resources at their disposal, the students enact their agency by mediating between the perceived norms and their home culture, and between the self and the collectives. One thing, which should be particularly noticed, is that as non-native speakers, these Chinese students are not only conscious about the presence of other native speaker students, but also that of their Chinese counterparts, for any action they take in the classroom is not only valued by the local norm but also judged by other Chinese peers according to their home conventions.

Canagarajah criticized that some western educational system hold fixed views on their international students as if “the discourses of academic communities are not open to

negotiation or criticism” (2002: 32). From the students’ perceptions on the academic norms and the actions they took for self-change in this study, it is safe to argue that students played an important role in constructing and negotiating the local academic discourse. On the one hand, the students made effort orienting to the gradually established and perceived norm in order to engage in more original thinking. On the other hand, they chose not to adopt the native-speakers’ norm that favours speaking in a straightforward way and presenting question directly. They prefer to maintain their Chinese way of politeness and always prepare a preliminary answer to their own question to check for confirmation. This, in some way, helps to promote deep discussion. The reciprocal relationships demonstrated here have further strengthened the emphasis on the interplay between structure and individuals, for these students are not solely constrained by the local code but bring in their own academic values. These values are largely formed through their biographical experience and different cultural engagement. During the process of agency exertion in the local community, the students developed new identities while maintained their Chinese-ness at the same time. As Clark & Gieve noted, “a conceptualisation of identity which accepted fluid and multiple identities would allow for students taking on the attitudes and practices of different social and cultural groups simultaneously, contingently, instrumentally, and flexibly. They might still feel themselves to be very much Chinese, and not acknowledge any contradiction between ‘being Chinese’ and following ‘Western’ learning practices” (2005: 274).

The current study delved into a fine-grained process of agency exertion through the combination of interview and classroom discourse. The analysis of sample discourse is conducive to a more comprehensive view and helps to minimize the danger of being subjective and missing the important aspects in the classroom realities. However, the methodology is not without its limitations. Although the focus of the study is on the students and the teacher’s voice is also heard through the discourse analysis, an interview with the course lecturer may be useful to confirm the explicitness of academic norms and expectations from the teaching staff and programme authorities, as the students recalled that there was no requirement explicitly expressed to them. It should be also noticed that the current study is based on a group of students from one programme, whether the academic norm is pre-existed or newly-constructed is subject to the academic context in terms of discipline and programme arrangement. Therefore, the applicability of the resources for agency exertion is also subject to change. What need to be pointed out at last

is that the subjects are postgraduate students while most of the previous studies focus on undergraduate students. However, as they are from the taught programme in the UK University, there are many commonalities in terms of classroom education, but the findings cannot be over generalized to cover the whole UK higher education.

Overseas students from Asian countries (exemplified through the study on Chinese students here), as shown in this study, are no longer passive academic norm pursuer in the English-speaking countries. The stereotypical view on education based on the East-West contrast can be easily challenged by a detailed study of any academic community, since variation and variability are viewed in the current course of globalization, in which mobility, fluidity and situatedness are under increasing emphasis and discussion. The students' agentivity should not be undermined in the transitional phase, and the teaching support, therefore, should not be taken granted according to the old view on what the local institution deems as needed by the international students. A consideration of the academic values and attitudes hold by these students is needed. At the same time, their actions in class should not be overlooked in order to provide a better higher education in the future.

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## Appendix A: Sample transcript of classroom discourse

### Transcription Convention

(0.1)	pause (in tenths of a second)
(.)	very short pause
[ ]	overlapping speech
↑	markedly rising pitch
.hhh	inhale
°°	whisper
><	speeded up speech
=	latching speech
( )	unclear speech

### Extract 1

(The lecturer is explaining how to present the logic formula and A initiates a question)

A: Excuse me

L: Yes

G: In logic, we are not supposed to extract the not from the statement (.) the summer is not very hot

L: uh::uh: you could (.) what we were doing was (.) you could do that (.) so I was treating q as being the summer in Edinburgh is not very hot you are quite right (.) what you could say is actually (0.1) the conditional is that and the q is: the summer is hot in Edinburgh and the whole thing is false (0.1) overall then you still got the true and true (.) you got it because you had the negation as false (.) yes that's probably a more systematic way of doing it

G: Thank you

L: yeah that's a badly set question and that would be a more completed way of doing it

## Extract 2

(the lecturer is writing a logic formula along with student's voluntary answer)

L: ok Clive told Tom that Bill had left (.) the predicate i::s

(many students answer together): tell

L: tell (writing it on the white board) right what are the arguments

(many students answer together): [c:]

L: [c is Clive a:nd [t is Tom]

(many students answer together): [t:

G: °° a:nd there's [another predicate°°

T: [another

R: [there's another predicate

L: uh: yes

R: uh: sorry

L: >no no no< just say it's just because I can't hear so many people (.) I have to pick one

R: u:h I think there's another predicate (0.2) that is (0.1) left

(many students speak together): leave

L: yeah we are going to take the tense out (.) just [leave]

R: [leave]

## Extract 3

(The professor and the students are discussing about how to present the sentence "Marcia usually buys a hat when she shops" in logic formula using quantifications. When they have reached an agreement on a proper way of presentation, student F initiated a question)

L: Is there any other question about this

F: yeah (.) I'm just wondering if we use usually to quantify the time (0.1) which is interpreted as most of the time (.) then could it quantify the number of hat ↑ Say I have another reading of this sentence (0.1) most of the hat Marcia's got is from the time she shops

(1.0)

F: does it make sense ↑ heheh

(2.0)

F: it's like [a result]

L: [ahhh ↑ ] say your interpretation again

F: most of the hat Marcia's got is from the time she shops

L: o:k (0.1) right (.) so:: does any one see: that (.) I think you can get that meaning (0.2) what we got i::s

(the professor picked up a pen and started to write something on the board along with ongoing explanation of the student's reading. She even came up with different examples trying to get the students' point)

L: well our interpretation is that most of time when Marcia shops she buys a hat (0.1) your interpretation is that let's say if we could find a good example she buys a hat when she goes to London

S: but she changes buy into get

L: yeah right but we could get the meaning say when she shops most of the time she buy a hat not other things (.) that means usually can not only quantify she shops but buy (0.1) so here you get the restriction differently and sometimes I think you can get different restriction through intonations for example...well that's something discussed in some literature I didn't expect you to notice that (.) very well done

#### **Extract 4**

(before the start of the tutorial, T initiated a question which is not on the question list and she kept going deep into relevant problems)

T: we are talking about downward entailing

L: yes

T: I look up on the wikipedia about the upward entailing but there is not much information about the upward entailing (0.1) so can I uh=

L: OK yeah so: let me (.) upward entailing has the opposite (0.5)

T: is it opposite because if we say I ran entails I ran fast can I say I ran fast is an upward entailing

L: yes the difference is that...

T: so that means we can use downward entailing to look at negative polar item and we can use the upward entailing but it's the other way around or it's more complex

L: so there is the notion that ...

### **Extract 5**

(the session is to address the ambiguity of English sentences. In the middle of the discussion, H attempted several times and tried to bring up his own idea)

L: We could start by saying (.) what's the ambiguity of the first example (.) David wants to flatter everyone Golden insulted (0.1) what are the possible ways of understanding it (0.5)

J: well the ambiguity was whether it was individual that David flattered or it was a group

L: [ah:: okey

J: ( )

L: yeah: that is a possible (.) though that's not the typical reading but it's there (0.2) so: well you treat it as the ambiguity of individual and group (.) that's the distribution or collectivisation (.) we get how you might 19 get there (0.1) wasn't it actually the ambiguity I'm thinking of (.) Does anybody



## **Appendix B: Interview questions**

### Part 1

Can you tell me something about your academic study? Is there anything you enjoy and anything difficult to you in your programme?

Since you are enrolled in a taught programme, how do you think of the courses or modules? Do you notice any academic norm in your study at this school or any particular courses?

### Part 2

What do you think of the oral participation of the semantics class in general?

How do you view your own speech in the class throughout the whole semester? What about other students?

What effort did you make in the semantics class?

Is there any big difference in terms of oral participation between the semantics class and other tutorial class of different courses?