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Learners' Stories: A Study of Hong Kong Post-Secondary Students' English Learning Experiences and Identity Construction

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LEARNERS' STORIES: A STUDY OF HONG KONG POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS' ENGLISH LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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by

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Abstract

This study is a narrative inquiry of six Hong Kong post-secondary students' English learning experiences. Studies on Hong Kong's English language education system have tended to explore the impact of medium of instruction policy on secondary school students' motivation and attitudes towards English learning (e.g., Poon, 2013) and their cultural or national identity development (e.g., Lin, 1997; Lin & Man, 2009). At the post-secondary level, researchers have examined the effectiveness of English for Academic Purposes courses (e.g., Evans & Green, 2007) and language use in English-medium post-secondary institutions (e.g., Evans & Morrison, 2011a, 2011b). Less is known about how students negotiate identities and construct perceptions of English learning in Hong Kong's post-secondary education context. Theoretically informed by Norton's (1997, 2000a) work on the role identity plays in English learning, this study pays particular attention to how interactions within the English classroom have shaped and informed the participants' English learning experiences and English learner identities.

Data were gathered from relevant English language curriculum, pre-interview questionnaires, interviews with student participants, and post-interview classroom observations. The data were used to develop the participants' English learning narratives, and connections were made between the various stories told by individual participants and how they made meaning of their English learning. A thematic analysis of the data was also conducted to highlight both common and idiosyncratic aspects of students' English learning.

Findings demonstrate that the participants constantly (re-)constructed their identities as situated and multiple within their immediate and imagined learning communities. Their investment in English learning was inextricably tied to their prior learning experiences, multiple identities, and hopes and desires for the future. The students' learning narratives provided rich descriptions that contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between language and identity in second language learning both in Hong Kong and internationally.

The study highlights the importance of language educators taking into account students' prior learning experiences and multiple identities, which are often overlooked or neglected in highly competitive learning environments such as in Hong Kong. The study suggests possible ways for educators and policy makers to enhance students' investment in learning in English language classrooms.

Keywords

Dedication

For my late grandfather, 李輝 Lee Fai,

who taught me about perseverance in overcoming adversity.

For my loving parents, 李培華 Li Pui Wah and 余亞美 Yee Ah May,

and my wonderful sister, 李穎琪 Li Wing Kei,

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Chapter 1

1   Introduction

Once I attended a dinner party with my parents. Before dinner, my mother circulated and mingled with her friends. I recalled there was one lady who was excitely talking to the other guests about her two small grandchildren. I overheard the conversation and was astonished to hear that the two small children only spoke English to her at home (though the whole family spoke Cantonese as their first language). I later found out that the parents of the two small children did not allow any Cantonese to be spoken at home. The main reason was that the parents considered fluency in English as one key determinant of their children's entrance to "prestigious English-medium" schools. While it really annoyed me when I heard that the two small children could not speak their mother-tongue, it clarified for me the hegemonic influence of English in Hong Kong, a former British colony. That night, I kept thinking about my own early language learning at home. When and how did I start learning the English language? What was my English learning journey like?

Like most Hong Kong students, after kindergarten, I started learning English formally at the age of six in a Chinese[1]-medium primary school. English was taught as a language subject and I learned all other subjects in Cantonese, my mother-tongue. After graduation, I entered an English-medium secondary school in which all subjects, except the Chinese language and Chinese history, were taught in English. Back then, I thought my English learning journey was similar to that of other Hong Kong English learners. It was only when I began to teach English in a post-secondary institution in Hong Kong that I realized not all students follow the same learning journey. Each student has a different English learning experience and each has a very different story to tell. In this chapter, I will first recount my own English learning and teaching experiences. Through the

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[1] "Chinese" in this thesis refers to standard written Chinese and spoken Cantonese. In Chinese-medium schools, all the teaching materials (except the English related ones) are written in standard written Chinese and all the lessons are conducted in Cantonese (the mother-tongue of most Hong Kong students).

retelling of my own story, readers will be able to see how my prior learning and teaching experiences have informed and shaped the current study. I will then describe the context in which this study was situated and the research questions that guided my investigation. The description is followed by a discussion of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study. Lastly, I will present the justification and an outline of this study.

1.1   My English Learning and Teaching Story

"A B C D E F G…Now I know my ABCs, next time won't you sing with me?" As far as I can remember, singing the alphabet song was my very first English learning experience. I recalled my mother often sang English nursery rhymes with me when I was little. I guess that was the main reason why I was not shy or frightened when learning English at an English-medium kindergarten. English was not something "new" to me. English learning during my kindergarten years (between the ages three and six) was not difficult at all. In Hong Kong, kindergartens vary greatly in terms of their scale of operation. As far as I can remember, there were about 20 students in my class. As stated on the website of Education Bureau (2012), the aims of kindergarten education in Hong Kong are to:

> …nurture children to attain all-round development in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics; to develop good habits so as to prepare them for life; and to stimulate children's interest in learning and cultivate in them positive learning attitudes, in order to lay the foundation for their future learning.

All kindergartens devise their curriculum following the Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum developed by the Curriculum Development Council (2006). With regard to English language education, the curriculum guide states that teachers should cultivate children's interests in English through activities such as singing nursery rhymes and play. I still remember that there was one native English-speaking teacher at school. She was very kind to students and always wore a smile on her face. English learning at that time had always been fun and interesting. We learnt a set of English words every day. There was no examination or any tests in school. What I enjoyed most, looking back now, was

reciting all the new words to my mother every day after school. After my three years of kindergarten studies, I then entered a Chinese-medium primary school[2].

The transition from kindergarten to primary education was not a smooth one. My primary school was well-known for its heavy workload. To my parents, they believed that I would achieve better academic performance by doing endless practice. But to me, I was frustrated by all the school work. Learning was not fun anymore, including my English learning. Instead of telling my mother what I learnt from school every day, I told her the number of pages I had to complete in the grammar book. My kindergarten teachers had adopted an interactive teaching approach. I used to talk a lot during class and I enjoyed interacting with my peers. At my primary school, however, the English teacher typically taught according to the textbook. Sometimes, she called on individual students to read a portion of the assigned reading. I liked being called upon to read aloud in front of the class. Looking back now, I might have tried to find ways to resist my role as a "silent" student in the classroom. I was so eager to speak the language. It is no wonder that I once asked my mother, "Why can't I just learn English like before? Can I go back and study at my kindergarten?" Besides all the grammar exercises, there were also dictations and spelling quizzes every week. To ensure I could get high grades in them, my mother helped me review my lessons. Whenever I got full marks in my English dictation, my mother would give me a new toy. At that time, I perceived English learning as something I was required to do in school. Similar to other subjects, I had to perform well in English so as to get promoted to more senior levels and later, to get into a Band 1[3] secondary school. Well, that was what I was told by my parents.

During the last two years of my primary education, I was extremely hard-working as I knew my academic performance determined whether I could pursue my secondary

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[2] As stated in Cheng (1997), nearly 90% of primary schools in Hong Kong use Chinese as the medium of instruction. Fang (2012) also states, almost all primary schools in the public sector (473 in total) adopt Chinese as the language of instruction.

[3] In Hong Kong, all secondary schools are categorized into three different bands (Band 1 – 3). Band 1 schools are considered as the best schools, which consist of students with higher academic standing.

education in a well-established school. My mother had always taken an active role in my studies. Not only did she check my homework every night, but she also prepared mock examination questions to help me review my work. I remembered during those last two primary school years, she placed great emphasis on my English. She told me it was of great importance to get good results in English as a subject in order to get into an English-medium secondary school. I did not fail to meet my parents' expectation. I got very good results in all my school subjects. I even got full marks in my English examination. I was awarded a certificate for achieving excellence in English. My parents were extremely proud of me and I still remembered their smiles of praise at the award presentation ceremony.

After my six years of primary studies, I began to pursue my secondary education in a prestigious English-medium school. My secondary school was well-known for students' high academic standing, especially in the English language. Being a student from a Chinese-stream background, my adaptation to an English-only learning environment was not at all smooth. I remembered my school had a streaming arrangement for the English subject. On the first day of school, all students were required to take an English test. Based on the test results, students were streamed into six different classes (A to F). Class A consisted of students who had the highest English grades. I was assigned to class D. At that time, I thought to myself, the students in my secondary school must be very good at English. I received full marks in English at my primary school and yet, I was only assigned to class D at secondary school. While studying in an English-medium school, the English language had become an important part of my school life. I was surrounded by the language in school. I recalled there was a school assembly every morning and it was conducted in English. On Fridays, a native English-speaking reverend would come and speak to us. I did not follow everything he said. It was not until my later school years that I fully understood his sermons. English learning was not easy during my secondary school years. The grammar exercises were a lot more difficult than those in the primary English classroom. The English textbook was full of difficult vocabulary. I remembered I had to use the dictionary quite often. Having noticed that I had to study all the subjects (except the Chinese language related ones) in English, I knew that I had to master the language well in order to excel in the content subjects.

Beginning my secondary studies, my mother was no longer involved in my English learning. She seemed to hold the perception that once I entered an English-medium school, I would be fine as English-medium education would help me secure a seat in the local university. She believed that by studying in an English-only environment, I would pick up the language naturally and become good at it. However, that was not the case. It took me almost three years to really get used to the learning environment at school. During those first three years, I worked hard to memorize all the difficult terms in subjects like science and history. Not only did I memorize the difficult vocabulary, but I even memorized the content of each chapter of the textbook (sentence by sentence). On the one hand, I knew that rote-memorization was not going to help in the long run. On the other, I could not find a better way to learn those subjects. As for my English learning, I also adopted a similar strategy. I memorized all the grammar rules while doing my English homework. And while writing assignments for other content subjects, I tried to apply those rules in my writing. It was like learning English through trial and error. As time went by, I slowly began to develop confidence in my English and I gradually became able to manage my studies in an English-medium school.

Different from my primary education, I was quite active in extra-curricular activities at my secondary school. For example, I was a member of the school choir and girl guides. All the extra-curricular activities were conducted in English. Looking back now, those activities might have helped with my English learning. For instance, my music teacher was a native English speaker. During choir practice, she taught us English pronunciation as she reminded us it was of great importance that the audience could hear the song lyrics clearly. At that time, I did not realize the positive impact these activities had on my English learning. I just enjoyed singing with my friends. At around that same time, I also developed an interest in listening to English songs and watching American television series. In my circle of girl-friends, American celebrities became our common topic. I recalled we bought a lot of teen magazines to stay up to date on the latest news of our favourite idols. While reading those magazines, I came to see a different side of my world (my Cantonese-speaking world). For example, my friends and I were surprised to know that students in North America generally did not need to wear uniforms at school.

English seemed to serve as a telescope for me to discover what lay beyond my immediate surroundings.

My senior secondary school years were full of exercises based on past examinations. Like most Hong Kong students, I had to sit two public examinations; one at the end of my senior secondary studies (Secondary 5) while the other at the end of my matriculation (Secondary 7). These two examinations determined whether one could enter the local university. I do not recall what my English class was like in the senior levels. The only thing I remember was I had to do a lot of examination practice in class and the English teacher would go through the answers with us. I did not have any negative feelings towards those examination exercises as I knew I needed them to do them to get higher marks in the examination. My English teacher once said the two language subjects (English and Chinese) were the key determinants for university admission. I always kept that in mind and worked hard to improve my English and Chinese. In the end, I got good grades in both of those subjects. Upon my graduation from secondary school, I got accepted in one of the local English-medium universities in Hong Kong.

I was a linguistics major during my undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Having graduated from an English-stream secondary school, I did not encounter any difficulties adapting to an English-only post-secondary context. At that time, I truly believed that my English-stream background helped me a lot with my linguistic studies. It was especially true when I took an English syntax course. The knowledge of English grammar that I had gradually acquired during my secondary school years seemed to come into play to help me cope with the course assignments.

Whenever I look back on my prior English learning experiences, I always feel grateful to my family for they had provided me with a supportive learning environment ever since I was little. Without my parents' support, I would not have been able to get into an English-medium secondary school, which provided me ample opportunities to learn and also to use the English language. Back then, I did not really think too much about how other Hong Kong students learned English. To me, all Hong Kong students learned

English using the same English curriculum, developed by the Hong Kong Education Bureau. In other words, I thought we all followed a similar English learning journey.

After my post-graduate studies, I began teaching English at a post-secondary institution in Hong Kong. During my first few years of teaching, I held the perception that helping my students improve their English should be my top priority. I prepared a lesson plan before each class and strove to complete all the tasks in the plan. I also made sure I covered everything that was written in the course syllabus and ensured my students were well-prepared for the end of term examination. At that time, I thought I did my job well as most of the students received satisfactory results in English. However, I will never forget the day that a student came up to me after class and expressed his worries over his English learning. This student came from a Chinese-medium secondary school. He told me of his sense of inferiority studying alongside students from English-stream backgrounds, "Well, they graduated from English-medium schools. We (students from Chinese-medium schools) will never be like them (in terms of English learning)." I stood in stunned silence for a few seconds. I did not know how to respond to him. I remembered telling him not to think that way and suggested some ways to improve his English. The student thanked me and then rushed off to his next lesson. The incident happened almost ten years ago and yet, it has been etched on my mind since then. I strongly concur with Lin (2010) who states in her work,

> It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that success in learning and mastering English for a school child in Hong Kong impacts significantly on her/his academic success and social mobility, and very often the student's own self-worth directly or indirectly depends on it. (p. 122)

That evening, I went home and reflected on my prior teaching experiences. I realized that for all those years, I had assumed that my students and I shared a very similar English journey. Moreover, I perceived all students as having only one identity – that of "a Hong Kong English learner", irrespective of their prior educational backgrounds (e.g., the language stream in which they pursued their secondary education). The next day, I went into the classroom and looked at my students. I had this urge to hear their English

learning stories. What were their experiences of learning English? How did their past make them who they were that day? I had become interested in the impact their prior learning experiences had on their current English learning and their positioning in the English classroom. I then decided to embark on doctoral studies, hoping to find the answers to my questions. Before presenting the research questions that guided the present study, I will first describe the context in which this study was situated.

1.2   Situating the Research and Research Questions

Hong Kong is a racially homogeneous society as 95% of its 7 million inhabitants are ethnic Chinese (Census and Statistics Department, 2011). Notwithstanding the fact that different Chinese dialects (e.g., Hokkien, Teowchew, and Hakka[4]) may be spoken at home (usually with the older generation[5]), Cantonese is used by the majority of Hong Kong people as their first language. According to the Census and Statistics Department (2012), 89.5%[6] of the population (aged 5 and over) claimed that Cantonese was their language of daily spoken communication. Sociolinguists like Yau (1989) describe Hong Kong as a "virtually monolingual Chinese society" (p.279). So (1992) also describes that Hong Kong is an "essentially monolingual Cantonese-speaking community" (p.79). Despite the fact that Cantonese is the first language of the majority of Hong Kong people, the English language has impacted every aspect of Hong Kong people's life. As stated in Poon (2004), the English language penetrated into the domains of Hong Kong's "education, government administration, legislature and the judiciary" (p. 54). The prominent position of English can be attributed to the territory's colonial past.

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[4] Hokkien is spoken in Fujian, a province in the southeast coast of China. Teowchew is spoken in eastern Guangdong, located on the southern coast of China. Hakka is spoken in Southern China.

[5] A large influx of Chinese people escaped to Hong Kong during the second world war and have settled in the territory since then.

[6] As stated in the 2011 Population Census Main Report, the other languages used for daily spoken communication included Mandarin (1.4%), other Chinese dialects (4.0%), English (3.5%) and other languages such as Indonesian and Filipino (1.6%).

The 156 years of British colonial rule have consolidated the hegemony of English in Hong Kong. As in other crown colonies, English has occupied a prominent position in Hong Kong's education system. As Poon (2004) points out, "despite the small English population as opposed to the large Chinese population, English enjoyed a supreme status in the colony" (p. 54). During the colonial period, the British government adopted a laissez-faire approach to the medium of instruction used in schools. Most Hong Kong parents believed (and still believe) that knowing and speaking English would help their children climb the social ladder (Lai & Byram, 2003; Li, 2008). As a result, the decision of medium of instruction in schools was usually driven by strong parental preference for English-medium education. Shortly after the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from Britain to China in 1997, the Hong Kong government implemented a mandatory mother-tongue (Chinese) education policy, compelling all secondary schools to use Chinese in teaching. However, there were exemptions. Schools that could demonstrate to the government that their teachers and students were capable of teaching and learning in English could retain English streams. In the end, the policy divided all secondary schools into two language streams: Chinese-medium (CMI) and English-medium (EMI). It is within this context that I conducted my research.

1.2.1   An overview of English learning in Hong Kong

As mentioned in the previous section (1.2), Hong Kong can be seen as "a racially homogeneous, largely monolingual society" (Evans, 1996). Cantonese is the main spoken language in the territory. English is mostly used in official and formal settings such as government and education. Most Hong Kong children begin their schooling at the age of three at kindergarten (usually for three years). As stated in the Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum, developed by the Curriculum Development Council (2006), English is introduced to students as a second language. Developing students' proficiency in their mother-tongue (Cantonese) is of primary importance. With regard to English teaching, teachers should stimulate students' interest in English through pleasurable activities such as story-telling and play. After their three years of kindergarten studies, children enter primary school.

Students in Hong Kong begin their primary education at the age of six and there are six years of primary schooling (Hong Kong Government, 2013). Most primary schools in Hong Kong adopt Chinese as the medium of instruction. As stated in Chik (2008b), in general, there are about 30 to 40 students in one class and students learn Chinese, English and Mathematics as core subjects. According to the English Language Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 – 6), English language education at the primary level aims to provide students with contexts and learning experiences to "develop their English proficiency; enhance their personal and intellectual development; and extend their understanding of other cultures through the English medium" (Curriculum Development Council, 2004, p. 4).

Upon completion of their primary studies, students then enter secondary school (at the age of 12). In Hong Kong, students receive their secondary education either in the Chinese- or English-stream (more details will be given in section 3.2.2 in Chapter 3). While the primary English curriculum focuses mainly on laying the foundation of students' English language development, the secondary English curriculum centers on "the application of English for various everyday learning and developmental purposes" (Curriculum Development Council & Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2014, p. 3). Teachers should support students' learning of other content subjects in English (to prepare them for English-medium post-secondary education).

At the end of their six years of secondary studies, Hong Kong students have to sit the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination. Students whose examination results are high enough will proceed to post-secondary studies. Most of the post-secondary institutions in Hong Kong adopt English as the medium of instruction and offer English enhancement courses for all first year students. These English courses vary greatly in terms of their structure and content (Evans & Green, 2007).

In Chapter 3, a more detailed description of the English language education in Hong Kong will be presented.

1.2.2   Research questions

As mentioned earlier, prior to my doctoral studies, I taught English in a post-secondary institution in Hong Kong that offered compulsory English enhancement courses for all students. Throughout my teaching career, I had students who graduated from different language streams (Chinese- vs. English-stream) and noticed differences how students from the two language streams learn English. My prior teaching experience reinforced my interest in exploring students' experience during the course of their English learning. This study aims to address the following questions:

1. How do Hong Kong post-secondary students perceive their prior English learning and their learner identities along their English learning trajectory?

2. How do these perceptions impact their current English learning at the post-secondary level?

3. How do these perceptions develop over time and across different learning sites?

All research studies are influenced by an underlying theory that informs and shapes the type of inquiry adopted in one's study (Norton Peirce[7], 1995). In the next section, I present the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of my research.

1.3   Theoretical Underpinnings and Research Methodology

The two main theoretical frameworks that informed and guided my study were: i) Sociocultural theory of second language acquisition; and ii) Norton's (1997, 2000a) theory of identity and language learning.

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[7] Norton Pierce will be referred to as Norton in this study.

1.3.1   Second language acquisition (SLA)

Earlier work on SLA had two preoccupations: cognitive processes underlying SLA and the effects of learner characteristics (e.g., motivation, attitude and personality) on acquiring a new language. In Breen's (2001) words, these earlier studies "received a great deal of [their] initial impetus from first language studies which were strongly influenced at the time by a Chomskyan paradigm" (p. 173). Researchers who approach SLA from the Chomskyan linguistic perspective are largely concerned with describing and explaining the nature of L2 (second language) linguistic systems, and perceive L2 learners as "the possession of a mind that contains language…and the focus is on what is universal within this mind" (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p. 94). While some researchers adopt a linguistic perspective towards SLA, others are more interested in examining the mental mechanisms involved in the processing, learning and storage of the L2 knowledge.

For instance, researchers who adopt a psychological perspective towards SLA, such as Krashen (1982, 1985), examine "the mental processes involved in the creation and use of L2 knowledge" (Ellis, 1997, p. 241). Krashen (1982, 1985) states that the issue of how much language input is converted into intake depends on affective factors such as motivation and attitude (see Krashen's [1982, 1985] Affective Filter Hypothesis). Clearly, linguistically and psychologically grounded SLA investigations do not place language acquisition in its social, historical and political context. Researchers such as Lantolf (2000), and Lantolf and Appel (1994), saw the need for an approach to "situate [L2] acquisition outside in the social world rather than inside the head of the learner" (Ellis, 1999, p. 17).

A social perspective of SLA views language learning as a process embedded in its sociocultural contexts. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, my study aims to examine Hong Kong students' prior learning experiences along their English journey. To this end, I adopted a social perspective of language learning, acknowledging the social and cultural situatedness of L2 learning and use (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Toohey, 2000). I explored the complex relationship between Hong Kong English learners and their L2 interactions within the school context. While perceiving SLA as a social process, I

posited that the participants in this study were not merely language processing devices that received and autonomously "convert[ed] linguistic input into well-formed (or not so well-formed) outputs" (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 145). Rather, they were understood as individuals who actively engaged in constructing and reconstructing "the terms and conditions of their own learning" (p. 145).

1.3.2   Sociocultural theory (SCT) of SLA

Different from Western psychology that sees individual development as independent of social relations, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory (SCT) saw development as socially constructed. As Ellis (1997) states, it is "the activity that learners engage in when interacting with others that brings about cognitive change" (p. 242). Language, in Vygotsky's (1978) view, is a mediator for individuals' mental activity. Such a view towards language departs from a psychological view of language as "part of (or at least, housed in) the mind" (Toohey, 2000, p. 12). SCT has inspired SLA researchers to consider the wider socio-historical contexts that inform and shape language acquisition, as well as the role of human agency and interaction in SLA. Researchers like Lantolf and Appel (1994), and Lantolf (2000) have extended SCT to SLA studies.

From a Vygotskian perspective, a second language is regarded as one mediating means that "people use to participate in social activities" (Toohey, 2000, p. 12). When learning a second language, learners engage in "social activities like schooling, shopping, conducting conversations, [and] responding to teachers' questions" (p. 134). L2 learners first require the scaffolding provided in interaction with others to understand and to perform the second language. Eventually, they will be able to use the new language unaided. In short, SLA first appears between people as an interpsychological category (on the social plane) and then moves to an intrapsychological category (on the psychological plane) (Vygotsky, 1981). The application of SCT to SLA studies is best described in Lantolf and Appel's (1994) work, "…[SCT] situates the locus of learning in the dialogic interactions that arise between socially constituted individuals engaged in activities which are co-constructed with other individuals rather than in the heads of solipsistic beings" (p. 116).

In this study, I adopted a sociocultural perspective towards SLA, which allowed me to address the participants' English learning experiences in terms of their active engagement in their English learning process. I perceived the participants as active meaning-makers, who learned to use English to engage in interactions with others and to co-construct experiences with others. The student participants in my study had experienced a transition from secondary to post-secondary education. During their secondary education (equivalent to grade 7 to 12 in Canada), they learned English in either Chinese-medium (CMI) or English-medium (EMI) streams. When they proceeded to the post-secondary level, they learned English with their counterparts from the other stream (i.e., CMI and EMI students were grouped together in the same English classroom). A sociocultural approach helped me explore how the participants' ongoing L2 learning experiences were constructed and co-reconstructed through their L2 interactions with others at both the secondary and post-secondary level. Learning a new language also involves a transition from one linguistic identity to another, and this transition relates to how L2 learners view themselves as language learners and the contexts (e.g., the L2 classroom) that provide them potential learning (Norton, 1997). Such conceptualizations affect, in turn, the extent to which L2 learners invest in or withdraw their participation from learning (Breen, 2001). While exploring the participants' English learning experiences, it is worth examining how they constructed and reshaped their identities as their L2 learning proceeded. Norton's theorizing of identity and language learning (Norton, 1995; 1997, 2000a) served as a theoretical guide for my investigation.

1.3.3 Norton's conceptualization of identity and language learning

Norton's (1995) theorizing of identity and language learning is compatible with Vygotsky's (1978) SCT. Both theoretical frameworks see "social interaction as the matrix of language acquisition", and learners as "agents in their own learning, actively shaping the language activities they engage in to suit their own goals" (Ellis, 1997, p. 243). Norton (1995) adopts a poststructuralist conception of social identity, and emphasizes "the role that social identity plays in L2 acquisition" (Ellis, 1997, p. 243). In Norton's (1997, 2000a) view, language and identity are not fixed notions. Rather, they are closely intertwined. Language learners negotiate their identity/sense of self during the

learning process and contribute to their own process of meaning-making in an L2. Identity in my research has been understood in a poststructuralist perspective and I adopted Norton's (2000a) definition of identity – "I use the term identity to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5). I focused on the participants' sense of who they were in relation to their learning peers in the English classroom. Emphasis was placed on the identities that were related to their knowledge and use of English.

Drawing upon Bourdieu's (1977) notion of "cultural capital", Norton (1995) introduced the concept of "investment" to capture the complex relationship between language, power, and identity. "Investment" presupposes that when L2 learners speak, they are not simply "exchanging information with target language speakers" (Norton, 2001, p. 166). The learners are also "constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world" (p. 166). Thus, investing in a second language also involves investing in one's own constantly changing social identity. Norton's (1997, 2000a) theorizing of identity and language learning and her notion of "investment" provided the theoretical lens through which I addressed the complex relationship between Hong Kong students, their L2 interactions in the English classroom, and their constantly changing identities and investment in English learning. I examined how Hong Kong students constructed and reconstructed their identities when they interacted with different groups of students at both the secondary level (when they learned English in separate language streams) and post-secondary level (Chinese- and English-stream students grouped together in the same classroom). As the student participants in my research were still pursuing their English language learning career at the time of study, they experienced ongoing identity formation along a learning path that relates to their past, present and future. Norton's (1997, 2000a) work has guided me to study how their identities shifted in response to the changing relations within the L2 classroom, and how a shift in the participants' identity impacted their investment in English learning and influenced the direction their future English learning took.

Building on Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) notion of "community of practice" and later Anderson's (1991) concept of "imagined communities", Norton (2001) suggests that a learner's imagined community invites an imagined identity, and "a learner's investment in the target language must be understood within this context" (p.165). The concept of "imagined communities" enabled me to explore the various imagined communities of the participants and how their imagined identities in these communities affected their current language learning and offered them a range of possibilities for the future.

As Karlsson (2008) points out, language learning experiences are organized in stories. Moreover, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) also contest that "…we believe they [personal narratives] bring to the surface aspects of human activity, including SLA, that cannot be captured in the more traditional approach to research" (p. 159). To get into students' English learning experiences, I adopted a narrative approach in my study.

1.3.4   Research methodology

In order to gain a comprehensive view of the participants' English learning experiences, I adopted a multi-method approach. First, I examined relevant English language curriculum documents to better understand the context of my study. I then distributed a questionnaire to a sample of post-secondary students to gather information about their language backgrounds and prior English learning experience. I separated the data collected from students with Chinese- vs. English-stream backgrounds to compare their perceptions towards English learning and identify prospective students for interviews. Next, I interviewed six students to gather their secondary and post-secondary English learning stories. I also conducted English class observations to understand the six student participants' daily in-class performance. Drawing upon the data gathered, I compiled the learning narrative of each participant. Clandinin and Connelly (1998) claim that "…in the construction of narratives of experience, there is a reflexive relationship between "living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story and reliving a life story (p.71). It is through their living, telling, retelling and reliving that the participants shared with me their English learning stories. I also conducted a thematic analysis of the data so as to

find out the common and distinctive features of Hong Kong post-secondary students' English learning.

1.4   Justification of the Study

In the early 1990s, Norton (1995) called for a comprehensive theory that captures the complex relationship between the language learner and the language learning context. Situating her work within a sociocultural and poststructuralist orientation, Norton (2000a) depicted language learners as active in their pursuit of language competence and non-language-related goals, and their identity as "nonunitary and contradictory", "a site of struggle" and "changing over time" (p. 125-128). Norton's (1995) work had spurred SLA research (e.g., Block, 2006; Creese, 2005; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) interest in identity issues within the field of language learning. Unquestionably, previous studies provide valuable insights to the inextricable links between identity construction and language learning. However, will their research findings resonate with the English learning trajectories of Hong Kong post-secondary students?

Block (2007) contends that there have been "far fewer studies of identity in FL[8] [foreign language] settings than there have been studies situated in naturalistic settings" (p. 869). Since the 1990s, there has been a steady accumulation of studies on identity construction and language learning in the Hong Kong educational context. Owing to the territory's colonial past, the language situation in Hong Kong is complicated. Most of the studies (e.g., Hyland, 1997; Lai, 2010, 2011; Leung & Lee, 2006) have examined the relationship between Hong Kong students' attitudes towards the three official languages (Cantonese, English and Mandarin) and their cultural and national identity development. Some researchers (e.g., Lin, 1997; 1999) analyzed the impact of societal inequalities in the distribution of English resources on students' identity formation. Yet other researchers (e.g., Chan, 2002; Choi, 2003) have explored the language education policy impact on students' cultural and national identity. These previous studies were conducted on a

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[8] Block (2007) refers to language learning in a foreign language context as "the learning of a language in a formal classroom setting, which is embedded in surroundings where that language is not the normal and most common linguistic mediator of communication" (p. 864).

macro-level, relating the identity issue to the broader sociopolitical context of Hong Kong. Micro-level research has also been conducted.

Studies conducted at the micro-level have focused on different aspects of teaching English. For instance, Mak and Coniam (2008) investigated the use of digital resources to improve students' English writing skills. Regarding students' identities, Lin's (2011) study discussed the impact of an innovative English Language Teaching (ELT) rap project on students' development of positive English speaker identities. Many of the aforementioned studies have tended to look at students' English learning at the secondary level. There has been less previous work on post-secondary English learning in the Hong Kong context. As stated in Poon (2009), studies on the post-secondary sector have explored topics such as student motivation and attitudes towards English learning (e.g., Lu, Li & Huang, 2004; Yang & Lau, 2003), and their experiences learning different aspects of English such as speaking (Lewkowicz & Cooley, 1998), listening (Flowerdew & Miller, 1992), and negotiation of meaning (Lai, 2001). Regarding post-secondary students' identity, Hyland's (2002) work looked at the notion of identity in L2 writing. In recent years, researchers like Evans and Green (2007) and Evans and Morrison (2011a, 2011b) have studied students' learning experiences in English-medium higher education, looking at their language use as well as their difficulties when learning other subjects through the English language. These studies provided insights into the development of the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses at the post-secondary level.

The aforementioned works did not look in depth into the multiple identities and prior educational experiences that post-secondary students bring into the English classroom. It is worth exploring how students' identities and prior experiences come into play during their English learning process. Moreover, the aforementioned studies were mostly large-scale and adopted quantitative research methods (e.g., surveys and questionnaires). These studies provided a broad perspective on English learning in Hong Kong's post-secondary context. However, as Steinbock (2010) states, "learning a second language can be a lifelong process just as is learning one's native language" (p. 122). It is worth examining students' English learning experience in its complexity and richness, recognizing the temporal notion of such experience.

Chik (2008b) conducted a longitudinal qualitative study on the development of individual differences of Hong Kong English learners. Her work is unique in the sense that it was "the first attempt to document and analyze the English learning experiences of Hong Kong Cantonese-speaking pre-tertiary students over the course of their lifetimes" (p. 3). The researcher's work provides insights into the English learning experiences of Hong Kong students and yet, her work focused only on students from English-medium schools (those who are often considered as "elite" students). Attention should also be paid to the English learning experiences of students from the Chinese-stream, especially how the interaction between students from the two language streams influences their English learning.

Owing to the global trend of internationalization of higher education, the Hong Kong government has been under pressure to attract outstanding overseas students to pursue their studies in Hong Kong. In his policy address in 2007, Donald Tsang, the former Chief Executive, announced the government's plan to increase the admission quotas for non-local students to local post-secondary institutions. More scholarships have also been offered to international students. As Wahab (2012) stated in the New York Times, in the academic year 2012-2013, "the University of Hong Kong saw a 42 percentage [42%] increase in foreign applicants compared with the previous year [2011-2012]", making the learning environment on campus more diverse than before. Nevertheless, little research has been conducted on interaction between students within post-secondary English classrooms, which are very likely comprised of a diverse student body. It is worth exploring whether (or how) such interaction facilitates or limits local students' English learning.

1.5   An Outline of the Study

This study examines the English learning experiences of Hong Kong post-secondary students. In particular, it explores their perceptions of English learning and the development of their learner identities across time and different learning sites. This chapter is followed by an overview of the literature on identity construction and language learning. Particular attention is paid to common themes that emerged from the previous

studies and how these themes have provided insights into the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this study.

In Chapter 3, I present the methodological framework that informed and guided my investigation. I also introduce the six participants, Brandon, Gallie, Jack, Lindsay, Maggie and Stanley (pseudonyms), focusing on their educational and linguistic background. Moreover, I describe the research site where I conducted post-interview classroom observations. The description is followed by a discussion of the data collection and analysis process. I also include in the chapter the ethical considerations and limitations of the present study.

Chapter 4 retells the six participants' English learning stories, focusing on their prior learning experiences across different learning sites (from early English learning at home to their current post-secondary English learning). In the participant's learning narrative, I attempt to reveal their conceptualizations of English learning and themselves as English learners. The learning narratives presented in this chapter help set the context for the discussion in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 5, I present and discuss the common themes that emerged from the six focal students' English learning narratives. I discuss the emergent themes in relation to the theoretical notions described in Chapter 2. Drawing upon Norton's (1997, 2000a, 2000b) conceptualization of identity and language learning, I explore the link between language learning experiences, identity (re-)construction and English learning in the Hong Kong context.

In Chapter 6, I present the educational implications of the present study, in particular, how this study contributes to the English language education in Hong Kong. Chapter 6 also suggests ways for language educators to develop a more appropriate English curriculum to acknowledge students' prior educational experiences and language backgrounds so that English learning will become more meaningful and relevant to them.

Chapter 2

2   Literature Review & Theoretical Orientations

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) has garnered much scholastic attention since the 1970s. Earlier SLA studies (Burt, Dulay & Hernadez, 1975; Ferguson, 1975; Selinker, 1972) had a linguistic focus, aiming to examine learners' errors, interlanguage as well as the order in which learners acquire different aspects of the language system such as morphemes and phonemes. As stated in Yoshimoto (2008), these earlier SLA studies perceived language as "a system of arbitrary signs or symbols" and language learners as "a unitary group in which individual differences are ignored and social backgrounds are considered to be external" (p. 24). Jackson (2008) also states that these SLA studies perceived language learning as "an internal, biological process of linguistic system-building" (p. 34). Learners' historical backgrounds, culture as well as the power structures of their learning environment were ignored and thus, the notions of language learning and identity were perceived as separate issues.

Since the 1980s, there has been a "social turn" (Block, 2003, 2006; Canagarajah, 2004; Duff, 2012) in the field, with SLA researchers beginning to look at the social aspects of second language learning. Duff (2012) points out that in early sociological studies, "aspects of identity such as gender, first language (L1), and ethnicity tended to be treated as straightforward, easily categorized, relatively homogenous, and static group variables" (p. 411). For example, Edwards (1985) examined the relationship between group identification and language use. During the early 1980s, researchers showed increased interest in the linguistic aspects of identity with Gumperz (1982) focusing on language and social identity, and Edwards (1985) examining the relationship between group identification and language use. Already in 1982, Gumperz and Gumperz asserted that "social identity and ethnicity are in large part established and maintained through language" (p. 7). They claimed that identity manifested itself in day-to-day speech events and "to understand issues of identity and how they affect and are affected by social, political, and ethnic divisions we need to gain insights into the communicative processes by which they arise" (p. 1). The work of sociolinguists Le Page and Tabouret-Keller

(1985) focused on Creole-speakers in the Caribbean and West Indian groups in London by exploring the relationship between language choice and ongoing identity construction in various contexts. According to Edwards (2009), Gumperz's (1982) and Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's (1985) studies were "quickly followed by work on a variety of aspects of social identity; some examples are Kroskrity (1993) on language, history and identity, Calhoun (1994) on the politics of identity and Hooson (1994) on geography of identity" (p. 15). In the field of SLA, instead of "focusing on the abstract grammar system and treating learners as a bundle of psychological reflexes", researchers began to consider language learners as complex social beings (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 117).

Researchers such as Block (2002), Lantolf (2000) and Norton and Toohey (2004) situated their work within the sociocultural framework (Vygotsky, 1978), positing that language learning occurs through social interactions and it is shaped by learners' lived experiences in their communicative environments (Hall, 2002). When learners learn a language, they are not only acquiring the knowledge and skills of the target language, they are also forming their sense of self. Thus, language learning and identity is inseparable. And as Canagarajah (2004) puts it, SLA researchers begin to "consider how learners negotiate competing subject positions in conflicting discourse communities and how these struggles shape their practices of language learning" (p. 117). Researchers have adopted different theoretical positions while examining identities and language learning which include "feminist scholarship, language socialization studies, Bakhtinian semiotics, and Focauldian poststructuralism" (p. 117).

Over the past 20 years, an increasing wealth of literature has been accumulated in the area of language learning and identity. The literature covers many different language learning contexts and types of language learners: Norton's (1995; 2000a; 2000b) study of immigrant women's English learning in Canada; Toohey's (2000) and Day's (2002) work on young English language learners in mainstream Canadian kindergarten and primary school classrooms; Jackson's (2008) investigation of the impact of study abroad programs on Hong Kong students' second language acquisition and their identity (re-)construction; Kanno's (2003) study of Japanese returnees' development of bilingual and bicultural identities; McKay and Wong's (1996) work on the identity negotiation of

adolescent Chinese immigrant students during their English learning in the United States; and Cummins' (1996; 2000; 2009) study of the influence of societal power relations on the identity negotiations between educators and English language learners in the North American context. This list of works is by no means exhaustive and complete and yet, it reveals the many possible topics that can be explored in the area. The publication of the first volume of the quarterly *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* in 2002 further heightened researchers' interests in identity issues. Toohey and Norton (2010) summarize some of the topics covered in the journal: i) deafness and disability; ii) gender sexual orientation; iii) multilingual, monolingual and multicompetent identities; iv) national, religious and imagined affiliations; v) situated roles (teachers, researcher, writer); and vi) race and class, and other bases of identity (p. 182). According to Toohey and Norton (2010), these topics are not "mutually exclusive, and their variety points out the complexity of how language learning and identity interact" (p. 182). Given the immense article- and book-length publications in the area, the literature review in this chapter is selective in orientation.

In the following sections, I will present studies that are directly relevant to my study. The discussion aims to highlight the previous works that made important contribution to the understanding of second language learners' identity negotiation and (re-)construction. The review of selected literature also aims to provide a contextual background against which to place my doctoral study. As shown above, previous studies covered a wide range of learning contexts and different types of learners. I have organized my discussion into two main parts: English learning in target- and non-target language speaking countries.

2.1   English Learners in the Target Language Speaking Countries

With the significant increase in international migration in recent decades, SLA researchers have paid great attention to the impact of crossing geographical, cultural and linguistic borders on English language learners, examining how their acquisition of English as a second language necessitates identities construction (Chik, 2008b). Many of these research studies focus on immigrants' English learning experiences in target

language speaking countries and among them, Norton's (1995, 2000a, 2000b) work has been the most influential.

2.1.1   Immigrant English learners

Norton's (1995, 2000a, 2000b) ethnographic study of five immigrant women in Canada aims to examine the complex relationship between their second language learning experiences and identity formation. According to Norton (2000a), her work intends to "investigate how the learners made sense of their experiences and to what extent their particular historical memories intersected with their investment in language learning" (p. 22). Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1977; 1991) and Weedon (1987), Norton (2000a) theorizes identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the social world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, [and] how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5). Norton (2000a) gathered her data through individual diaries, interviews, questionnaires, and observations. The collected data reveals that language learners "assumed and were assigned various identity positions in the various communities in which they participated, and as such, had greater or lesser possibility for participation in community activities and for using language in particular ways" (Toohey & Norton, 2010, p. 181). Thus, it is of importance for language educators and researchers to examine language learners' negotiation of identities within their social, cultural and historical contexts.

Situating her work within the poststructuralist framework, Norton (1995) perceives language users as having a complex identity which is non-unitary, contradictory, dynamic and fluid. The multi-dimensional, non-unitary and constantly changing nature of identity can be illustrated by the case of Martina, one of Norton's (2000a) research participants. Martina was an immigrant, mother, language learner, worker, and wife. As a new immigrant in Canada, Martina felt uncomfortable speaking to native English speakers. In spite of her feelings of inferiority and shame, Martina refused to be silenced. Norton (2000a) suggests that Martina refused to be silenced because "her identity as a mother and a primary caregiver in the home…led her to violate the appropriate rules of use governing interactions between legitimate speakers of English" (p. 126). One example would be her perseverance in engaging in a long conversation with her landlord regarding

her family's lease agreement. The view that identity is multiple and contradictory helps explain how the five immigrant women "responded to and created opportunities to speak English" (p. 126). Norton's (1995, 2000a, 2000b) work draws attention to how the power relations between language learners and target language speakers influence learners' language learning and their identity construction. Moreover, Norton (1995, 2000a, 2000b) also introduces the notion of "investment" to explore "the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language" (2000a, p. 10).

Inspired by Bourdieu's (1977, 1991) work on "cultural capital", Norton (2000a) develops the concept of "investment" to capture "the complex relationship between power, identity and language learning" (p. 10). As stated in Norton and Toohey (2002), if language learners "invest" in the target language, they do so

> …with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. As the value of their cultural capital increases, so learners' sense of themselves and their desires for the future are reassessed. Hence the integral relationship between investment and identity. (p. 122)

In other words, learners hope for "a good return on their investment in the target language – a return that will give them access to the privileges of target language speakers" (Norton, 2001, p. 166). Norton (2001) further states that "an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space" (p. 166). The notion of investment must be understood within a sociological framework, and it aims to "make a meaningful connection between learners' desire and commitment to learn a language, and their changing identity" (Toohey & Norton, 2010, p. 183).

From her research data, Norton (2000a) found that learners' motivation to speak the target language is mediated by investments "that are intimately connected to the ongoing production of the learners' identities and their desires for the future" (p. 120). While examining the five immigrant women's investment in English learning, Norton (2000a) was able to "understand how and to what extent they created and responded to

opportunities to practice English" (p. 121). For example, Norton (2000a) points out that Eva's (one of the participants in the study) investment in English learning has to be understood in accordance with her reasons for immigrating to Canada (for economic advantage), her plans to study at a college in the future as well as her changing identity. As Eva had no childcare responsibilities and less domestic duties, Eva was successful in seeking more exposure to the English language through her full-time employment. Eva was invested in her English learning as she understood that she needed the language to "work where she wanted to work, to go to the university of her choice and to rid herself of an immigrant identity" (p. 98). Eva, as Norton (2000a) puts it, "valued English for the access it gave her to the public world" (p. 98). The construct of investment helps capture the language learners' contradictory desires to appropriate their target language. Cummins (2006) contends that the notion of investment has become a "significant explanatory construct" (p. 59) in the field of second language learning. Indeed, Norton's (2000a) notion of investment has sparked considerable research interest in language learning and identity. To better understand the relationship between second language learning and identity formation, Norton (2000a) also incorporates Anderson's (1991) notion of "imagined communities" in her work.

According to Pavlenko and Norton (2007), "humans are capable, through our imagination, of perceiving a connection with people beyond our immediate social networks" and "our orientation towards such imagined communities might have just as much impact on our current identities and learning as direct involvement in communities of our everyday life" (p. 670). The researchers also state that learners' actual and desired memberships in their imagined communities will affect their learning trajectories, "influencing their agency, motivation, investment, and resistance" (p. 669) in language learning. In her studies, Norton (2000a, 2000b, 2001) examines two adult English learners' non-participation in their ESL (English as a second language) classes. Katarina, one of the research participants, was a Polish immigrant in Canada. Katarina resisted joining her ESL class after she was discouraged by her ESL teacher from taking a computer course, because her English was not good enough. According to Norton (2001), Katarina's resistance was due to her investment in the imagined community, which was a community of professionals. Before immigrating to Canada, Katarina was a veteran

teacher in Poland. Katarina felt that "she was positioned as a 'mere' immigrant…being denied an important opportunity to gain greater access to her imagined community of professionals" (Kanno and Norton, 2003, p. 243). Kanno and Norton (2003) conclude that Katarina's nonparticipation in the ESL class was best explained by "the disjuncture between Katarina's imagined identity and the teacher's educational vision" (p. 243). Katarina's case illustrates that language learners' memberships in the imagined communities will influence their investment in learning the target language, shaping their present and future decisions along their language learning trajectories. Norton's (1995, 2000a, 2000b, 2001) studies play a pivotal role in shaping much of the later research on language learning and identity, including Skilton-Sylvester's (2002) ethnographic study on four Cambodian women's English learning experiences in the United States.

Drawing upon Norton's (2000a) construct of investment, Skilton-Sylvester (2002) examines the complex identities of four Cambodian women and how their identities impacted their investment in an adult ESL program. The data reveals that their attendance in the ESL class shifted according to their particular roles and identities as spouses, mothers, sisters and/or daughters. For example, Soka, one of the Cambodian women in the study, initially attended the ESL class with her husband. However, the ESL teacher later said that Soka's husband only attended the class for two days because her family had decided that Soka would be the language learner in her family; that would be her job. The ESL teacher also commented that Soka learned English with a vengeance. As Skilton-Sylvester (2002) points out, it was the fact that Soka's identity as "an English learner, and the ways that her role as learner complement her roles in her family that help make participation in this program [the ESL program] a reality for her" (p. 16). The researcher contends that a shift in the ESL learners' identity influenced "their claiming of the right to participate in educational programs that support their language development" (p. 22). Moreover, it is important to pay attention to the fact that "understanding and addressing the long-term participation and investment of adult ESL learners in learning English requires seeing the classroom as a real place where the multiple selves of learners are central to teaching, learning, and program development" (p. 22). Similar to Skilton-Sylvester (2002), McKay and Wong (1996) also conducted an ethnographic study on immigrant English learners in the United States.

McKay and Wong (1996) pursued Norton's (1995; 2000a, 2000b) notion of investment in their ethnographic study of four Chinese immigrant high school students (grade 7 and 8) in California. The two researchers perceived the classroom as a contested site of social discourses and identified five discourses, which included: i) the colonialist and racialized discourse; ii) the model-minority discourse; iii) the Chinese cultural nationalist discourse; iv) the social and academic discourse; and v) the gender discourse. The four immigrant students were found to establish their multiple identities within specific interactions, revealing how their identities shifted according to the multiple discourses in which they were engaged. The multiple identities developed in the various social discourses shaped the immigrant students' varying levels of investment in English learning, subsequently affecting their learning outcome. The authors suggest that the five social discourses contributed to each participant's identity construction, which was closely related to their English learning. For example, one of the immigrant students, Michael's athletic ability made him popular among his peers and friends of various racial/ethnic backgrounds. His positive identity in the social school discourse led him to invest more in his aural/oral English skills. As a result, his listening and speaking skills surpassed his writing skills during the two years of McKay and Wong's (1996) study. The authors conclude that the participants' investment in the four different English skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) shifted in accordance with multiple identities they developed in the five different discourses. While McKay and Wong (1996) focus their attention on immigrant students in the United States, Miller's (1999, 2003) work looks at immigrant adolescents' English learning in the Australian context.

Miller's (1999, 2003) studies explore immigrant students' English learning in the Australian high school context. Her work documents immigrant students' English learning journey, from their arrival to full mainstream integration in school, focusing on the complex relationship between discourse and identity construction. Miller (1999) aims to find out: i) how the high school context constrained or facilitated the immigrant students' acquisition of spoken English; and ii) the relationship between their acquisition and use of English and their self-representation and social identity. The student participants in Miller's (1999) study were grouped in one ESL program and perceived as students who "don't really speak English" (p. 163). The boundaries between the ESL and

mainstream English program were clear. According to the researcher, the ESL unit was separate from other classrooms as it was located above the administration block. The immigrants were positioned as being "inside" or "up here, up in ESL" (p. 158) and, as Tien, one of the immigrant students, expressed it, "well when a teacher say that I'm ready to go out, I just go out, to mainstream English" (p. 158). Mainstream English was considered as "outsider, it is where you 'go out to', when you are ready" (p. 158). While some immigrants struggled with their transition from ESL to the mainstream English program, others saw chances for interaction as their opportunities to "compete with main students" (p. 163). Neta, another student participant in the study, slowly developed her English proficiency and was later "authorized and recognized as a legitimate user of English by others" (p. 163). Neta was perceived by others as "a 'student' like any other, not as a Bosnian student or an 'ESL kid'" (p. 163). Miller (1999) suggests that the link between "second language use and social identity must be seen in its relation to empowerment, being heard, and the ongoing process of self-realisation" (p. 163). While Miller's (1999) work reveals the impact of the representations of immigrant students in school on their English learning and identity construction, Cummins' (1996, 2000, 2009) studies examine the impact of coercive relations of power on ESL students' language learning in the Canadian context.

Cummins (2009) points out that coercive power relations between dominant and subordinated groups have occupied "the social space in the wider society and directly influence [d] pedagogical spaces created within classrooms…" (p. 261). The way students are positioned in school, "either expands or constricts their opportunities for identity investment and cognitive engagement" (p. 265). The researcher stresses that language educators have a choice to "resist and challenge the operation of coercive relations of power" (p. 261). The case of Madiha, a grade 7 student who just arrived Canada from Pakistan four months earlier, in Cummins et al.'s (2005) and Cummins, Bismilla, Cohen, Giampapa and Leoni's (2005) study, is illustrative.

According to Cummins (2009), Madiha's teacher challenged the normalized assumption that the classroom should only be an English-only environment by encouraging Madiha to co-author a 20-page Urdu-English bilingual book with her two other friends (who had

lived in Canada for about four years). The researcher points out that the three students invested their identities and capitalized on their bilingual and biliteracy skills while preparing the story book. Contrary to Madiha's experience, many of the recently-arrived immigrant students, like those immigrant students in Miller's (1999) study, who were labeled as ESL students who did not speak standard English. The identity of newly-arrived students is often devalued in schools or in wider society. Cummins (2009) draws attention to the fact that "power relationships in the broader society express themselves within schools as the negotiation of identity between teachers and students" (p. 270). Language educators (like Madiha's teacher) should provide educational opportunities for students to express and affirm their identity, cultural knowledge and first language. SLA researchers are not only interested in immigrant students' English learning in the elementary and high school context, they are also concerned with how immigrant students are positioned at the post-secondary level, focusing on "the challenges involved in ESL students' access to and success in college" (Kanno and Varghese, 2010, p. 312). Harklau's (2000) study of ESL students in the American context is illustrative.

Harklau (2000) conducted ethnographic case studies of three language minority students in the United States. The case studies focus on the participants' transition from their high school to college, aiming to "compare representations of ESL student identity in the two educational institutions and illustrate the manifestation of these representations in class curricular and spoken and written interactions" (p. 35). Harklau (2000) argues that how educational institutions represent ESL students has significant consequences for student learning, their identities, and their attitudes towards classroom learning. As shown in Harklau's (2000) data, the three immigrant students were praised by their high school teachers as "hardworking, highly motivated students who had triumphed over adversity" (p. 46). However, in the ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) curriculum, these learners were represented as newly arrived immigrants with a limited ability to improve their English proficiency. The researcher states that the college ESOL curriculum overlooked the participants' previous experiences with the English language, neglecting the fact that they had already lived in the United States for many years. After beginning college, they were being identified as "inexperienced users of English" (p.57), which led to their resistance in the college's ESOL program, despite having an ongoing

need for support with their academic writing. Harklau (2000) concludes that the identities of the student participants were shaped by institutional labels and these labels had consequences for both students' "classroom behavior and ultimately for students' motivation or investment in English and academic learning" (p. 38). In a similar vein, Toohey (2000) conducted a study on language minority kindergarten students, looking at how their identities were being shaped by classroom activities and practices.

Toohey's (2000) longitudinal study documents the school experiences of language minority students from their kindergarten to grade 2. In her study, Toohey (2000) focused mainly on how classroom activities and practices created possibilities for students' engagement in their language learning and identity formation. The researcher observed that the specific practices of her participants' classrooms "produced" the young language learners with the identities such as "quiet or clever or not so clever and so on" (p. 125). These identities either prohibited or generated possibilities for students' participation in classroom activities and thus, how much they could learn. For example, one student in the study, although a competent English speaker, "struggled to gain access to participatory roles because of his heavy accent, clumsiness with skills such as using scissors, and stigmatization by other children" (Toohey, Manyak & Day, 2007, p. 632). At the end, he took up "a problematic identity within the class… [and] was denied access to social and material resources, and his English production decreased over time" (p. 632). Toohey (2000) argues that such identity could lead to his isolation, and restricted, less powerful participation in the classroom.

Similar to Toohey (2000), Day's (2002) study also looks at young English learners in Canadian classrooms. Day (2002) drew data from Toohey's (2000) research (described above) and focused on the English learning trajectory of one Punjabi-speaking child, Hari. Day's (2002) work, in her words, investigates "the complexity and variability of peer relations in this [Hari's] kindergarten classroom and the critical role they played in the identities learners could negotiate and the kinds of access and participation they could have" (p. 108). Through her ethnographic case study, Day (2002) finds that Hari's "language learning, language choice, social interaction and identity [were] inextricably interwoven" (p. 54). Hari's membership in the many sub-communities in his classroom,

and his interactions with the different members of his classroom, shaped the identities Hari displayed, "his access, his participation, and his opportunities for learning" (p. 109). For example, Hari revealed a different identity when engaging in different oral discussions in class. When having conversations with other English learners (especially girls), Hari took an active role, leading and contributing to the discussion. However, when Hari had conversations with Anglophone boys, his participation in and contribution to the discussion became less active. Day's (2002) study illuminates the power relationships in the classroom, and how these relationships affect young language learners' negotiation and construction of their identities. While some researchers focus on exploring English learners' experiences in target language-speaking countries, a considerable number of researchers have also looked at overseas experiences of international students.

2.1.2   International students in study abroad contexts

Block's (2002) study examines the multilingual identities of two adult female Asian Masters students in London. Both research participants were English teachers: Noemi was from Japan while Carly was from Taiwan. Drawing on Hannerz's (1996) notion of cosmopolitans, which refers to people who "tend to immerse themselves in other cultures, or in any case [who are] free to do so" (p. 105), Block (2002) develops two types of cosmopolitans to describe the case of Noemi and Carly. Noemi was described as the "early cosmopolitan" as she had lived and received her education outside of Japan up to the age of twenty, and she had lived in the United States between the ages of twenty-seven and thirty-two. During the time of Block's (2002) study, Naomi was in her mid 40s. Despite the fact that Naomi had returned to Japan for a number of years, she still "projected an identity far more European and North American than Japanese, and she conveyed a certain ambivalence about a Japanese national identity" (p. 488). Moreover, she perceived herself as 'not very Japanese' but also unable to claim a 'native English language speaker identity' (p. 488). As for Carly, Block (2002) described her as the "expatriate cosmopolitan" as she did not leave Taiwan for any significant period of time until she was 18 when she did her bachelor studies in the United Kingdom. Carly went back to Taiwan after her graduation. During the time of Block's (2002) study, Carly was

in her late 20s, pursuing her masters in London. Carly perceived herself as "somehow not typically Taiwanese but Taiwanese all the same" (Block, 2010, p. 488). Block's (2002) study has highlighted the ways life experiences during extended periods of stay in the target language speaking country interact with language learning and identity formation. In the same spirit, Jackson (2008) conducted a study on the impact of study abroad programs on second language acquisition and identity construction.

According to Jackson (2008), her ethnographic study of four Hong Kong university students' study abroad experiences in the United Kingdom aims to i) use poststructuralist and socioculturalist perspectives to "address the nature of language learning, identity (re-)construction, and the development of intercultural communicative competence and intercultural personhood in L2 [second language] sojourners"; and ii) "test contemporary sociocultural perspectives by investigating the actual experiences of L2 sojourners, following them from their home environment to the host culture and back again" (p. 11). While documenting the participants' pre-sojourn, sojourn and post-sojourn experiences, Jackson (2008) investigated how the participants viewed themselves and used languages in their home environment (Hong Kong) before and after travelling to the target language speaking country (the United Kingdom). Jackson's (2008) study highlights the complex interplay among the participants' language choices, identities and the sociocultural context of their interactions. Adam and Cori, two of the research participants, found it difficult to build relationships with their host family as their hosts failed to recognize their preferred identities (as Hong Kongers). Ada and Cori were sometimes mislabeled by their hosts as Japanese or Chinese Mainlanders. According to Jackson (2008), such mislabeling had "a negative impact on their [the two participants'] attitudes toward the host culture, [and] their desire to spend time with their hosts and other locals" (p. 207). These two participants were also concerned about losing part of their Hong Kong identity if they were to identify with the English culture. In the end, Ada and Cori resisted using English in many social situations. On the contrary, the other two participants, Elsa and Niki, cultivated a close relationship with their hosts and as a result, had a more positive attitude towards their sojourn. Also they were more open to both their personal and linguistic expansion as well as to their identity reconstruction. It can be seen from Jackson's (2008) study that the four participants had different experiences in their

sojourns and the outcomes of their sojourn vary. Jackson (2008) concludes that the participants' identities were "contradictory, relational, and dynamic… [and they] shifted over historical time and space" (p. 198). Similar to Jackson (2008), Chik and Benson (2008) also examine the border-crossing experiences of Hong Kong students.

In their work, Chik and Benson (2008) describe Hong Kong students overseas as "frequent flyers" to capture their moving 'back and forth' between "languages and cultures both across and within both their home and overseas settings" (p. 157). While retelling Ally's (one Hong Kong student) study abroad experience in the United Kingdom, Chik and Benson (2008) aim to reveal "how the difficulties they [Hong Kong students overseas] encounter and their ways of dealing with them are interwoven with their experiences of 'frequent flying' and the construction of [their] distinctive identities…" (p. 157). As Ally's learning narrative reveals, she started out as a confident overseas student who wanted to integrate into the target language speaking country – "to become a 'native speaker' of English" (p. 167). However, Ally was astonished by the way her hosts resisted her desire by "positioning her as an EFL speaker and treating her as invisible unless problems arose" (p. 167). The researchers also point out that Ally's perceptions of the ways others saw her "destabilized Ally's sense of self-identity, leading her to position herself temporarily on the Chinese side of a Chinese-gwai[9] divide that she had been unaware of" (p. 167). Ally's extended stay overseas influenced her identity as a Hong Kong Chinese. Upon her return from the United Kingdom, Ally is now a person "who has studied overseas", an identity which is recognized in Hong Kong that "involves assumptions about knowledge of English and intercultural competence …" (p. 167). The researchers suggest that the story of Ally, "although unique, has much in common with those of other Hong Kong students who travel overseas for higher education and, perhaps, with those of overseas students from elsewhere in the world" (p. 168). The researchers emphasize the need to look at more study abroad stories to examine the meanings that students attach to their overseas experiences and how such experiences

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[9] The term "gwai", literally means "ghost" in Chinese. It is a derogatory slang expressions used among Chinese to refer to White people.

contribute to their ongoing identity construction. Similar to Jackson (2008) and Chik and Benson (2008), Kanno's (2003) study also investigates the impact of crossing geographical and cultural borders on English learner identity.

Kanno (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of four young Japanese returnees, who have lived their lives between two linguistic and cultural communities. According to the researcher, the four returnees "spent their adolescent years in North America (mainly Canada) and returned to Japan…as they moved into young adulthood" (p. vii). Kanno's (2003) study aims to examine the development of the returnees' bilingual and bicultural identities, focusing on how their identities and relationship to their two languages (English and Japanese) changed as they moved through two different cultures. The data reveals that the participants' Japanese and Canadian identities varied widely, depending on where they were, with whom they were interacting, and their developmental phases. According to Kanno (2003), the returnees developed their bilingual and bicultural identities along three developmental phases: i) sojourn (prior to their return to Japan after their extended overseas stay), during which there was alienation and English was perceived as the access code to Canadian society; ii) reentry (their return to Japan), which centers on how participants adjusted to Japanese society; and iii) reconciliation (one year after their return to Japan), when the participants started to see "the possibility that one can be bilingual and bicultural" (p. vii), and began to define themselves in terms of hybrid identities. Kanno's (2003) study illustrates the identity struggles experienced by the returnees, and how their identities were shaped by intercultural conflicts; it also illustrates how their identities were entangled with their learning contexts, learning communities and life experiences.

The research studies presented so far have focused on immigrant English learners (from kindergarten to adolescent English learners) and international students in target-language speaking countries. These studies reveal how the acquisition of a second language necessitates identity (re-)construction during a stay in an English-speaking country. How do these students compare to ones involving English learning in non-target language speaking countries? As the present study focuses on English learning in the context of

Hong Kong, the rest of the literature review focuses on English learning in the learners' home country, with a special focus on Asian contexts.

2.2   English Learning in Asian Contexts

Situating their work within a poststructuralist framework, Stroud and Wee (2007) examine the English language and literacy experiences of adolescents in Singapore. The researchers focus their attention on the impact of students' language choices (English, Mandarin, and Malay) on their positioning in the English classroom. The linguistic situation in Singapore is complex. The country recognizes four official languages, which include English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. Stroud and Wee (2007) point out that, in the context of Singapore, the "multilingual language practices…discursively mediate different types of social identities" (p. 43). The data reveal that when languages other than (standard) English are used in the classroom, "it may be in a negative and ridiculing context which frames and reaffirms these languages and their associated values and speakers as marginal, carrying a message detrimental to the students' sense of self" (p. 43-44). An illustrative example was when one English teacher referred to a Chinese student participant's identity in derogatory terms using the word 'ah ma' ("grandma" in the Hokkien[10] dialect). The teacher commented on the participant's essay by saying "You wrote a very very crappy piece of thing…You ask your *ah ma* to write for you one, right?" (Ong, 2003, p. 57). According to Stroud and Wee (2007), the teacher was "publicly ridiculing both the grandmother's (assumed) lack of ability in English and Elvan's [the Chinese student participant] having to solicit her help" (p. 42) when writing the essay. The researchers state that the English teacher might have assumed the "(old) Chinese culture has little or no social capital and most certainly no place in the modern English language classroom" (p. 42). They further argue that English teachers should not privilege the use of English in the classroom and downplay other languages spoken by students. Language educators should develop and adopt "pedagogical strategies that take into account students' identity work in learning" (p. 51).

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[10] Hokkien is a Chinese dialect spoken by overseas Chinese in the Southeast Asian regions.

In the case of China, Gao, Li and Li (2002) conducted a case study of Chinese students' English learning, examining students' perceptions of the shift in their identities during the learning process. The shift in the participants' identities can be illustrated by the case of Aiwen, one of the research participants, who expressed her identity crisis associated with her learning of English writing style. Aiwen was fond of reading Chinese literature and writing Chinese prose before entering college. After years of training in English essay writing, she found her style of Chinese prose writing changed and began to favour the English essay writing style. Aiwen was shocked about the changes and suffered an identity crisis. She said "I feel a bit sorry…I enjoyed the leisurely loose and roundabout style. Now I am afraid I can never find that look of mine anymore..." (Gao, 2007, p. 102). As time went by, Aiwen became more open to her emerging writing identity and came to appreciate the beauty of both Chinese and Western writing styles. Gao et al. (2002) argue that English learning can be "part and parcel of students' self-identity construction" (p. 115) and "it is not a surprise to see that identity change and foreign language learning influence each other" (Gao, 2007, p. 105). Likewise, Gu (2010a; 2010b) also examines students' English learning in the Chinese context.

Gu (2010a) conducted a longitudinal study of the English learning experiences of four Chinese college students. The researcher focuses his attention on the ways in which English learning informed and shaped the participants' sense of their national identity. In his study, Gu (2010a) conceptualizes the participants' national identities as discursively constructed in and through their English learning experiences. Drawing on the data collected from interviews and the participants' diaries, the researcher identifies three stages of development of the participants' national identity. The first stage reflects the participants' admiration of English-speaking cultures as they all perceived English-related cultures as "advanced, civilized and modern" (p. 60). At the second stage, which Gu (2010a) termed as "antagonism towards alien things" (p. 57), the participants came to appreciate the Chinese culture and express pride in being Chinese. Their admiration of English-speaking cultures began to fade away. The participants entered their third stage of development in their fourth year of college. At this third stage, the participants had reached "a kind of reconciliation between their national identity and their global identity" (p. 64-5). The participants developed a stronger sense of national identity and, at the

same time, saw the English language as "a critical and necessary means of self-development, and for connecting China to the outer world" (p. 64). They also saw themselves as "standing between the two dominant discourses: one concerning the deeply-rooted Chinese culture and its centuries-old traditions; the other, the culture of modernity that accompanies the spread of the English language" (p. 64). Gu (2010a) suggests that English learning is more than just the acquisition of the knowledge and skills of a language. It plays "an important role in shaping and constructing learners' national identities" (p. 65). Through English learning, the participants came to understand who they were and "how they are [were] related to the learning community, the national socio-cultural context and the imagined global community" (Gu, 2010b, p. 150). Similar to Gu (2010b), Huang (2011) also examines post-secondary English learning in China.

Huang's (2011) study investigates the English learning experiences of students in a teacher-education university in mainland China. The participants in the study were students enrolled in a four-year Bachelor of Arts TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) degree program in the English department. The researchers point out that the participants had to take a number of high-stakes examinations during their studies. One of them was the postgraduate entrance examination and the other two were Tests for English Majors. Huang (2011), therefore, claims that the participants were "generally pragmatic learners whose priority agendas were to pass important examinations and to find a job on graduation" (p. 231). During the participants' first year of studies, they did not have a clear goal towards their English learning and "they were unclear about their self-identity" (p. 233). They felt confused and puzzled about learning at the post-secondary level. While the participants proceeded to their second year, they had to prepare for the high-stakes English tests. Many of the students perceived the English tests as a motivation for their English learning. As Huang (2011) puts it, the students "used external tests to motivate and pressure themselves in their language learning, and felt gains from preparing for them" (p. 235). The tests brought students "a sense of gains and achievement" (p. 235) and "passing the test constituted evidence of success as an English-major student" (p. 236). The researcher further states that the high-stakes tests provided "an opportunity for identity development and fulfillment" (p. 236) as the students expressed that they used the tests to "re-orient their personal development and to

change their future lives" (p. 236). During the third and fourth years, the participants tended to focus more on the practicality of learning English as they began to consider more about their future career. The students held a practical orientation to their English learning. Moreover, they perceived themselves as passive learners as they had to take advanced courses, most of which were theoretically-oriented. They did not seem to see the usefulness of theoretically-oriented learning. As they put it, they were just "passively absorbing knowledge" (p. 239).

In addition, Huang (2011) also observed that the student participants became more invested in their oral English. As one of the participants put it, "…if your oral English is good, you'll be able to get much more 'impression credits'" (p. 239). Oral English had become an identity marker – it affected "how an English learner was viewed and judged by others" (p. 239). After their four-year studies, the participants had a one-off six-week teaching practicum, during which they began to develop their teacher identity. The participants were driven by "a sense of 'teacher responsibility' and a feeling of being needed, both of which enhanced their confidence in combating difficulties in their own teaching" (p. 240). Huang's (2011) study demonstrates how students' identity shifted from "'lost at sea' aimless first-year students, to more confident future teachers as a result of their interaction with their own students in the TP (teaching practicum)" (p. 241). Such prospective-teacher identity stimulated "the exercise of strong personal agency, thus promoting the development of 'student-teacher autonomy'…" (p. 242). Huang (2011) concludes that it might be reasonable to say "self-identity conceptualization and construction might be both an origin and outcome of autonomy in learning English" (p. 243). This raises the question of whether Hong Kong students have similar English learning experiences as of students in China. I discuss this question next.

In the case of Hong Kong, many of the language learning and identity studies (e.g., Chan, 2002; Lin & Martin, 2005; Lin & Man, 2009; Poon, 2010; Tsui, 2007) focus on the relationship between language education policy and the national/cultural identity of Hong Kong people. Researchers such as Tsui (2007) examine the role language policy plays in institutional and sociocultural processes that have shaped the collective identity of Hong Kong people. In the realm of educational context, researchers pay particular attention to

the impact of the mother-tongue (Chinese) education policy (implemented after Hong Kong's political handover in 1997) on the development of Hong Kong students' individual and collective identity. For example, Lai (2009) conducted a study on Hong Kong students' attitudes towards the three languages commonly used in Hong Kong (Cantonese, English and Mandarin) before and after the implementation of the mother-tongue education policy. Drawing on interview data from forty Hong Kong students, Lai (2009) states that the students' language attitudes were "mainly formulated on their perceptions of identity and an evaluation of power which each language symbolized" (p. 79). One student in Lai's (2009) study expressed his strong affection for Cantonese because it is an identity marker of Hong Kong people, "As a Hongkonger, how can somebody not know Cantonese!" (p. 83). While some researchers (Lai, 2009; Tsui, 2007) are interested in exploring the identity issue in the broader sociopolitical context, focusing on the ways in which language education policy influences identity formation, others have examined students' learning experiences in the everyday contexts of English teaching and learning. In the following, I will present some of these studies.

Chik (2007, 2008a, 2008b) and Chik and Breidbach (2011) conducted research on the relationship between English learning and identity construction in the Hong Kong context. In one of her studies, Chik (2007) looked at the English learning experiences of two Hong Kong adults, focusing on how their learner identities were framed by the institutional setting in Hong Kong. The two participants, Karen and Thomas, were both educated in Hong Kong. They were in their mid-20s during the time of the study. Chik's (2007) study aims to document their English learning experiences from early childhood to young adulthood. From the collected data, the researcher found that the two participants framed their identities through their successes and failures in the Hong Kong education system. Both recounted and defined their learner identities in terms of their examination results and passing through crucial stages in their schooling (from primary to secondary and to post-secondary education). For example, Thomas expressed that his difficulties in articulating his learner identity and his failure to become a good English user were due to his unsatisfactory examination results and academic performances in school. Similar to Chik (2007), Chik and Breidbach (2011) also conducted a study on English learning in the Hong Kong context.

Drawing upon autobiographical narratives written by two undergraduates in Hong Kong and two German postgraduates students in Berlin, Chik and Breidbach (2011) explore the development of these four students' language learning, focusing on "the ways that they capitalized on popular cultural resources to enhance and maintain motivation and also create personal spaces for English language identity construction outside the regular language classrooms" (p. 145). The two groups of students wrote and shared their language learning histories (as one of their course assignments) through course wikis and they gave each other feedback on their learning histories. The researchers found that the two groups of students constructed their learner identity by comparing their experiences of structured and unstructured language learning. According to Chik and Breidbach (2011), "the education system paved the way for both Hong Kong and Berlin students to enter higher education, but it is through English language popular culture that participants began to see that they were individuals in language learning" (p. 157). The data demonstrate that the participants perceived that their English use beyond the language classroom (e.g., video games, pop songs, television series) to have influenced "their identity as language learners" (p. 157). The study reveals "mosaic glimpses of learners' English worlds beyond the classroom with arrays of popular culture activities and texts, and different degrees of consumption and participation" (p. 158). The researchers also suggest that popular culture can serve as an avenue for constructing language learners' identity. In another study, Chik (2008b) examines the learning experiences of young English learners who were still pursuing their English learning career during the time of her study.

Chik's (2008b) biographical study of ten Hong Kong English learners aims to examine the ways these learners developed their individual differences and identity during the course of English learning. Chik's (2008b) work was the first attempt "to document and analyze the English learning experiences of Hong Kong Cantonese-speaking pre-tertiary students over the course of their lifetime" and the study explores "the importance of interpretations of language learning experience in retrospect and in relation to language learner identity development" (p. 3). Chik's (2008b) research reveals that as the participants matured, they shifted the focus of their learning narratives from home to schooling and to out-of-class activities. And at the same time, they also expanded their

circles of comparative others from family members to classmates, to schoolmates to Hong Kong learners of the same age and to overseas speakers of English (whom the participants met during overseas trips). Drawing on the notion of "imagined communities" (Kanno, 2003; Norton, 1995, 2000a), Chik (2008b) states that, by comparing their own English use and learning with other Hong Kong learners of their age and overseas English speakers, the participants' imagined learning communities expanded. Furthermore, this expansion of comparative others showed that "the participants were positioning themselves first within an immediate and tangible learning community and then moved onto 'imagined communities'" (p. 228). The researcher also claims that the participants' conceptions of individual differences originated from the ways "they perceive[d] themselves as being similar to or different from their comparative others" (p. 228). Besides looking at English learners in their home country, similar to Kanno (2003), Chik (2008a) conducted a study on Hong Kong returnees, examining the shift in their identities across different sociocultural contexts.

In her study, Chik (2008a) focused on the learning experiences of two Hong Kong English language students: Julian, a returnee student who was a native speaker of English and an American immigrant and Chris, a non-native English speaker and a Hong Kong native. Drawing on the learning stories of these two students, the researcher aims to explore "the ways language learners construct their identities in formal learning contexts in a non-target language community" (p. 20). The two participants studied English alongside each other in the same classroom. Findings showed that the two students demonstrated "a strong awareness of their language learning experiences and the ways the experiences directed their language development" (p. 26). As a native English speaker, Julian spoke strongly against the inequality he experienced when he first arrived in Hong Kong. Julian perceived himself as not welcomed by the local education system because of his limited Chinese literacy. Nonetheless, Julian quickly found his footing when he entered an English-medium secondary school. His competence in oral English made him the captain of the debating team, "from which he gained much of his confidence and recognition from others" and "this lost and found bilingual identity enabled him to feel that he belonged to the school community, and he expressed that he was proud to be the only one who could use the language to represent himself and the

school" (p. 27). While Chris, who studied alongside Julian, had a very different English learning experience. Chris expressed that "he felt threatened to a certain extent by having to learn with a native English speaker" (p. 28). And Julian's presence led to Chris' reluctance to take part in oral activities. As a result, Chris defined his learner identity through writing. Chik (2008a) states that Chris' resistance to join oral activities led him to "excel in other areas, where he could be on a par with Julian" (p. 28). This example illustrates that Chris' identity was being shaped by his interaction with Julian, a native English speaker. Chik (2008a) concludes that, when English-speaking returnee students study alongside local students, teachers should be aware of the fact that i) these returnee students can be perceived as either competitive others or collaborative learning partners; and ii) they should capitalize on returnee students as collaborative learning and motivating partners.

Over the past twenty years, there has been a surge of research interest in second language learning and identity formation. As mentioned earlier, the review of literature in this chapter is selective in orientation. It aims to provide an overview of the major themes that directly inform and shape the present study. The review also serves as the starting point in developing its theoretical and methodological framework.

2.3   Theoretical Orientations of this Study

In this section, I discuss the common threads that run through the works described above and how they provide the theoretical guide for my investigation.

First, the previous studies presented earlier above adopted a sociocultural approach to second language learning and identity. Drawing upon Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, the researchers perceived second language learning as a social process that "takes on board a host of sociocultural and contextual factors…" (Miyahara, 2010, p. 2). A sociocultural perspective towards language learning acknowledges the situatedness of language learning. Moreover, identity is construed as "a contingent process involving dialectic relations between learners and the various worlds and experiences they inhabit and which act on them" (Ricento, 2005, p. 895). In other words, language learners are influenced by "the social, historical, economic, cultural, and political contexts of their

environment" (Jackson, 2008, p. 35). While adopting a sociocultural approach in their work, SLA researchers stress "the importance of exploring situated discursive practices in the construction of identities, rather than seeing identity as reflecting 'essential' aspects of human behavior" (Toohey, 2000, p.72). They discussed identity in terms of two key elements: first, identity is the result of social relations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and, second this socially constructed identity is dynamic, fluid, and multifaceted (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2002). Moreover, "identities and beliefs are co-constructed, negotiated and transformed on an ongoing basis by means of language" (Duff & Uchida, 1997, p. 452). Norton and Toohey (2002) provide the insight into the complex relationship between identity formation and language learning:

> Language learning engages the identities of learners because language itself is not only a linguistic system of signs and symbols; it is also a complex social practice in which the value and meaning ascribed to an utterance are determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the person who speaks it…Thus, language learners are not only learning a linguistic system; they are learning a diverse set of sociocultural practices, often best understood in the context of wider relations of power. (p. 115)

As mentioned in Chapter 1 (section 1.3.2), I situated my study within a sociocultural framework and perceived the student participants as active meaning-makers who used English to co-construct their learning experiences with others. I viewed them as "located in a network of social relations, in specific places in a social structure" (Kress, 1989, p. 50) with socially situated identities.

The participants in this study pursued their secondary education in two different language streams (Chinese- and English-stream). When they proceeded to the post-secondary level, they learned English with students from the other stream. They were grouped together within the same English classroom. A sociocultural approach enabled me to investigate how the participants constantly constructed and re-constructed their learning experiences and learner identity through interaction with their peers in the secondary and post-

secondary English classroom. Figure 1 below shows the participants' English learning at the secondary and post-secondary level.
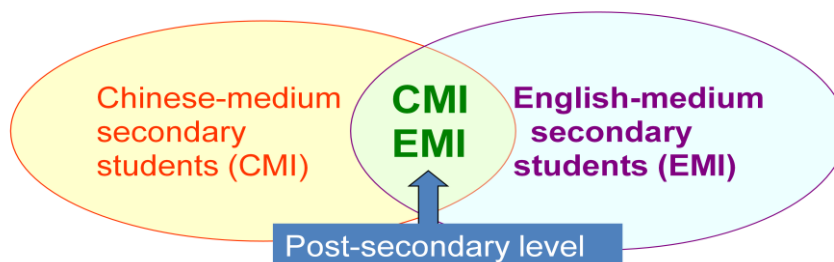
Figure 1: Participants' English Learning at the Secondary and Post-secondary Level

Second, I understand language learning and identity within a poststructuralist framework. As stated in Pavlenko (2002), a poststructuralist approach towards SLA can be traced back to Pennycook's (1990) call for a critical focus in applied linguistics; he expressed the "need to rethink language acquisition in its social, cultural, and political contexts, taking into account gender, race, and other relations of power as well as the notion of the subject as multiple and formed within different discourses" (p. 26). His call was answered by such ground-breaking studies as Norton's (1995) previously mentioned work on immigrant women's English learning in Canada, and Rampton's (1995) work on code crossing in the multilingual, and multicultural United Kingdom. Since then, the field of SLA has been reconceptualized within a poststructuralist framework with language perceived as "symbolic capital[11] and the site of identity (Bourdieu, 1991; Gal, 1989; Weedon, 1987)…, language acquisition as language socialization (Ochs, 1993; Wenger,

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[11] Bourdieu's (1991) notion of capital has been used to examine inequality in social settings. Bourdieu (1991) describes language as symbolic capital, and notes that speakers use language to negotiate and gain access to positions of power. In the case of students living in Hong Kong, for example, they need the symbolic capital of English to gain access to better academic (e.g., English-medium education) and career (e.g., high-income professions) prospects.

1998)…[and] L2 users as agents whose multiple identities are dynamic and fluid (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton Pierce, 1995; Pavlenko, 2000)" (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 283).

As stated in Pavlenko (2002), a poststructuralist framework "recognizes complex stratification in all societies and communities and acknowledge[s] a range of…communities in which L2 users may seek membership" (p. 295). Moreover, learners' multiple memberships coexist instead of being mutually exclusive. Learners may also create new identities; ones that did not exist previously. A poststructuralist perspective towards language learning and identity allowed me to examine the student participants as members of multiple communities of practices. I acknowledged the fact that they moved between different communities and developed multiple identities during their English learning. A poststructuralist framework allowed me to investigate the communities that the participants sought or resisted joining. Moreover, I also explored how the English language (perceived as symbolic capital) produced, reproduced, transformed and performed identities and how the participants' identities affected their access to linguistic resources (English resources in this study), interactional opportunities, and eventually, their learning outcomes (Cook, 2002).

Third, many of the previous identity studies (e.g., Jackson, 2008; McKay and Wong, 1996; Taylor, in press) drew upon Norton's (1995; 2000a, 2000b, 2001) notion of investment to describe "the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language" (Norton, 2001, pp. 165-166) and their desire to learn and practice the target language. As cited in Norton (2013), investment must be "seen within a sociological framework, and seeks to make a meaningful connection between a learner's desire and commitment to learn a language, and their complex and changing identity" (p. 6). During their course of language learning, learners negotiate their positioning and investment in learning the target language. The notion of investment recognizes the language learner as having a complex history and multiple desires, and investing in a target language as an investment in the social identity, which changes across time and space.

The concept of investment has sparked considerable interests in research on language and identity. It also provides "a different set of questions associated with a learner's commitment to learning the target language" (Norton, 2010, p. 354). Instead of asking "To what extent is the learner motivated to learn the target language?", researchers should ask "What is the learner's investment in target language practices of this classroom or community?" (p. 354). The construct of "investment" provided the lens through which I explored the extent to which the participants invested their symbolic and material resources in their language learning in light of their desires for the future. Moreover, the construct also enabled me to examine the participants' investments in relation to their learning experiences as a result of the power relations in different social contexts (e.g., their immediate learning settings and out-of-class activities).

Fourth, the notion of "imagined communities" (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007) as a tool for identity construction was explored in many of the identity studies presented above (Kanno, 2003; Norton, 1995, 2000a, 2000b). Wenger (1998) contends that imagination entails "a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (p. 176). While engagement in our immediate environment offers the opportunities for identity construction, "our imagination enables us to have a sense of belonging to communities that are not immediately accessible or are diffuse or distributed over a widespread geographical area (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), i.e. imagined communities" (Murray, 2011, p. 77). Norton (2001) adopts the notion of "imagined communities" to explore how language learners visualize themselves as belonging to their imagined communities and how such visualization impacts their language learning. As cited in Norton (2010), while language learners are "initially actively engaged in classroom practices, the realm of their desired community extended beyond the four walls of the classroom" (p. 355). These imagined communities may be "a construction of past communities and historically constituted relationships, but also a community of the imagination – a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future" (p. 355). Language learners are capable of "connecting with communities that lie beyond the local and immediate and that investment in such imagined communities strongly influences identity construction and engagement in

learning" (Kanno and Norton, 2003, p. 247). While employing the construct of "imagined communities", I investigated how the student participants' sense of belonging to their imagined communities influenced their investment in English learning, making their visions for the future into a reality.

Fifth, much of the previous work on identity and language learning adopted narrative as a research tool to examine language learners' understanding of their learning experiences. As Murphey and Carpenter (2008) state, "personal narratives of language learning have been given attention for the insight that they might provide concerning personal investments in language learning" (p. 20). Moreover, learners' narratives provide "insight into the meaningful aspects of learning from the perspective of the students themselves" (p. 20). One way to get into the inner world of individuals, according to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) is through "verbal accounts and stories presented by individual narrators about their lives and their experienced reality" (p. 7). Adopting narrative as a methodological tool allowed me to examine the participants' English learning experiences in their complexity and richness as "narratives arise from experience" (Menezes, Barcelos & Kalaja, 2008, p. 225). The participants, through the retelling of their learning narratives, were able to reconstruct and interpret their past and present and reassess their future. In addition, the learning narratives that I collected from this study help contribute to the larger picture of Hong Kong students' English learning experiences, taking into account "both the commonalities of the setting and the specificities of individual experiences of it" (Benson, 2005, p. 16).

2.4   Summary

The studies presented in this chapter perceive language learning as a social process, in which learners' identities are being constantly shaped and reshaped through learners' L2 (English) interaction. The review of the selected literature highlights the multiplicity of second language learner identities and how learners' multiple identities change over the course of their language learning trajectories. The common threads presented in section 2.3 provide the theoretical lens through which I investigated the inextricable link between identity and language learning. In the next chapter, I present the methodological approach and research design of this study.

Chapter 3

3 Research Methodology: Narrative as a Research Method

My research interests in students' English learning experiences date back to eight years ago when I started teaching English at a post-secondary institution in Hong Kong. Having received my education in Hong Kong, I thought I shared with my students a very similar English learning trajectory. While focusing my attention on students' English performance, seldom did I look beyond their performance and question why some performed better than others. One day a student came up to me and expressed his strong sense of inferiority in the English class. I looked at him, waiting to hear more from him. He began to share with me his stories of English learning in a Chinese-medium secondary school and how he thought his Chinese-medium background made him inferior to other students who graduated from English-medium institutions. His stories offered a window through which I could better understand his English learning experiences, the meanings he attached to them and how they influenced the way he perceived his post-secondary English learning. During my English teaching career, I heard many English learning stories from my students. I came to see that each student has a different English learning experience and each has a very different story to tell.

Connelly & Clandinin (1990) contend that "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" and thus, "the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p. 2). The researchers also state that "experience happens narratively…Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively" (p. 19). In my study, I adopted a narrative inquiry methodology to gain a deeper understanding of how Hong Kong students make sense of their lived English learning experiences. This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part, I describe what narrative inquiry is and explain why it is ideally suited to address my research questions. In the second part, I present the research design of this study, focusing on the different research stages involved, the selection of research site and participants, data

collection, analysis and representation. The ethical considerations and limitations of this study are addressed in the last part of this chapter.

3.1   Narrative Inquiry

"Narrative inquiry helps us see more carefully and completely…[the] details, complexities, contexts, and stories of human experiences of learning and teaching" (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011, p. 1). Over the past two decades, narrative inquiry has been used across a wide range of disciplines such as counseling (Mickelson, 2000; Patsiopoulos & Buchanan, 2011), education (Bach, 1998; Bell, 2002; Benson & Nunan, 2005; Block, 2007; Phillion & He, 2007), law (Amsterdam & Bruner, 2000), medicine (Adler, 1997; Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1999), nursing (Lindsay & Smith, 2003) and women's studies (Reissman, 1993; Weiler & Middleton, 1999). This list of works is by no means exhaustive and complete. It highlights the valuable potential that narrative inquiry offers to a range of different research areas. As Chase (2005) points out, narrative inquiry is "a field in the making" (p. 651). In the field of education, Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) work on narrative inquiry has been influential. According to Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002), Clandinin and Connelly's work has "attracted a large educational research following to narrative inquiry" (p. 331). To answer the question "What is narrative inquiry?", I will draw mostly on the two researchers' studies (e.g., Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 2006).

3.1.1   What is narrative inquiry?

The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that "human beings both live and tell stories about their living" (Clandinin, 2006, p. 44) and these stories serve as "a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). The important task of narrative inquirers is to "describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) see narrative as both the phenomenon (narrative inquiry) and the method (inquiry into narrative), "narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its

study. To preserve this distinction we [the two researchers] use the reasonably well-established device of calling the phenomenon 'story' and the inquiry 'narrative'" (p. 2). Narrative inquiry, thus, is "the study of experience as story" and is "first and foremost a way of thinking about experience…To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). While adopting a narrative approach in my study, I perceived, interpreted and represented the students' English learning experiences in storied forms.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also contend that narrative inquiry enables researchers to explore the complexities of lived experiences. Essential to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) work is Dewey's (1938) two criteria of experience: interaction and continuity. Drawing upon the first criterion, interaction, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that "people are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context" (p. 2). The second criterion, continuity, addresses the temporal notion of experience, "experience grows out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (p. 2). When one places oneself along that continuum, "each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future" (p. 2).

Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) research interests in experience also lie in "the growth and transformation in the life history" (p. 71) that researchers and their participants author. Narrative research is perceived as collaborative, "the thing finally written on paper…, the research paper or book, is a collaborative document; a mutually constructed story created out of the lives of both researcher and participant" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12). While constructing collaborative stories, there exists a "reflexive relationship between living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71). The living, telling, retelling and reliving of stories enable both researcher and participant to reflect on their actions and then "act with foresight" (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 4). Narrative inquiry not only necessitates personal change, it also leads to the possibilities of social change.

Chase (2005) points out that narrative inquiry helps reveal the taken-for-granted practices, as well as the structural and cultural features of the everyday world. Narrative inquiry therefore goes beyond telling individuals' stories; it opens up possibilities for both personal and social change. In Chase's (2005) words, "audiences need to hear not only the narrator's story, but also the researcher's explication of how the narrator's story is constrained by, and strains against, the mediating aspects of culture (and of institutions, organizations…" (p. 668).

Informed by Dewey's (1938) theory of experience, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) create the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space as a research framework, "with temporality along one dimension, the personal and the social along a second dimension, and place along a third" (p. 50). What makes a narrative inquiry, according to the researchers, is the simultaneous exploration of all the three dimensions. The following section details the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space and how it helps provide the methodological guide for my study.

3.1.2   Three-dimensional narrative inquiry space

As stated in Connelly and Clandinin (2006), the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space helps serve as "check points" or "places" (p.479) to direct researchers' attention to conduct narrative inquiries.

3.1.2.1   Temporal dimension

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) contend that narrative inquirers do not just study or describe "an event, a person or an object as such, but rather describe them with a past, a present, and a future" (p. 479). In other words, narrative inquirers view that "a particular person had a certain kind of history, associated with particular present behaviours or actions that might seem to be projecting in particular ways into the future" (p. 479). By attending to temporality, researchers look at an event backward and forward, focusing on its past and future. Experiences are in temporal transition. It is of importance to "understand people, places and events as in process, as always in transition" (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007, p. 23)

3.1.2.2   Personal-social dimension

According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006), narrative inquiry is concerned with both personal conditions (that is, looking inward: for example, one's feelings, hopes and desires) and social conditions (that is, looking outward: for example, the existential conditions and the surrounding factors that form the individual's context). While addressing the personal-social dimension, Connelly and Clandinin (2006) also draw researchers' attention to the interpersonal nature of the narrative inquiry process. The two researchers remind narrative inquirers to "bracket themselves in to an inquiry" (p. 480) and they have to negotiate "purposes, next steps, outcomes, texts, and all manner of things" (p. 480) that go into the relationship with their participants.

3.1.2.3   Place dimension

The third dimension, place, refers to "the specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place where the inquiry and events take place" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480-481). More places may be added as one attends to the temporal and personal-social dimension. Narrative inquirers have to attend to the impact of each place on participants' experience.

3.1.3   Engaging in the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space

When narrative researchers engage in their inquiry, they are "in the midst of a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, always located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal, and the social" (p. 144). Moreover, they perceive themselves as "in the mind-set of a nested set of stories" (p. 144) – their own stories as well as their participants'. They and their participants are together in the midst. The three-dimensional framework helped point me backward and forward (time), inward and outward (sociality) and locate my study in place. While attending to the temporal dimension, I acknowledged my participants' learning experience is in temporal transition: their current post-secondary learning experiences grow out of their prior learning and lead to future learning experiences. Moreover, in Chapter 1, I also looked backward to my learning and teaching experiences and how they brought me to my research questions. With regard to the personal-social dimension, I paid attention to both students' personal conditions such

as their feelings and perceptions towards English learning and themselves as a learner and their social conditions like the English classroom and all the interactions therein that have shaped their personal conditions. I also looked inward to my own feelings towards students' English learning. With regard to the third dimension, place, I attended to not only the English classrooms at the research site but also the impact of other places such as the private tutorial centres that some of the participants attended and their homes on their English learning. Throughout my study, I worked with the student participants within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space: we looked backward to our past, inward to our feelings, hopes and desires, outward to the environment in which we live and looked forward into our future – our multiple imagined possibilities.

This study sets out to explore the English learning experiences of Hong Kong post-secondary students, focusing on the meanings they attached to such experiences, and how their experiences moulded the way they interpreted their current learning and created possibilities for the future. Given the nature of my study, narrative inquiry is well suited for me to address my research questions. In the following section, I explain my choice of adopting a narrative approach in this study.

3.1.4   Why narrative inquiry?

The focus of my research is Hong Kong post-secondary English learners and their learning stories. With its emphasis on individuals, a narrative inquiry enabled my student participants to tell their learning stories and to make meaning of their experiences (Reissman, 2008). A narrative approach allowed me access to the student participants' learning experiences in storied forms. As Webster and Mertova (2007) state, narrative inquiry provides "a rich framework through which they [researchers] can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories" and it is "well suited to addressing the complexities and subtleties of human experience in teaching and learning" (p. 3).

While exploring student participants' English learning, I focused my attention not only on their English learning experiences but also their perceptions towards their learner identity and how such perceptions change over time and space. Narrative inquiry is

compatible with Norton's (2000a) theorizing of identity which states that identity is constantly changing. To approach the multiple, unstable, relational and contextually-situated nature of identity, narrative inquiry is best suited for this study. As Phillion (2002) states, "narrative reaches out to the past, is rooted in the present, and turns an eye to the future" and it "evolves with changes and shifts in time, place, and interactions" (p. 20). A narrative approach enabled my participants and me to construct stories that span across different times and spaces, enabled me to draw connections among students' learning experiences: how their prior English learning fashioned their interpretation of new experiences and how it shaped who and why they were that day. It allowed me to capture "the growth and transformation" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that the students experienced throughout their English learning trajectory. Through narrative inquiry, the student participants were invited to relive their stories. The retelling and reliving of stories created new meanings for them. While encouraging the participants to share their learning stories, they were allowed to negotiate their identities (Reissman, 2008). And as Lieblich et al. (1998) claim that, "we know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell" (p. 7).

Narrative inquiry focuses not only on the personal dimension, but also the social dimension. Students' English learning experiences need to be grounded and understood within the context of the wider social, cultural and political setting. A narrative approach enabled me to explore the "interrelation of time and space and social surfaces", and the influence of such interrelation on students' lived experiences and identity formation (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 215). Narrative inquirers are not only interested in how participants narrate their lived experience, they also aim to "understand those stories against the background of wider socio-political and historical context and processes" (Biesta, Hodkinson & Goodson, 2005, p. 4). In other words, narrative inquirers also seek to "understand how smaller milieu and larger structures interact" (Mills, 1970, p. 165).

Essential to narrative research is the collaborative nature of narrative constructions. The collaborative constructions involve both researchers and participants. It is "a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). While engaging with the student participants through

storytelling, I tried to maintain an equal and trusting relationship with them. I met the participants whenever they were available. They shared with me their learning of other subjects as well as their out-of-school activities. These informal meetings allowed me to get to know more about and gain rapport with them. My prior English learning experiences were also brought to the process of inquiry. Instead of having only the participants telling their stories, the research proceeded like a "mutual storytelling" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Woods, 1985). I shared relevant personal learning stories with them. Furthermore, I invited the participants to give feedback about the finished narratives and interview transcripts. By doing so, they had the chance to relive their stories and their feedback allowed us to co-construct meaning from the narratives. During the inquiry process, narrative inquirers see themselves and their participants as each retelling their own stories, and each coming to changed identities. That being said, the process of "mutual storytelling" has provided me and my student participants an opportunity for transformative growth.

All in all, narrative inquiry enabled me to understand the complexity, wholeness and richness of students' English learning experiences as well as the wider contexts in which their learning stories were situated. A narrative approach also allowed me to capture the temporal notion of students' experiences: to understand how their stories, which are embedded in their past and present lives, would guide their future learning practices. The process of co-constructing the learners' stories offered me the opportunity to understand our "growth and transformation" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). However, as Bell (2002) states, "narrative inquiry offers promise but also pitfalls" (p. 210). The English learning narratives presented in this study would only ever be my interpretations of the stories told by the participants. In other words, the co-construction of the learning narratives entailed the participants' telling of their stories and my responses to them. That being said, the participants' learning stories unfolded their English learning experiences at particular times and places. They were not meant to "interpret for the purposes of revealing a truth about human experience, but rather they were intended to illuminate the whole process of becoming" (Hendry, 2010, p. 76).

In the following section, I describe the research design of the present study.

3.2   Research Design

"Experience has a wholeness and an integrity about it…" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 189). In order to capture the wholeness of participants' stories, Clandinin and Connelly suggest that researchers collect data from a variety of sources such as "autobiographical writing; journal writing; field notes; letters, conversation; research interviews, family stories; documents…" (p. 92-93). In this study, I adopted a multi-method approach and collected data from various sources. The discussion in the following sections begins with an overview of the different research stages involved, followed by a description of the research site and student participants. Lastly, I provide a detailed description of each data collection method.

3.2.1   Research stages

Narrative inquirers focus on human experience as well as the context that shapes such experience. In view of this, I examined relevant English language curriculum prior to data collection so as to better understand the context in which the student participants learned English. Next, I posted an information letter on the e-learning platform of the selected post-secondary institution to recruit student participants. Students interested in the study were invited to complete a pre-interview questionnaire intended to gather information about their language backgrounds and prior English learning experiences. I then separated the data collected according to their educational background: whether they received their education in Chinese- or English-medium schools. By doing so, I was able to identify prospective student participants from each language stream for interviews. Three rounds of open-ended and semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the selected participants. The interviews were scheduled at the beginning, middle and the end of the academic year so as to allow me to document their lived English learning experiences throughout the year. Post-interview English classroom observations were also conducted in order to examine the participants' day-to-day performance in the English classroom.

3.2.2   English learning in Hong Kong

In order to set the context for the discussion of the research site and student participants, I will describe below the English language education in Hong Kong.

English learning in Hong Kong takes two forms: i) English is being taught as a language subject in Chinese-medium schools; and ii) English is used as the medium of instruction (MOI), except for the teaching of Chinese subjects (e.g., Chinese language, Chinese history and Chinese literature). In Hong Kong, English learning starts at the age of three when children enter kindergarten. Kindergartens are privately run in Hong Kong. As stated on the Education Bureau (2012) website, kindergartens can be put into two groups: not for profit or private independent (for profit) kindergartens. Kindergartens formulate their own English curriculum in accordance with the pre-primary curriculum guidelines provided by the Hong Kong Education Bureau. As stated in the curriculum guidelines, the main objectives of pre-primary English learning are to develop children's interest in learning English, to provide children with the opportunity to listen and understand simple English conversations, to sing or recite English nursery rhymes, and to employ simple English words used in their everyday life. McBride-Chang and Treiman (2003) state in their work, "kindergartners typically receive about a half hour of 'English time' per school day, singing songs, reading stories, or learning to read and write" (p. 139). The researchers also point out that English teaching generally focuses on "the visual configurations of words" (p. 138) and teachers often adopt the "look and say" approach – "the teacher shows children a character or word, names it, and asks the children to repeat the name" (p. 138). After three years of kindergarten studies (from three to six years of age), students begin their six-year primary education.

Hong Kong students generally begin their primary studies at the age of six. English is taught as subject in most primary schools in the public sector. Some independent private schools adopt English as the medium of instruction. According to the Curriculum Development Council (2002), English language education in primary school focuses on "helping learners master the language forms…, communicative functions, and skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing" (p. 5). The English subject is taught four to six hours a week at the primary level (Nunan, 2003). Most primary English teachers focus on

the teaching of English grammar. Poon (2004) observes that, "English skills are not taught integratively. Emphasis is placed more on grammar and English usage exercises" (p. 308) and primary students generally "do not have much chance to expose themselves to the target language" (p. 308). In view of this, numerous policies have been implemented to provide a conducive learning environment for students such as the extension of the Chinese and English Extensive Reading Schemes (which was introduced in 1997) and the provision of native English-speaking teachers to enhance English teaching and learning.

 After six years of primary studies (from age six to twelve), students pursue their secondary education in either the Chinese- or English-stream. As mentioned earlier, the mandatory mother tongue (Chinese) teaching policy compelled all secondary schools to adopt Chinese as the medium of instruction. The English proficiency level of Hong Kong students has been declining ever since the policy implementation (CUHK, 2002, 2004, 2008; Li, 2008; Poon, 2004, 2013). As stated in one study conducted by researchers of the Chinese University of Hong Kong on students' academic achievement under mother-tongue teaching, Chinese-stream students had "a greater sense of difficulties than EMI (English-stream) students in English learning" (CUHK, 2006, p.5). In view of this, the government fine-tuned its mother-tongue teaching policy in 2008 to allow schools more autonomy in their choice of the medium of instruction. Schools have greater flexibility in adopting either Chinese or English as the medium of instruction based on students' ability. In other words, decisions on language streaming arrangement are now school-based. In the present study, all six participants received their secondary education before the implementation of the fine-tuning arrangement. In other words, they were streamed into either Chinese- or English-medium schools for their secondary education based on their academic performance.

Besides the reforms on medium of instruction, the secondary education sector also underwent another major change at around the same time. The Hong Kong Education Bureau implemented a new senior secondary academic structure in September 2009; namely, a "3+3+4" scheme. Under the new scheme, students complete 3 years of junior and 3 years (previously 4) of senior secondary education. After completing their

secondary education, students have to take one public examination (previously two). Those whose grades are high enough get accepted at university and take a 4-year (previously 3-year) undergraduate program. As the participants in this study received their secondary education prior to the academic year 2009, they all studied under the old academic structure. All of them entered secondary school at the age of twelve. Table 1 below shows the secondary educational path of the participants.

Table 1: Secondary Education in Hong Kong prior to 2009

Secondary Education							
	Junior			Senior			Matriculation
Secondary levels	1	*2*	3	4	5 (Students take the HKCEE at the end of their fifth year)	6	7 (Students take the HKALE at the end of their seventh year)

(HKCEE – the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination and HKALE – the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination were the two public examinations taken by the participants during their secondary education.)

According to the Curriculum Development Council and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (2014), English learning at the secondary level aims to:

i)   provide every learner of English with further opportunities for extending their knowledge and experience of the cultures of other people as well as opportunities for personal and intellectual development, further studies, pleasure and work in the English medium; and

ii) enable every learner to prepare for the changing socio-economic demands resulting from advances in information technology (IT) – demands which include the interpretation, use and production of texts for pleasure, study and work in the English medium. (p. 2)

In most secondary schools, English is taught seven to nine hours a week (Nunan, 2003). The English language curriculum at the secondary level is heavily examination-oriented. Lee (2005) states that the two public examinations (HKCEE and HKALE) exert a profound impact on the English curriculum, making teachers focus on providing students with "a large dosage of examination practice, model answers, [and] examination tips…"

(p. 41). In another study, Lee (2005) claims that English teachers in the Hong Kong secondary context mainly focus on teaching grammar.

In Hong Kong, all post-secondary institutions provide English enhancement courses for their students. As Braine and McNaught (2007) point out, most of these courses are "electives and are quite separate from the discipline courses the students study for their major" (p. 3). Students tend to perceive these English enhancement courses as "being on the periphery of the curriculum" (p. 3).

3.2.3   Research site

Hong Kong College (pseudonym) is located in an area with both residential and commercial buildings. It is one of the self-financed post-secondary institutions in Hong Kong. Three types of programs (described under pseudonyms) are offered at Hong Kong college (HKC): i) Academic Degree program; ii) Diploma program; and iii) Preparatory Academic Degree program. The three types of programs cater for secondary school-leavers. The Academic Degree programs are two-year programs designed mainly for students who would like to further pursue their studies at the university after they graduated from HKC. The two-year Diploma programs aim to equip students with professional job-oriented skills to enter the workforce upon the completion of the program. The Preparatory Academic Degree program is a one-year program which aims to prepare secondary school-leavers (those who haven't finished their matriculation studies in the secondary school) for the Academic Degree programs. Figure 2 shows the possible progression paths upon graduation from HKC.
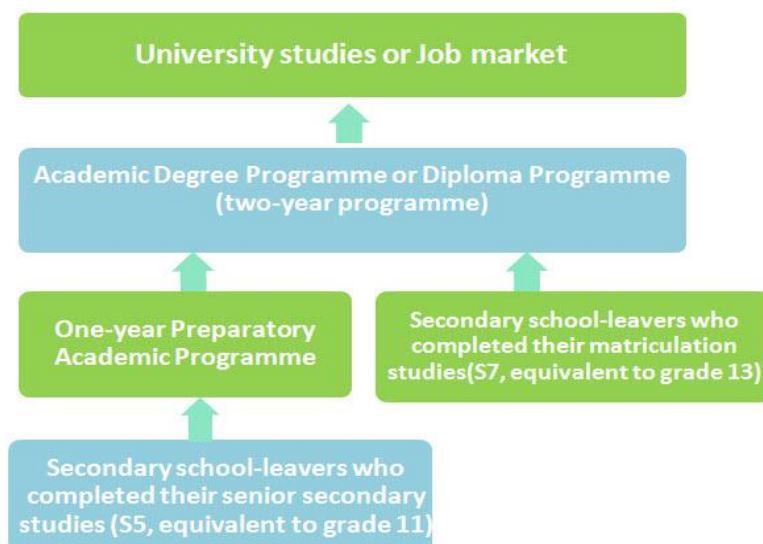
Figure 2: Possible Progression Paths

HKC offers around 30 Academic Degree and Diploma programs covering a range of areas such as arts, social sciences, business administration and science and other specialized areas including design and tourism. HKC is led by one principal and two vice-principals. Each degree and diploma program is led by a program leader who oversees the different courses offered in the respective program.

HKC had an enrollment of approximately 5, 000 full-time students, 100 teaching staff and 120 administrative and support staff during the time of the study. HKC is an English-medium institution. As stated in the student handbook, all subjects, except those related to the Chinese language, are taught in English. All first-year Academic Degree students, regardless of which programs they are enrolled in, are required to take three English courses during their studies at HKC. Table 2 below shows the English courses taken by students in their first and second year of studies.

Table 2: English Courses for Academic Degree Students

	English courses
Year 1	**ENG001** *(Taken in Term 1, from September to December)* **ENG002** *(Taken in Term 2, from January to May)*
Year 2	**ENG003** *(Taken either in Term 1 or 2 depends on students' preference)*

Similar to most other post-secondary institutions in Hong Kong, HKC provides English enhancement courses for all first-year students. However, different from the courses offered in other institutions, English courses in HKC are developed for students from all academic disciplines. In other words, the English classroom in HKC is more diverse in terms of: i) the academic discipline that students are studying; ii) students' knowledge of the English language; and iii) the extent of their English usage at the post-secondary level. The diverse English classroom makes HKC a suitable institution for my study. The diversity in students' English learning experiences added complexity and richness to the data gathered in this study.

3.2.4   Research participants: The storytellers

Chase (2005) states that narrative researchers "devote much more space in their written work to fewer individuals than do other qualitative researchers" (p. 666). She further points out that many anthropologists have published books based on one individual's life story (e.g., Frank, 2000; Shostak, 2000) while some sociologists and psychologists have based their work on a small number of narratives (e.g., Bell, 1999; Ferguson, 2001, Mishler, 1999). This study focuses on the English learning experiences of six first-year post-secondary students. The goal of qualitative inquiry is to enrich the understanding of an experience and thus, selection of participants is purposeful (Polkinghorne, 2005). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) also contend that purposive sampling is an appropriate approach when "most of the random sample may be largely ignorant of particular issues and unable to comment on matters of interests to the research" (p. 115). In the following, I first describe the participant selection process, then provide a description of the six student participants.

Locating my research in a qualitative paradigm, I acknowledge the existence of multiple realities or truths. I believe that students have different English learning experiences both in and out of school and each of them has a different understanding of what it means to be an English learner. In other words, students have their own perception towards English learning and themselves as an English learner. In this study, I focused my attention on first-year post-secondary students as they had passed through one key stage in their academic career (that is, they moved from secondary into post-secondary studies) and they would be able to recount their secondary English learning experiences and their current learning at the post-secondary level. Polkinghorne (2005) states that, during the participant selection process, researchers can "select participants from a particular subgroup whose experience is expected to be somewhat alike…" in order to "describe the experience of a particular subgroup in depth" (p. 141). As mentioned earlier, secondary school students in Hong Kong receive their education in one of the two language streams: Chinese- and English-medium schools. In order to study how students' English learning will be shaped by these two different contexts, I also selected participants based on the language stream in which they pursued their secondary studies.

Once I received the informed consent from HKC, an information letter explaining my research was posted on the e-learning platform to recruit first-year students for the study. The selection criteria included: i) students who speak Cantonese as their first language; ii) students who have been learning English as a second language; and iii) students who have pursued their primary education and at least five years of secondary education in Hong Kong. Twenty students responded to the recruitment notice and expressed their interest in the study. A questionnaire (Appendix 8) was given to these self-selected students, which aimed to gather information about their linguistic background and English learning experience. Students were also asked to indicate in the questionnaire their willingness to participate in interviews and class observations. The questionnaire allowed me to generate a list of possible participants for interviews. All twenty students returned the completed questionnaires out of which, five students indicated their unwillingness to participate in interviews and class observations. I then separated the remaining fifteen completed questionnaires based on the language stream in which

students pursued their secondary education: four students from the Chinese-stream and 11 from the English-stream.

In order to further explain the details of my data collection procedure, I called for a meeting with the fifteen students. At the end, seven students attended the meeting. The other eight expressed that they were unsure if they would be available for interviews as it was their first year of studies and they were afraid of the tight study schedule during the academic year. After explaining to those seven students in more details about the data collection procedure, only six agreed to participate in the study.

All six participants were born in Hong Kong and spoke Cantonese as their mother-tongue. Tables 3 and 4 show their linguistic background and educational path prior to their studies at HKC. All the names are pseudonyms.

Table 3: Participants' Linguistic Background

Name	Age	Academic discipline	Mother-tongue	Languages other than mother-tongue
Brandon	19	Science	Cantonese	English; Mandarin
Gallie	20	Arts	Cantonese	English; Mandarin; French
Jack	22	Science	Cantonese	English; Mandarin
Lindsay	19	Social Sciences	Cantonese	English; Mandarin
Maggie	19	Social Sciences	Cantonese	English; Mandarin
Stanley	19	Science	Cantonese	English; Mandarin; Japanese

All six participants were first-year Academic Degree students during the time of the study. They had been learning English as a second language since their pre-primary education (around the age of three). Like the majority of Hong Kong students, they started learning Mandarin as a language subject in primary school. Only Gallie and Stanley had experience learning a foreign language. Gallie learned French in school during her primary education. She also learned the language at the Alliance française de Hong Kong from secondary three to five (equivalent to grade nine to twelve). Stanley learned Japanese as an extra-curricular activity during the summer holiday prior to his studies at HKC.

The six student participants shared a similar educational path. They all received their

kindergarten, primary, and secondary education in Hong Kong. However, they took

different paths after their secondary studies. Table 4 below shows the six participants'

educational background. The language stream (CMI: Chinese-medium; EMI: English-

medium) in which they received their education is also indicated in the table.

Table 4: Participants' Educational Background

Participants	Kindergarten education (K1 – K3)	Primary education (P1 – P6)	Secondary education			
			Junior (S1-S3)	Senior (S4-S5)	Matriculation (S6-S7)	
Jack	CMI	CMI	CMI			Two years of matriculation studies at an evening school
Gallie	EMI	EMI	EMI		EMI (Studied S6 for six months)	One-year foundation course and two years of undergraduate studies in Australia
Lindsay	CMI	CMI	EMI		One-year self-study for S5 to retake the public examination	One-year preparatory program at HKC
Brandon	CMI	CMI	CMI			
Maggie	CMI	CMI	CMI/EMI (subject-specific)	EMI		Pursuing Academic Degree at HKC
Stanley	CMI	CMI	EMI (S1 only)	CMI (S2-S7)		

Note: Gallie, Lindsay rightmost column grouped as "Pursuing Academic Degree at HKC"

As can be seen from Table 4, all participants completed their seven years of secondary

studies, except Gallie and Lindsay. Gallie pursued her matriculation studies only for six

months and then she left for Australia for further studies. She pursued her post-secondary

education there for three years prior to her studies at HKC. As for Lindsay, upon

completion of her senior secondary studies, she decided to study on her own (without

attending school) for a year to retake the public examination, hoping to continue with her

matriculation studies. As she did not get satisfactory results in the examination, she

decided to take a one-year preparatory program at HKC to prepare herself for the

Academic Degree program. As for Jack, he retook his matriculation studies at night

school as he wanted to try for his university entrance examination a second time. The six

student participants' education background exemplifies the range of English learning experiences that HKC students can have: learning English in different language streams (CMI and EMI) and different contexts (e.g., night school); and out-of-school English learning opportunities (e.g., studying in Australia) students can have prior to studying at HKC. The linguistic background and educational paths of the six student participants added layers of complexity to their English learning stories and such complexity provided a window through which I explored Hong Kong students' English learning experiences across different times and contexts.

3.3   Data Collection

In this study, the data were gathered from various sources: English language curriculum documents, a pre-interview questionnaire, interviews and post-interview classroom observations. Table 5 summarizes the data collection process and the details of each data collection method are presented in the following sections.

Table 5: Data Collection Process

Data collection methods		Time frame
Review of English language curriculum documents		August – September, 2011
Pre-interview questionnaire		October, 2011
Interviews with students	First interview	November – December, 2011
	Second interview	March – April, 2012
	Third interview	May, 2012
Post-interview classroom observations		December, 2011

3.3.1   English language curriculum documents

"All research projects involve, to a greater or lesser extent, the use and analysis of documents" (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 1996, p. 150). Merriam (1988) also states that "documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding and discover insights relevant to the research problem" (p. 118). In order to better understand the participants' learning stories in relation to the Hong Kong education context, I gathered relevant English language curriculum documents from two sources. First, I collected the English Language Curriculum Guide for both primary and secondary education, issued by the Hong Kong Education Bureau. Second, I gathered the English

course materials from HKC, including the course syllabus, lecture notes, assignment instructions and rubrics. While examining this collection of English curriculum documents, I focused my attention on stated learning objectives, key learning areas and assessment schemes. A review of the English curriculum documents provided the context within which the research participants operated (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006), which helped me better understand and analyze their experiences. The contextual details revealed in the documents also helped better prepare me for the interviews with the student participants.

3.3.2   Pre-interview questionnaire

As previously mentioned in section 3.2 on research design, a pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix 8) was used during the participant selection process. The main purpose of using this questionnaire was to find out about who the student participants were so as to identify prospective students for interviews. That is, the questionnaire was used to gather students' biographical information, language backgrounds, the English courses they took during their secondary education and those currently taken at HKC, and their perception of English learning and of themselves as English learners. The questionnaire also asked students to indicate their willingness to participate in interviews and class observations. Student responses enabled me to: i) better understand the English learning history of each participant prior to the interview; and ii) establish an initial rapport with the participants. Although the questionnaire was used initially to identify prospective participants for interviews, it provided valuable information about Hong Kong students' English learning. The questionnaires completed by students who did not participate in interviews and classroom observations also provided me with a glimpse of the student population at HKC.

3.3.3   Interviews

Individual experience, according to Weiss (1994), is potentially accessible and interview provides researchers a virtual window on that experience. Through interviews, researchers can "learn about places we [they] have not been and could not go and about settings which we [they] have not lived…" and researchers can "learn what people

perceived and how they interpret their perceptions" (p. 1). I collected the six participants'
English learning stories through open-ended and semi-structured interviews. Seidman
(1991, as cited in Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 142) suggests that a sequence of three
interviews with the participants is "more likely to produce accounts of sufficient depth
and breadth" (p. 142). I, therefore, conducted three rounds of interviews throughout
HKC's academic year 2011-2012. Table 6 shows the time frame of interviews conducted
with each participant.

Table 6: Interview Time Frame

Name	First interview	Second interview	Third interview
Brandon	Nov, 2011	April, 2012	May, 2012
Gallie	Dec, 2011 (two sections)	March, 2012	May, 2012
Jack	Nov, 2011 (two sections)	March, 2012	May, 2012
Lindsay	Nov, 2011	March, 2012	May, 2012
Maggie	Dec, 2011	May, 2012	--------------
Stanley	Nov, 2011	April, 2012	May, 2012

Most of the interviews were conducted on the HKC campus during school hours. The
specific date, time, and location of interviews were mutually agreed between participants
and me. I made efforts to accommodate participants' schedule with an aim not to disturb
their school life. All the student participants chose to use Cantonese during the
interviews. Each interview lasted from one to two hours, and was digitally recorded. I
also kept notes while conducting the interviews. As the first interview with Gallie and
Jack went over the scheduled time period, the two participants and I agreed to meet
another time to continue with the first round of interviews. It was my hope that I could
conduct three rounds of interviews with each participant. Even though I was only able to
conduct two interviews with Maggie because of her busy schedule, the two interviews
offered the depth and breadth of her learning experiences.

During the first round of interviews, I explained the purpose of my study to each

participant again in a manner they could understand and relate to. As in-depth

interviewing "opens up what is inside people…[and it] may be more intrusive and [may]

involve greater reactivity" (Patton, 2002, p. 407), I therefore indicated to the students that

their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the research at any time. I

also assured them that their names and information would be kept confidential by the use

of a pseudonym. I also provided them the opportunities to ask me questions regarding the interviews and my study.

The first interview was guided by an interview protocol (Appendix 9) which aimed to gather detailed background information about the participants. The first interview also provided the participants with the opportunity to clarify their responses on the questionnaire. Though I prepared questions for the first round of interviews, the interviews were allowed to develop and evolve in their own way. The background information collected from the first interview helped me capture the participants' stories chronologically and helped set the context for the two subsequent interviews. After the first round of interviews with students, I listened to the recordings and reviewed my field notes in order to look for the key themes mentioned. These themes served as the starting points in the two subsequent interviews.

Chase (2005) points out that narrative researchers who base their inquiry on in-depth interviews "aim specially at transforming the interviewer-interviewee relationship into one of narrator and listener" and she further states that:

> …to think of an interviewee as a narrator is to make a conceptual shift away from the idea that interviewees have answers to researchers' questions and toward the idea that interviewees are narrators with stories to tell and voices of their own. (p. 660)

When researchers perceive interviewees as narrators, they not only attend to the stories that the narrator tells during an interview, they also work at inviting stories. As mentioned earlier, I did not prepare any interview questions for the second and third round of interviews. Instead, I listened to the interview recordings and went through the notes I took during the interviews so as to look for possible topics for the next interview. I also looked for any unclear ideas which need further description or clarification. By doing so, I was able to invite stories from the student participants and I encouraged them to elaborate on the most significant stories during their course of English learning. This came in line with Mishler (1986), who suggests researchers to pay attention to

interviewees' relevancies so as to allow the voice of interviewees to come through in greater detail in an interview.

During the interviews, I also shared my own English learning stories with the student participants. The interviews were conducted in a manner similar to what Platt (2001) describe as "a conversation between equals" rather than a "formal question-and-answer exchange" (p. 40). The exchange of stories between the student participants and me added to the depth of the interviews and also the richness of our co-constructed English learning stories.

3.3.4   Post-interview English classroom observations

Observation helps "supplement and clarify data derived from participant interviews (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 143). Prior to data collection, I planned to conduct classroom observation after each round of interviews so as to compare what participants said with what they did. However, because of the tight teaching schedule of the English teachers at HKC, I was only able to conduct classroom observations after the first round of interviews. The English classes that I observed were ENG001, taken by the participants during the first semester of their first year studies. The English class was held two times a week and each lesson lasted for one and a half hours. There were about thirty students in one classroom and students were usually divided in small groups for classroom activities.

Prior to the classroom observations, I reviewed the course materials as these materials could reveal things that may have happened before I entered the classroom (Patton, 2002). The materials provided information about the "history" and "behind-the-scenes" (Patton, 2002) of the English classroom. Heeding the advice from Merriam (1998), I focused my attention on the physical setting, the participants and their interactions with others during the classroom observations (p. 97-98). I was also mindful of my own behavior and reactions during the observations. While conducting observations, Patton (2002) also contends that "it can be appropriate to note that something did not occur when the observer's basic knowledge of and experience with the phenomenon suggests that the absence of some particular activity or factor is noteworthy" (p. 295-296). In view of this, I listened to the recordings of the first round of interviews prior to the classroom

observations, paying particular attention to what the participants said about their interactions in the ENG001 classroom.

The time and length of classroom observations were decided by each participant's English teacher. I indicated to the teachers my role as a non-participant observer in their class. I explained that my focus was on the English classroom settings and the student participants' interaction in classroom, and that I would not comment on their teaching practice. At the beginning of each classroom observation, the English teacher briefly introduced my role as a researcher and the purpose of my study. During the classroom observation, I made use of the observational protocol suggested in Creswell (2007). Table 7 below shows the observational protocol adopted in this study. I jotted down both descriptive and reflective notes (Creswell, 2007, p. 135, 138). The descriptive notes summarized the classroom settings, the chronological flow of activities in the class, and the participants' interaction with their counterparts. The reflective notes included my feelings and reactions to the experiences that had been observed. Immediately after the classroom observations, I also had the chance to talk to the teachers about the pertinent matters that occurred during the English classroom. After the classroom observations, I reviewed my notes, which helped inform the subsequent interviews. During the second round of interviews, I explored the incidents I noted from the classroom observations and invited participants to further elaborate on them.

Table 7: Observational Protocol

Date: _____

Length of class period:_____ (minutes)	
Descriptive notes	**Reflective notes**
Classroom layout:	
Students in the classroom:	
Teacher in the classroom:	
Particular events or activities (in chronological fashion):	

Adapted from Creswell (2007, p. 137)

The classroom observations provided me with a glimpse into the participants' day-to-day performance in the English classroom in which their learning stories developed. I was able

to contextualize their experiences and better understand how their experiences were shaped and informed by the ENG001classroom.

No single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective on the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002). By collecting data from a variety of sources, I hoped to be able to document the participants' lived English learning experiences. In the following section, I discuss the data analysis process.

3.4   Data Analysis

"The data generated by qualitative methods are voluminous" (Patton, 2002, p. 440). It is important to first get a sense of the whole before conducting data analysis and, as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state, "narrative inquiry was driven by a sense of the whole and it is this sense which needs to drive the writing (and reading) of narrative" (p. 7). Before I began data analysis, I organized each student participant's data into one computer file which consisted of the pre-interview questionnaire, digital interview recordings, interview transcripts, and my notes taken during the interviews and observation.

In this study, data analysis was simultaneous with data collection. After I finished my first round of interviews, I listened to the recordings and jotted down key ideas for the two subsequent interviews. By doing so, I was able, in Merriam's (1998) words, to "hold a conversation with the data" (p. 131). I collected a total of 20 hours of digital recordings. Instead of transcribing all the recordings at one time, I worked with one student's interviews at a time. Before I started transcribing the recordings, I listened to each recording once so as to get the overall shape of each participant's learning stories and to immerse myself in the data (Patton, 2002). While listening to the recordings, I noted key elements to help me to understand and interpret the participants' English learning experiences. After listening to each recording once, I started the transcription process. As I listened and transcribed the interviews of each participant, the themes within and connections between the stories started to emerge.

After I finished transcribing one participant's digital recordings, I read the transcript alongside the recordings so as to ensure accuracy. The iterative process of listening and transcribing allowed me to immerse myself in the participants' stories, making the meaning and significance of each learning story more apparent to me. As the data transcription process came to an end, I translated the interview transcripts into English. I made efforts to retain the emotional nuances accompanying the interviews while doing the translation. During data analysis, I analyzed the interview data in the language in which they were collected to avoid meaning lost in translation. What and how participants feel and think is best expressed in their mother tongue and, as Jackson (2008) notes, using the mother-tongue enables research participants to "express their innermost feelings ('true' selves) and emotions with those closest to them (e.g., relatives, friends from the same 'ingroup')" (p. 201). Analyzing the transcripts in the original language helped my analysis "stay close to the original data" (Willig, 2012, p. 75).

Data analysis was conducted in two phases: i) constructing the participants' English learning stories; and ii) identifying the themes that emerged from all participants' stories. The analysis procedure will be described in the following sections.

3.4.1   Constructing participants' learning stories

When narrative researchers begin to interpret narratives heard during interviews, they "listen first to the voices *within* each narrative" (Chase, 2005, p. 663). In view of this, I read each student participant's interview transcripts multiple times, paying particular attention to the connections among the various stories that each participant told me, to find the underlying meaning and insights their stories illustrated.

Creswell (2007) states that "the data collected in narrative study need to be analyzed for the story they have to tell, a chronology of unfolding events, and turning points or epiphanies" (p. 155). Moreover, Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) suggest that narrative researchers gather stories and analyze them for key elements of the story and then rewrite the story to place it within a chronological sequence, with a beginning, a middle and end. In other words, the story consists of past, present, and future ideas (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In order to reconstruct the participants' stories in a chronological manner, I set up a data base on NVivo 7 containing the data file of each participant (their pre-interview questionnaire, digital interview recordings, interview transcripts, my notes taken during interviews and classroom observations). The NVivo software program enabled me to i) separate the data and coding linked to each participant; and ii) compare and contrast the English learning process among the six participants. In other words, with the use of the NVivo program, I was able to examine the growth and transformation of each individual student and at the same time, I could provide a comprehensive picture of the six participants as a whole. To reconstruct the learning stories of the participants, I attended to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space: the temporal, the personal and social, and the place dimensions so that I could connect participants to their stories in a meaningful way. In my analysis, I aimed to discover how the student participants made sense of their learning experiences (how they perceived their English learning and learner identities) over time and space. In order to achieve this aim, I coded the data with the code labels in Figure 3. The figure was adapted from Creswell (2007, p.170.)
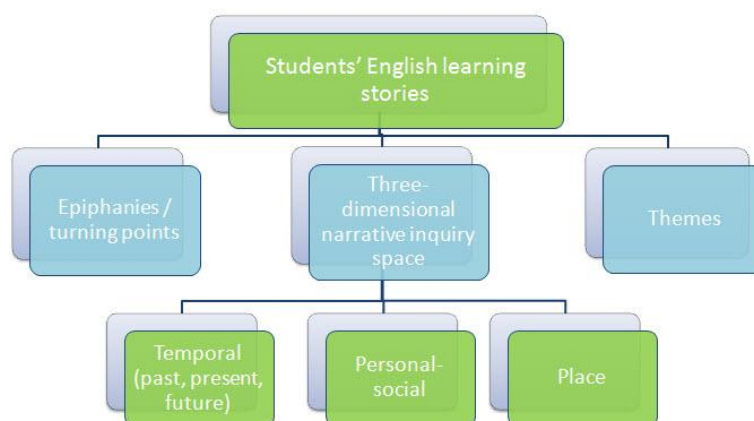
Figure 3: Coding a narrative study

During the interviews, the student participants did not always share their stories in a chronological order. Very often, they moved backward and forward in time. The code labels in Figure 3 helped me locate each student's learning stories in time and space and see how their stories were shaped by both personal and social interaction. The data coded

as epiphanies/turning points and themes indicated significant topics or aspects of the participants' English learning trajectories and they served as the core elements based on which each participant's English learning story was constructed.

As my analysis continued, I developed "interim texts", which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as the various drafts of writing and re-writing. While writing the interim texts, I moved back and forth through the interview transcripts, and sometimes re-listened to the interview recordings. This process enabled me to produce abridged versions of the learners' stories. I also sent the learning stories to the participants so as to involve them in the writing process.

The writing up of each participant's narrative allowed me to: i) focus on the connections among the various stories told by each participant; ii) listen to the complexity and multiplicity within each participant's voice as well as the diversity among all participants' voices; and iii) explore how the participants constructed and positioned their self in each of the stories they told during the interviews. The narratives of each participant are presented in Chapter 4.

3.4.2   Reading across participants' stories

The second phase of data analysis aimed to explore the six participants' narratives collectively. While the narrative account of each participant provides the viewpoint of each student towards English learning, a thematic analysis across the six participants' stories helped provide the multiple perspectives that emerged from the intersection of their stories. NVivo was used in the coding process. The coding process involved several readings of the collected data (Patton, 2002). I first read through the data file of each participant to develop coding categories. The categories were informed by both the literature (as discussed in Chapter 2) and students' English learning experiences. Next, I re-read the data and started formal coding. After coding the first student's data, I coded other students' files in the same way. As I did this, I compared students' experiences with those that were already coded.

As Mills (2008) states, "comparison is at the heart of most social sciences research" (p. 100). Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative analysis is one prominent strand of comparative analysis. Adopting a constant comparative method, researchers compare "newly acquired data with existing data and categories and theories that have been devised and which are emerging, in order to achieve a perfect fit between these and the data" (p. 473). The comparison continues "until no more variation occurs" (p. 493). Keeping this in mind, my data analysis was a cyclical process, which required me to return to the data with a different perspective when I developed new insights. As the process went on, themes shared across participants' stories started to emerge. A thematic analysis across the six participants' data allowed me to see how these themes connected and diverged. While each participant's narrative revealed each individual growth and transformation over time and across different contexts, a thematic analysis of all six participants' narratives enabled me to draw comparisons among them and, thus, show the communal and idiosyncratic features of Hong Kong post-secondary students' English learning.

3.5   Data Representation

Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space informs narrative inquirers to look backward and forward (time), inward and outward (personal and social) and situate experiences within place when writing stories of participants. The learners' narratives presented in the next chapter represent both the content and analysis of the student participants' stories (Ouellette, 2003). When restorying each student participant's learning experiences, I attempted to include their voices so as to uphold the narrative principals as mentioned in the previous sections. I included interview excerpts (translated from Cantonese) in the stories so as to bring students' English learning process to life. While presenting each student's individual narrative in Chapter 4, I could honour their distinct voices and highlight the differences and commonalities among them. Each participant's story begins with a profile, describing the student's family and linguistic background, personality, and educational path. The retelling of their English learning experiences would then be presented in a chronological order in order to show how their experiences led them into an understanding of English learning and of

themselves as an English learner. At the end of each story, I provided a summary of the student's English learning journey, linking their stories to the theoretical constructs discussed in Chapter 2 and as Jackson (2008) states "this format involves a dialectic of the particular with the general, encouraging reflective, multiple, and critical interpretations of their [the participants'] storied lives to emerge" (p. 70).

After presenting the six participants' narratives in Chapter 4, I discussed in Chapter 5 the findings, focusing on the themes and issues that emerged across the learning stories. During the discussion, I paid particular attention to the themes that are common to the participants as well as those that are unique to each participant. The themes were discussed in relation to the participants' interview data with an aim to link their "emic" perspectives with my interpretations ("etic" perspective) and the theoretical constructs in the literature (Jackson, 2008).

3.6   Ethical Considerations

The nature of qualitative research, including narrative inquiry, generally requires observation and interaction with individuals. Thus, a number of ethical considerations have the potential to arise during the research process. In the following sections, I present these considerations focusing on my relationship with the student participants and student voice in their stories.

3.6.1   My relationships with the student participants

According to Clandinin (2006),

> The idea of working within the three-dimensional narrative space highlights the relational dimension of narrative inquiry. Thus, narrative inquirers cannot bracket themselves out of the inquiry but rather need to find ways to inquire into participants' experiences, their own experiences as well as the co-constructed experiences developed through the relational process. (p. 47)

Once the inquiry begins, narrative researchers have to negotiate "relationships, research purposes, transitions" and how they are "going to be useful in those relationships" (p. 47)

with the participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also stress that while in the field, "the researcher-participant relationship is a tenuous one, always in the midst of being negotiated" (p. 72). Throughout the study, I kept reminding myself the negotiation of research-participant relationship was an ongoing process.

With regard to the relationship between researchers and their participants, Cameron Fraser, Harvey, Rampton and Richardson (1992) suggest three kinds of position that researchers can take up, namely, ethical, advocacy and empowerment. Researchers who take up an ethical position conduct studies *on* social subjects with an aim to "minimize damage and offset inconvenience to the researched, and to acknowledge their contributions" (p. 14). As for advocacy research, it is not only about research *on* subjects, but also research *for* subjects. This type of research is characterized by a commitment on the part of the researchers to use their skills as "an 'expert' to defend subjects' interests, getting involved in their campaigns…and speaking on their behalf" (p. 15). As for empowering-based studies, researchers conduct research *on, for and with* subjects. Cameron et al. (1992) propose three principles behind these types of research: i) "persons are not objects and should not be treated as objects"; ii) "subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them"; and iii) "if knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing" (p. 22-24). That being said, while researchers are working *with* their participants, they ensure that the relationship is an interactive and dialogic one. These relationships are "opposed to the distancing or objectifying strategies positivists are constrained to use" (p. 22).

In this study, I perceived myself working with the student participants to construct their learning stories. The participants were not "passive vessels of answers" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 30) of interview questions. The research process was a collaboration between me and the participants (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). To establish a trusting relationship with the students, I clearly explained my research purpose to them, as well as the data collection process, and my role in this research. I also assured them that the data collected would be kept confidential. As the student participants were still in their course of learning career when this research was conducted, I started my data collection only after I secured their consent to participate. I also sought teachers' informed consent prior

to classroom observations. Issues such as safety, anonymity, and confidentiality were mutually agreed upon between the participants and me. I emphasized that no individuals or schools would be identified by name in this study. Pseudonyms were used for the participants, the people whom they mentioned during the interviews, the post-secondary institution in which they were studying, and the programs and courses they were attending.

To ensure the research process was a collaborative one, I made it explicit that the participants could raise questions and introduce topics for discussion. I also shared my English learning and teaching stories with them. While revealing my background to the participants, not only was I able to encourage them to open themselves up during the interviews, I also had the chance to reflect on how my experiences brought me to the research topic and how they led me to understand the participants' stories. During the study, I listened attentively to each of the stories the students shared. I kept mindful of each student participant's reactions and reminded them they could decide on the issues they wanted to cover when telling their stories.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also contend that "it is critical to the trust and integrity of the work that researchers do not simply walk away when 'time has come'" (p. 74). As I perceived the participants as my co-researchers in the study (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), I clearly explained my "next steps" to them at the end of each interview. I reminded them they were constructing their own narratives in collaboration with me. I also invited them to provide feedback about their learning narratives. It is "a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

3.6.2 Student voice

Narrative inquiry highlights "the uniqueness of each human action and event" (Chase, 2005, p. 657). As a narrative inquirer, I saw the student participants as narrators, having stories to tell and voices of their own. The participants were not univocal or unidimensional (Chase, 2005). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) remind researchers,

> …to consider their responsibility as researchers with the participants. In much the same way that we consult our consciences about the responsibilities we have in a friendship, we need to consult our consciences about our responsibilities as narrative inquirers in a participatory relationship. (p. 171-172)

During this study, I listened to the students' stories and made efforts to re-tell them. I bore in mind that they were the authors of their lived stories and I was a co-author of their stories as presented in this study. I strove to respect the multiple voices embedded in the students' stories. During the writing stage, I kept reminding myself that the research participants were my first audience and, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, they were indeed the most important audience, "for it is to them that we owe our care to compose a text that does not rupture life stories that sustain them" (p. 173-174). To make matters even more complex, Gubrium and Holstein (2003) contend that "treating subject positions and their associated voices seriously, we might find that an ostensibly single interview could actually be, in practice, an interview with several subjects, whose particular identities may be only partially clear" (p. 23). Therefore, many narrative researchers attend to "*any* narrative as an *instance* of the possible relationships between a narrator's active construction of self, on the one hand, and the social, cultural, and historical circumstances that enable and constrain that narrative, on the other" (Chase, 2005, p. 667). In view of this, while writing the English learning stories, I made efforts to highlight the specificity of each English learning experience and place it in a broader context so as to convey the impact of the context on the narratives.

While treating participants as the most important audience, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also remind researchers that they owe their "care and responsibility to a larger audience, to the conservation of a scholarly discourse, and our [their] research texts need also to speak of how we [they] lived and told our [their] stories within the particular field of inquiry" (p. 174). In this study, I reminded myself to be responsible to my research participants, my own research, and the research community. I thought about whom I wrote for and spoke to, and how I did so in order to make room for readers' alternative interpretations (Chase, 2005).

While acknowledging the fact that the participants had a voice in the collaborative process of constructing their stories, I also took note of the fact that they would tell their stories in their way, and I would interpret and retell their stories in my way. Moreover, my interpretations would be shaped by my experiences. All qualitative data analysis is "inevitably interpretive" and is "less a completely accurate representation…but more of a reflexive, reactive interaction between the researchers and the decontextualised data" (Cohen et. al., 2007, p. 469). It was important for me to constantly reflect on my researcher's role and also on the data so as to ensure that both voices would be heard.

3.7　　Limitations

As mentioned earlier, the six student participants chose to use Cantonese in the interviews. Polkinghorne (2005) states that "translations of gathered data from one language to another may distort meaning" (p. 139). In view of this, I invited a Cantonese-English bilingual, who had a university degree in translation studies and an understanding of the context of this study, to check if my English translation of the Cantonese data was accurate.

"When narrative inquirers are in the field, they are never there as disembodied recorders of someone else's experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 81). Inquirers, together with their participants, are engaged in the process of living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories as the inquiry proceeds. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state that researchers have to be aware of the multiple "I's" in narrative inquiry. When writing narratively, we become "plurivocal" (Barnieh, 1989). "The 'I' can speak as researcher, teacher, man or woman, commentator, research participant, narrative critic, and as theory builder" (p. 9). It is important to find out whose voice is the dominant one when we write "I". The two researchers also state the importance of acknowledging the researcher's own experience – the researcher's own livings, tellings, retellings, and relivings. One of the starting points is "the researcher's own narrative of experience, the researcher's autobiography" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 70). According to the two researchers, "the narrative beginnings of our own livings, tellings, retellings, and relivings help us deal with questions of who we are in the field and who we are in the texts that we write on our experience of the field experience" (p. 70). As I had taught English in a post-secondary

institution in Hong Kong before, my preconceptions might influence my representations of the post-secondary English classroom and students therein. My English learning and teaching stories presented in Chapter 1 drew me to understand the meanings I made of my English learning and what made me who I was and who I am today. It is through the telling of these stories that I came to clearly see my position. My storytelling during the interviews with the participants as well as the writing-up of my personal stories forced me to "come to terms not only with our [my] choices of research problem and with those with whom we [I] engage in the research process, but with our [my] selves and with the multiple identities that represent the fluid self in the research setting" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 210). I reminded myself of my different selves ("research-based selves", "brought selves", and "situationally created selves" (Reinharz, 1997, p. 5) and how "each of these selves comes into play in the research setting and consequently has a distinctive voice" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 210).

Reflexivity, according to Guba and Lincoln (2005), entails "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher or the "human as instrument" (p. 210). I was aware of my preconceptions, interests and biases. Moreover, I was also conscious of how my own autobiographical narrative emphasized a particular perspective. As I wrote, I thought about the readers. I tried to make transparent the values and beliefs that inevitably shaped the research process and its outcomes (Etherington, 2004). Moreover, reflexivity helped enhance the trustworthiness and representations of the findings as "our interpretations can be better understood and validated by readers who are informed about the position we adopt in relation to the study and by our explicit questioning of our own involvement" (Etherington, 2004, p. 32). In a similar vein, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also remind narrative researchers that narrative inquiry "necessitates ongoing reflection", which the researchers call "wakefulness" (p. 184). Narrative inquirers need "to be wakeful, and thoughtful" (p. 184) about all of the inquiry decisions. Throughout this study, I kept wakeful and thoughtful so as to ensure the narratives had "an explanatory, invitational quality" (p. 185); and that they were trustworthy.

To capture the complex connection between language learning and identity, I focused my attention on six student participants. The participants were from middle-class families,

where parents' English proficiency had reached secondary-school-level. One may question if a study with a smaller number of students is representative of Hong Kong post-secondary students' English learning. Researchers such as Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Polkinghorne (1988) and Reissman (1993) state that narrative research should not be judged by the same set of criteria as those which are applied to more traditional approaches. In other words, it is not appropriate to apply "the measures of validity and reliability, to narrative" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 90). Instead, "access to reliable and trustworthy records of the stories as told by individuals is the cornerstone of validity" (p. 90).

According to Webster & Mertova (2007), validity, in narrative research, is "more concerned with the research being well grounded and supported by the data that has been collected. It does not provide results that produce generalisable truths, 'prescribing' how things are or ought to be" (p. 90). Reliability, in narrative research, refers to "the dependability of the data…[it is achieved] by the 'trustworthiness' of the notes or transcripts" (p. 93). To achieve "trustworthiness" in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 300) suggest four criteria: credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability. In this study, I attempted to establish trustworthiness through member checking, collecting data from multiple sources, clarifying my position through my personal narrative, and providing thick description of the research process.

Member checking was achieved by inviting the participants to review their learning narratives. Their comments and feedback helped enhance "the credibility of the findings and interpretation" (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). Lincoln and Guba (1985) also contend that to achieve trustworthiness, "the researcher must show that he or she has represented those multiple constructions adequately, that is, that the constructions…that have been arrived at via the inquiry are credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities" (p. 296). Credibility was enhanced through the participants' confirmation of the stories retold in this study.

Trustworthiness was also achieved through triangulation. In this study, data were collected from documents, a pre-interview questionnaire, interviews and classroom

observations. The variety of data sources helped provide "corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective" (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). Multiple rounds of interviews with the student participants also helped ascertain the trustworthiness of the data.

It is also important, according to Merriam (1988), for readers to understand the researcher's position and if any biases or assumptions will impact the inquiry. The personal narrative I wrote in Chapter 1 revealed to readers my experiences, interests and beliefs, and enabling readers to see how my experiences may have shaped this study and my interpretations of the participants' stories.

To further enhance trustworthiness, I also provided a complete description of the study, including its setting, and the participants. The description helped set the context for readers when they read the participants' stories. A detailed description of data collection and analysis process is "instrumental to any reader's understanding of how to trace any specific parts of data collected" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 96). As Creswell (2007) states, a rich and think description enhances transferability of a study, and provides greater transparency for readers and other researchers to develop their understandings and interpretation, and come to their own conclusions.

In this study, the student participants recounted their learning experiences along their English learning journey. They revisited their past (from kindergarten to secondary studies) and also talked about their present (current learning at HKC). It was possible that the participants' retellings might not be an accurate representation of actual events. However, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) contend that in narrative inquiry, "the distinction between fact and fiction is muddled" (p. 179). In a similar vein, Webster and Mertova (2007) also state that, "a personal narrative is not meant to be read as an exact record of what happened, nor is it a mirror of the world 'out there'" (p. 89) and "narrative research does not produce conclusions of certainty" (p. 90). Researchers have to bear in mind that narrative inquiry does not "try to pin down truth" (Leggo, 2004, p. 110). Narrative researchers engage in "an ongoing process of questioning" and intend to "represent that questioning in research texts that invite productive readers to continue the

questioning" (p. 110). Moreover, Riessman (1993) states that our readings of narrative data are situated in particular discourses. Narratives do not aim to achieve "validity in representing something 'out there' in the world, or even in expressing one's logically reasoned notions of how things 'out there' ought to work" (Amsterdam & Bruner, 2000, p. 13-14). In other words, "multiple interpretations are valid and that the real test of validity of any research should ultimately be done by those who read it and they should be the ones to decide on whether an account is 'believable'" (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p. 92). Thus, I invite readers to think through and about the student participants' learning experiences narratively and to draw conclusions regarding the relevance of the participants' stories in relation to their own experiences. As Peshkin (1985) states,

> when I disclose what I have seen, my results invite other researchers to look where I did and see what I saw. My ideas are candidates for others to entertain, not necessarily as truth, let alone Truth, but as positions about the nature and meaning of a phenomenon that may fit their sensibility and shape their thinking about their own inquiries. (p. 280)

It is hoped that readers' own life experiences may resonate with the stories presented in this study; the stories may ring true to readers if they remind them "about something that has happened to him/her [them] or it opens a new window" to them (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 99). As a consequence, readers may generate new understandings of their own experiences.

3.8   Summary

This chapter began with an overview of narrative inquiry focusing on the two questions: "What is narrative inquiry?" and "Why narrative inquiry? In the discussion, I presented Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space which served as the methodological guide for my data analysis. I then explained my research design and described the specific research stages, and the selection of research site and participants. I also presented the process of data collection and analysis. The chapter ended with the ethical considerations and limitations of this study.

"Narrative illuminates human actions and complexities" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 21) and it allows us "to watch what an experience can do to people who are living that experience" (p. 20). During the research process, I strove to ensure that I respectfully represented the student participants' lived and told stories and I also left room for readers' alternative interpretations (Chase, 2005; Clandinin and Huber, 2010).

In the next chapter, I present the learning narratives of each student participant. They were constructed in ways to highlight the participants' perceptions of English learning and of themselves as English learners. The narratives aim to illustrate how the participants live, tell, retell and relive their stories as they negotiate their selves over time and space.

Chapter 4

4 Students' English Learning Stories

"Stories allow us to watch what an experience can do to people who are living that experience" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 20). In this chapter, I will present the English learning stories of the six focal students in this study. I will focus my attention on how their learning experiences had shaped and informed the meanings that they attached to English learning. While compiling their learning stories, I aimed to i) introduce to readers who these students are, based on how they presented themselves to me; and ii) describe their English learning experiences from their kindergarten to their post-secondary studies. Each learning story was constructed in such a way that readers can access the students' prior learning experiences so that they can come to see how the students interpreted their own English learning and constructed their learner identity across different time and learning sites. As I spent more time with the participants throughout the study, I began to establish rapport with them and as Webster and Mertova (2007) state in their work "…by the creation of situations of trust, stories are told that reflect the experience and understanding" (p. 86). While the participants were sharing with me their learning stories during the interviews, I came to see how they felt about and perceived their own English learning.

While retelling the participants' learning stories in this chapter, I attended to the "particularity" of their stories. And as Webster and Mertova (2007) state in their work, "as we recall experience we unfold the story of those experiences. The story, in turn, is associated with a memorable event. That event has carried with it a development of new understanding as a consequence of the particular experience" (p. 72-73). In view of this, the learning stories in this chapter were constructed based on the memorable events that the participants recounted during the interviews. These memorable events have stood "the test of time and retained a place in living memory, where many other details have faded not to be ever recalled" (p. 73). Readers will be able to understand the nature and impact of the participants' learning experiences on their understanding of English learning. Moreover, I also included in their learning stories the interview excerpts so that readers

can actually "hear" how the six focal students reinterpreted their prior English learning based on their current English learning at the post-secondary level.

As I began listening to the interview recordings and transcribing the collected data, I was overwhelmed by the voluminous verbal account of the students' learning stories. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) claim that narrative inquirers cannot "summarize in formats that condense the volume in a way that data tables condense survey results" (p. 11). Narrative writers need to ask the question "which records are most telling?" (p. 11) and it is important that they "search their memories…for significant events preparatory to writing" and "practical considerations of space and imagined audience eventually determine the quantity of data contained in the written narrative" (p. 11). Moreover, Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) also state that the approach adopted by narrative researchers to retell participants' stories may result from "the purpose to be accomplished in the narrative study, the audience that will receive it, and the research problem being examined" (p. 345). This study aims to show the continuous development of the participants' perceptions towards English learning and their learner identities over time and space. In view of this, I will retell the students' stories, focusing on "what has been, what is now, and what is becoming" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 146). In other words, I will pay attention to what the students' English learning has been like, their current English learning and what their English learning will become.

In the following sections, the narrative account of each student participant will be presented. Each account begins with a brief introduction of the student participants. The heading of each introduction was a description of the participants based on my own perception of their key disposition. The introduction focuses on their family and language background so as to set the context for the readers to understand better how the participants' background might have contributed to their understanding of English learning. The students' English learning journey will then be presented following a chronological order, from their earliest experience learning the English language at home to their current learning in the post-secondary context. While constructing the participants' English learning stories, I also included their out-of-school English learning activities in order to show the impact of these activities on their perception of English

learning and learner identities. As the students' stories unfold, readers will come to see more clearly the students' evolving views of who they were, who they are and who they will be, in relation to English learning.

Each story will be divided into three main sections. The first section describes each participant's individual English learning journey, focusing on the memorable learning experiences recounted by them. The first section allows readers to see how each participant returned to their past and revisited their English learning experiences. The second section explores the students' perception towards English learning and especially the English language, focusing how the interactions within the English classroom shaped and informed their perceptions. The last section centers on how the participants constructed themselves as an English learner in response to their learning peers in the classroom. Readers will be able to see how the students developed their sense of self in relation to their learning peers, which in turn, will affect their investment in English learning. At the end of each narrative account, I will provide a summary of each student's English learning experiences, highlighting the themes that emerged from their stories. These emergent themes will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

In the following sections, I retell the six student participants' individual English learning story.

4.1   Brandon, a young man who takes things as they come

> "English is spoken in many places. I would like to learn English better so that I could travel to other places and understand their cultures better."

The first time I met Brandon, he was a quiet young man. He described himself as rather "shy", "We, science students, always study on our own…We seldom interact with other students or participate in any extra-curricular activities. It's difficult for us to make friends." Brandon was the eldest child in his family. He lived with his parents and one younger brother. Brandon's family spoke mainly Cantonese at home. Brandon recalled that his family had hired a Filipino domestic helper when he was small. The only time that his family spoke in English was when they talked to the domestic helper. Brandon

remembered that he had more opportunities to practise his English speaking skills back then. The domestic helper left when Brandon began his secondary studies. As far as Brandon could remember, his parents did not push him much regarding his English learning. When Brandon was in primary four, his mother hired a private tutor who taught him English phonics at home. Brandon attended the private tutorials for six months and he could not recall what he had learnt from the tutorials. However, he said that the private tutor was very encouraging as he recommended Brandon to participate in an English speech competition.

During the interviews, Brandon talked about his interest in learning languages. Besides learning Chinese, English and Mandarin in school, Brandon also self-studied Japanese. He developed his interest in the Japanese language from watching Japanese video clips on YouTube. Brandon planned to ask his mother to teach him Japanese as his mother once worked in Japan and she learnt Japanese while working there. Brandon has relatives living in Canada, the United States and Japan. During the summer prior to his studies at HKC, Brandon went to Vancouver to attend his cousin's wedding. Most of his cousins were Canadian-born Chinese who spoke mainly English and understood very little Cantonese. Brandon remembered his cousins would converse with him in English and yet, he usually responded to them in Cantonese. Brandon was amazed that his cousins could speak "native-like English". Besides his trip to Vancouver, Brandon also joined a two-week English summer program to Toronto when he was in primary six (at the age of twelve).

During the trip, Brandon had to attend English lessons everyday and the lessons were mostly activity-based. Brandon said he met students from other countries and he had to communicate with them in English. Brandon claimed that he had learnt much from the summer tour, "…we (Brandon and the students in the program) had a lot of opportunities to speak the language in that summer program. In Hong Kong, we seldom need to speak English…That's (the trip) the first time I spoke English in unfamiliar settings. I felt great." Though Brandon did not participate in any English extra-curricular activities in school, he made efforts to gain more exposure to English through listening to English songs and watching English television programs at home. He told me that he recently

became interested in watching stand-up comedy shows online. He expressed that those comedians spoke really fast. Though sometimes, Brandon could not fully understand what they were saying, he believed that he could polish up his English listening and speaking skills through watching the shows.

4.1.1 Brandon's English learning journey: "A never-ending challenge"

Brandon did not talk much about his English learning at the kindergarten. He just recalled there were no formal English lessons and he only learnt some simple English words through songs and games. Brandon then entered a Chinese[12]-medium primary school in which he learnt all the content subjects in Chinese and English was taught as a language subject. There were both local and native English-speaking teachers in his school. Brandon did not enjoy the English lessons taught by the native English speakers as he could not understand a single word that they said, "We (the whole class) were very small back then. The teacher spoke really fast and we could not follow the lesson." On the contrary, Brandon said the local teachers spoke relatively slower and would sometimes supplement their teaching with Cantonese such as explaining the meaning of some difficult English vocabulary. The whole class would understand the lesson better when Cantonese was used. Brandon described the English lessons at his primary levels as rather "traditional", with the teacher standing in front of the class and teaching according to the textbooks. The whole class just sat there and listened to the teacher. That was all Brandon could remember about English learning at the primary level.

After his primary studies, Brandon studied at a Chinese-medium secondary school. Each English class was taught by both a local and a native English-speaking teacher. However, the native English-speaking teacher would only teach the class for one month in every academic year. Brandon said the local teachers used both Cantonese and English in the lesson. When Brandon progressed to his senior secondary levels (from secondary four to

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[12] In Chinese-medium schools, all the teaching materials are written in standard written Chinese and all the lessons (except the English language) are conducted in spoken Cantonese (the mother-tongue of the majority of Hong Kong students).

seven), he had to start preparing for the public examination. Brandon mentioned a lot about the examination drills and he said with a complaining voice, "I am not sure if I could call those lessons as English lessons…I did not see any English teaching in class." Brandon claimed that the teachers just taught him the techniques of answering examination questions, instead of the English language itself. Brandon shared with me his expectation from an English class, "I expected to learn more about the English language. I wanted to learn the language itself, like its grammar or sentence structure, but not how to tackle examination questions." To better prepare for the public examination, Brandon also attended private English tutorials after school. The private English tutorials aimed to teach students how to attain better results in the examination.

 After his graduation from secondary school, Brandon studied at HKC in September, 2011. As mentioned earlier, Brandon described himself as a rather "shy" young man. It took him quite some time to get to know his peers in the post-secondary English classroom. At the beginning of the school term, Brandon felt very nervous as he had to speak English in front of unfamiliar people. As time went by, he had become more familiar with his group mates and he was more willing to share his ideas in English in group discussions. Brandon found that the post-secondary English classroom was more interactive and he thought that all the class activities provided him with more opportunities to speak English. However, Brandon wanted something more, "Yes, we took turns in expressing our ideas in English and yet, no one was there giving us feedback after the discussion." Brandon wished that the teacher could help correct the grammatical mistakes in his oral English. He felt that whenever he wrote or spoke in English, he was still drawing on what he learnt from his primary English lessons:

> I felt that I had been relying on what I had learnt a very long time ago…I still made many grammatical and spelling mistakes in my writing…To be frank, I do not think I have learnt anything during my secondary studies…I felt that my English learning has just started all over again here at HKC…I am now attending a "real" English lesson here…

Brandon indicated that he did not have a strong English foundation and felt desperate sometimes as he did not know how to improve his English skills, "I was trying to work harder and yet, I felt that I was always falling behind and was not able to catch up in the class. I felt so depressed."

When I met Brandon at the end of his first year at HKC, he told me that he really enjoyed the post-secondary English learning environment as all the English lessons were conducted in English. However, Brandon did not think the English courses at HKC helped improve his English skills. For example, the English course in the second term required students to write an English research report. Brandon claimed that the teacher just focused on teaching the class "what to include in a research report instead of how to write a research report". Though Brandon did not think he had learnt much while working on the English research report, he said he had developed his interest in reading English references and he was no longer resistant to reading English academic texts:

> I am now more willing to read English texts. In the past, I always tried to guess the content of a piece of writing after scanning just the first few lines of the passage. But now, I read more slowly. I think I have become more focused when reading English texts. I used to have resistance in reading English materials…But now, I will try to finish reading the whole text.

When recounting his English learning experiences at the post-secondary level, Brandon said he had learnt a lot of new vocabulary and yet, he found that he could hardly use it in his everyday life. It appeared that Brandon could not make a connection between what he learnt from the classroom and his social life. And that might be the main reason why he would like to seek more out-of-school exposure to the English language in order to learn more practical English. Brandon indicated that, "I think the most effective way to learn English is to immerse yourself in an English-rich environment where you can get more used to using the language…You just have to go and seek more opportunities to practise using English…You have to go and find those opportunities yourself." Brandon said that he would like to go to the United States or find a part-time job at a sports bar in Hong Kong (where most of the expatriates gathered) so as to have greater exposure to English.

When being asked how he would describe his overall English learning journey, Brandon said he had always been at the bottom of his class (in terms of his English performance) since his primary studies and he had not had any improvement in his English since then. That might be the reason why he described his learning experiences as rather "dull". Brandon also described his English learning as "a never-ending challenge", "Once you have overcome a challenge, there will be another one. You just couldn't avoid them."

4.1.2   English learning and Brandon: "Learning English through Shakespeare's works"

When I met Brandon during the first interview, he shared with me his interest in learning different foreign languages. Besides the English language, he was also interested in learning Japanese and Spanish. To Brandon, language serves as a means of communication. He contended that English would enable him to understand other cultures and allow him to access to other worldviews. However, Brandon expressed that the type of English he had been learning so far did not enable him to communicate effectively with other people. As mentioned earlier, he had learnt a lot of English vocabulary from the post-secondary English classroom and yet, he could not use it in his daily life, "I felt that I could not use that vocabulary in my everyday life. I barely saw it…I never came across those words on newspapers or any websites." Apart from learning English for practical use, Brandon was also interested in learning different English literary genres, "To me, English learning is about reading English literary texts such as Shakespeare's works or poems…I would like to learn how to write in more refined English."

Unlike the other student participants in this study, Brandon seldom talked about the importance of English in his academic development. This may be due to the fact that Brandon had been a science student and he mentioned several times that science subjects were not language-loaded like geography or history. Brandon said that he seldom needed to write his assignments in English, "We (science students) often wrote formulas or equations in our assignments."

4.1.3   Brandon's English learner identity: "I am from the science stream."

Brandon's perception of himself as an English learner is closely tied to his science stream background. Brandon had been studying in the science stream since his secondary studies. He had always perceived himself as a low English achiever because of his background.

> I studied both Physics and Mathematics here at HKC. For Physics, I still had to write my assignments in English, but not much. But for Mathematics, I did not have to write in English at all…Those who studied in the arts stream, like those who took the History course, they had more opportunities to practise their English language skills…The English level of science students was often lower than that of the arts students...The difference was particularly obvious when we were having group discussions in English with the arts students.

Brandon believed that science students could only learn English in the English classroom whereas arts students had more opportunities to learn and use English in other content subjects, most of which were language-loaded. The way how Brandon perceived himself as a low English achiever also limited his participation in English extra-curricular activities. At the beginning of the first school term, the English club at HKC was recruiting new committee members and Brandon would like to apply for one of the committee positions. However, he soon gave up on the idea as he was unsure of his English performance, "Well, my English was not that good after all…I did not think I could really help much as a committee member." Brandon's perception of himself as a "low English achiever" limited his opportunities to gain more exposure to the English language.

Brandon told me that he was very quiet in the English class during the first month of his studies at HKC. As mentioned in section 4.1.1, Brandon was a rather shy young man and it took him some time to get familiar with his peers. Very often, Brandon chose to remain silent in group discussions. Brandon later explained that his silence was due to the presence of those students with higher English proficiency. Most of those students had

studied overseas, "They (the returnee students) were very active in class. They were very different in terms of their accent and use of vocabulary. Their English was more fluent. There was a difference between us (local students) and them (returnee students)."

During his second school term at HKC, Brandon began to hold a different perception towards his English learner identity. He told me that his English was not that bad after all. Brandon felt more secure about his English performance as he noticed that there were some students who performed worse than him, "I felt less anxious about my English performance as I knew they (those less proficient students) would do worse than me. Well, their presence drove me to work harder."

Not only Brandon constructed himself as different from the arts students and the returnees, he also viewed himself as different from those with an English-stream background. When talking about his English writing skills, Brandon felt that he had limited knowledge of English sentence structure and vocabulary for him to write well. He said he could not draw much out from his "reserve". He believed that students in the English-stream had been acquiring and accumulating knowledge of the English language since their primary studies and their "reserve" was full of English resources, "They had already learnt so much in the past. Well, I did learn English in the past but then, what I had learnt was not as much as theirs."

How Brandon positioned himself in the English classroom and the way how he perceived his English proficiency largely depended on his learning peers. While studying alongside the more proficient students, Brandon described himself as a "low English achiever" and yet, he felt more assured of his English ability when he noticed there were students who performed worse than him. Brandon was constantly reconstructing his learner identity in response to whom he was grouped and compared with in the English classroom.

4.1.4   Summary

Prior to his studies at HKC, Brandon pursued his education in Chinese-medium schools. English did not play an important role in Brandon's social life and his English learning was quite limited to formal classroom settings. Brandon was not active in any English

extra-curricular activities in school. However, he would listen to English songs and watch online English television programs at home during his free time. While Brandon was pursuing his secondary education, he attended private English tutorials to prepare for the public examination.

Unlike the other student participants in the study, Brandon did not simply perceive English as one important academic subject to master well so as to get into the university or to get a better job in future. On the contrary, Brandon expressed his interest in the English language as well as other foreign languages such as Japanese and Spanish. He believed that language serves as a means of communication, which would enable him to connect with other cultures. That might help explain why Brandon was not engaged in his English learning during his secondary studies. At that time, what he had been learning were just the techniques to tackle public examination questions. Brandon felt the same way towards his current English learning at the post-secondary level as he found that he could not use the vocabulary he learnt in his everyday life.

During his first school term at HKC, Brandon perceived himself as a quiet and passive learner. He remained silent often, mainly because of his perceived inadequacy in his English proficiency. Brandon was highly aware of the differences between himself and students in the arts stream. He held the perception that it was very normal that science students have lower English proficiency than arts students. His identity as a science student might have limited his opportunities to practise using English in class. As we can see from his learning narrative, Brandon's sense of self in the English classroom was also influenced by the presence of returnee students and students from the English-stream.

4.2   Gallie, a border-crosser

"Wherever you go, you need the English language."

Gallie was a warm and friendly young woman. She was very articulate about her English learning experiences during the interviews. Gallie was the eldest child in her family. She lived with her parents and two younger brothers. Since Gallie was born, her parents had hired a Filipino helper to handle all household chores. The family spoke English when

interacting with the helper and at other times, Cantonese was used. Gallie expressed that she was accustomed to speaking English at home. The domestic helper left during the year prior to Gallie's studies at HKC. Apart from having more opportunities to speak English at home, Gallie also had the opportunity to practise her English writing outside class. Gallie had two cousins living overseas, one in Canada and the other in Australia. Gallie said that she would write letters to them regularly and all the letters were written in English.

Before studying at HKC, Gallie had been receiving her education in English-medium schools. She learnt all the subjects in English, except Chinese language and Chinese history. In Hong Kong, some of the so-called "English-medium schools" used both English and Cantonese in teaching. However, Gallie stressed that all the English-medium schools she attended adopted an English-only policy because of the linguistically and culturally diverse student population in school. Throughout her educational journey, Gallie had classmates who came from different countries such as Britain and India. Gallie recounted, "Since I was small, I had to communicate with my classmates in English. If I did not learn the language well, I could not speak to anyone." When talking to her local Hong Kong peers, Gallie code-switched between Cantonese and English.

Besides English, Gallie had also learnt French and Mandarin during her primary and secondary studies. When Gallie was in primary five and six, she learnt Mandarin as a language subject in school. Sometimes, the Chinese language teacher also used Mandarin in teaching. Gallie said that she did not speak Mandarin very well as she had only learnt it for two years. Besides Mandarin, Gallie had also been learning French in her primary school. After her primary studies, Gallie continued learning French at the Alliance Française de Hong Kong from her secondary three to five. When being asked about her proficiency in French, Gallie said she could only use very simple French in greetings as she seldom had any chances to practise using the language in Hong Kong. Gallie had been receiving English-medium education since her kindergarten studies and she explained that might be one reason why she did not perform very well in the Chinese language subject. She said her performance in Chinese was just "average". Gallie expressed that she stammered whenever she had to give an oral presentation in

Cantonese. On the contrary, she felt very confident in giving a presentation in English. Moreover, during the Chinese language lessons, Gallie sometimes used English to supplement what she wanted to say in Cantonese. Gallie indicated that, "I got a lot of satisfaction from the English lesson whereas in the Chinese language lesson, I had a sense of failure."

Gallie participated actively in the extra-curricular activities in her secondary school. All those activities were conducted in English. For example, Gallie learnt cookery and gardening once a week and she recalled that she had learnt a lot of vocabulary from those activities. Gallie also participated in the annual Hong Kong schools speech festival, organized by the Hong Kong Schools Music and Speech Association. The festival aims to raise students' interest in Western and Chinese music, speech, drama, poetry and prose. Gallie once participated in the English poem recitation section and she enjoyed all the training before the competition. In her free time, Gallie enjoyed listening to English songs and watching English television series at home. Different from the other five student participants in the study, Gallie had the experience of living in an English-speaking country.

Gallie did not complete her secondary studies in Hong Kong. She left for Australia to further her studies when she was in secondary six. Gallie had pursued her post-secondary studies in Australia for three years. Gallie commented that her extended stay overseas provided her the opportunity to live in an English-rich environment. She said her English proficiency had reached its "highest level" during that time.

4.2.1   Gallie's English learning journey: An East-West encounter

Gallie began her formal English learning at the age of three in an English-medium kindergarten. As mentioned earlier, Gallie's classmates mainly came from English-speaking countries and she had to communicate with them in English. Though Gallie believed that English-medium education helped her build a strong foundation in English, she did not have a pleasant English learning experience at the kindergarten. Gallie recalled that she had a difficult time when learning new vocabulary from the English textbooks. She once compared her English textbooks with those of her cousin, who

studied in a Chinese-medium kindergarten. She noticed the differences in the textbook content, "I was so surprised when I found that my cousin's English textbook provided the Chinese meaning for the English vocabulary in each chapter…At that time, I wondered why there was none in my textbook." Gallie also shared with me one memorable experience when learning vocabulary in the kindergarten English classroom.

> We were not allowed to write any Chinese words on our English workbook. The native English-speaking teacher did not know how to read written Chinese. Well, we could use drawings to show the meaning of the English word. We just couldn't write down the meaning in Chinese…For example, when learning the word "elephant", I drew an elephant to help me remember its meaning.

After three years of her kindergarten studies, Gallie attended an English-medium primary school. Similar to her kindergarten, Gallie's primary school also had a very diverse student population. Her classmates came from different countries including Britain, Canada, India and other Asian countries such as Japan and Korea. There were both local and native English-speaking teachers in school. Gallie enjoyed her English learning at the primary level. She said the English teachers usually began the lesson with some teaching, followed by group activities. Gallie said the English class was more interactive and she liked the way how her teacher put students in different groups for discussion. The teacher ensured that there were both local and English-speaking students in each group so that all students had to use English in discussion. Moreover, Gallie also said that her primary school was very supportive of students' English learning. She remembered her English teachers would encourage students to participate in the Hong Kong schools speech festival. There were also many English extra-curricular activities in school. Gallie felt excited when recounting her participation in those activities.

> My school organized English activities to celebrate different festivals such as Halloween and Christmas. I recalled, at Halloween, we did trick or treat. In order to get candies from our teachers, we had to recite English poems in front of them…I think my school made a lot of efforts to motivate students to learn

English, making us feel that English learning was not that difficult after all. We felt more eager to learn the language.

Once Gallie progressed to her secondary education, she began to perceive English learning differently. Gallie described her secondary English learning as "marks-oriented" and it was all about how to get higher marks in the examination.

Gallie pursued her secondary education in an English-medium school. Like all the other student participants in this study, Gallie only recalled how the teacher prepared students for the public examination.

In my secondary four and five, English learning was just about preparing yourself for the public examination. I felt the pressure from my school. There were tests two or three times a week. We had to stay after school to work on past examination papers.

The same practice continued throughout Gallie's secondary six studies. She recalled that the whole class would work together on a different English paper everyday, one day on the reading comprehension section and the other day on writing. The English class was less interactive. Gallie remembered the English teacher told the class that the oral English examination would not take place until a later time during the examination period and thus, it was more important for them to work on the other English papers first. Gallie felt the intense pressure under the examination-led learning environment. Moreover, Gallie had been absent from school for two weeks during her secondary six studies due to influenza illness. She worried about her English studies when she got back to school,

I was so nervous. I was afraid that I could not catch up with my school work…I felt hopeless and I knew it was not going to work. My classmates wondered if I would be able to catch up with the rest of class. That really scared me.

Gallie felt that the secondary six curriculum was so intensive and she began to lose interest in her studies. As a result, she left for Australia to further her studies.

During her first year in Australia, Gallie pursued a foundation program at a college. The one-year foundation program aimed to prepare students to enter the universities in Australia. English was one compulsory subject in the foundation program. Gallie recalled that she took two different English courses. The one in the first semester focused mainly on essay writing while the second one on writing literary analysis essays. Both courses were taught by Australian teachers. Gallie said that there was not much interaction in the English class. Though she had been receiving English-medium education in Hong Kong, Gallie found it difficult to adapt to the new learning environment,

> In those English courses, I had to learn to write in English academically and professionally. It was very difficult…It was like I had made a great leap. I felt that there's a gap in between…There was a great difference between what I learnt in Hong Kong and in Australia.

Gallie said that she felt much better in her second semester at the college. She began to feel more confident in her English use. The English teacher was very encouraging and gave feedback on Gallie's writings. However, Gallie still found it difficult sometimes to follow the English lesson as the Australian teachers spoke very fast. After finishing her one-year foundation program, Gallie got accepted into the arts program at one local Australian university. She stated that she had to speak English at all times on the campus. She would only speak Cantonese at home (Gallie was living with her relatives in Australia) or when she met other Hong Kong students on campus. Gallie did not complete her university studies in Australia. She decided to go back to Hong Kong as the tuition fee and living costs in Australia were very high and she did not want to create any financial burden to her family.

Gallie began her studies at HKC one month after her return from Australia. She said the English courses at HKC were similar to the ones she took in the one-year foundation program in Australia. At HKC, Gallie felt that she had to study, once again, under a "marks-oriented" education system. She said the main purpose of learning at HKC was to attain good grades in the end of term examination. During the first school term, Gallie was not used to the teaching format at HKC. Gallie felt that she was being spoon-fed with

the vocabulary from the textbook and there were just too many assignments. Gallie said, "I felt like I was studying under a spoon-fed system again…I felt tired going to school every day. There's just so much to learn…I had to slowly adapt myself to the learning format here at HKC."

When I met Gallie at the end of her first academic year, she commented that the English courses at HKC were just like a revision on what she already learnt in Australia and Gallie did not think she had any improvement in her English skills. She even said that her English proficiency had been declining since she got back from Australia. Gallie expressed that she would like to maintain her English standard as when she was in Australia, "I do not want to waste the time that I had spent in Australia. I had improved a lot in my English during those three years." Gallie had set a goal for her English learning at HKC for the following year. She said she would like to participate in some exchange programs to overseas so that she could really immerse herself in an English-speaking environment, which she believed, would greatly help improve her English skills.

Looking back at her English learning journey, Gallie thought that her three years' studies in Australia exerted a great impact on her English learning, "It helps if you are able to go on exchange. When you go overseas, you will definitely improve your English skills…It's like taking a big jump. You will feel that you can speak more like a native English speaker."

4.2.2 English learning and Gallie: "It was part of my life."

At a very young age, Gallie already recognized the need to learn English well so as to communicate with her learning peers at kindergarten and primary school. Having been surrounded by her English-speaking peers at kindergarten, Gallie realized the importance of English in her school life, "I got used to speaking English in school…I had to communicate with my classmates in English." At that time, Gallie was not interested in learning the language. It was simply one academic subject in the curriculum and a tool for her to communicate with her peers. It was not until her primary studies that she had developed her interest in English learning. Gallie explained that all the English extra-curricular activities at school stimulated her interest in the language. Gallie indicated that

she did not encounter major difficulties when learning the English language at the primary level and English had become part of her school life. However, Gallie's perception towards the English language began to change when she progressed to her secondary education. She attached different meanings to her English learning.

Like the other student participants in this study, Gallie recalled her secondary English class was full of past examination paper drills. Gallie equated her English learning with getting good grades in the public examination. Being a student in the arts stream, Gallie stressed the importance of English in her studies, "I needed English to cope with my studies (studying other content subjects in English)." English had become a tool for Gallie to get better results in other content subjects. She felt the same way during her studies in Australia. When Gallie was in Australia, she was acutely aware of the importance of English in both her school and personal life. Not only she needed to learn everything through the English language, Gallie also needed the language to survive in her social life.

> English was extremely important…I wondered what would happen if I did not speak the language? I really hated this language at that time…I was so weary…While in Hong Kong, I was willing to speak in English. I liked the language. It was not like I could not live without it. But in Australia, I couldn't live without the language. I had to force myself to learn it well.

Upon her arrival in Australia, Gallie developed resistance to the English language. She felt her inadequacy in using English in both formal academic and social settings. Gallie recalled one example of her inability to use the language in her everyday life.

> I wanted to buy bus tickets from the bus station…That person (the ticket vendor) spoke really fast. I had to ask him several times how much I had to pay for the tickets. I was so embarrassed as there were people waiting behind me. I did not like the language. I wanted to stop learning it but I couldn't. I just couldn't afford to fail in my English subject.

Having received English-medium education since her kindergarten studies, Gallie had always perceived English as part of her school life. Gallie felt that it was "natural" using the English language both in and outside the classroom. However, when Gallie was in Australia, the feeling of herself as a "foreign language learner" was so intense. The English language was never so "distant" from her, "English was completely a new language to me. I felt like I knew nothing about English. I did not know how to speak it…or write in English. It was like I did not know the language at all." It was not until the second school term that Gallie felt more at ease in the learning environment in Australia and she slowly began to develop her confidence in using the language. Moreover, Gallie also made attempts to seek more opportunities to improve her English outside school. She made efforts to expand her social circle, "I would go out with my friends after school and I talked to them in English." Over time, the English language had slowly become part of Gallie's social life. However, she did not feel the same way upon her re-entry to Hong Kong.

At the beginning of her studies at HKC, Gallie was discontented about her English learning. Gallie found that the students at HKC aimed at attaining good results in the examination. Under such competitive learning environment, Gallie once again perceived English as simply one academic subject she needed to master well so as to understand other content subjects, "The English language helped me understand other subjects better and that was very important. In Hong Kong, more and more academic subjects were taught in English. If you are proficient in English, you will find it easier to study different subjects." Moreover, Gallie also claimed that, "Here (in Hong Kong), you do not need to use English in your everyday life. To me, English has become just another school subject." Apart from the fact that English would help with her academic studies, Gallie also realized the importance of English in her career development.

> Recently, I attended an interview for a part-time job and I found that being proficient in English would be an advantage…Yes, I would like to polish up my English skills as I know I am going to need it for my future job. English learning is no longer an interest. I am not eager to learn it. It has become just a tool.

While studying at HKC, Gallie also became aware of the differences between Hong Kong and Australian English. Gallie constantly compared her English performance at HKC with that in Australia. Gallie indicated that she could speak fluent English back then. And now in Hong Kong, her spoken English had become "rusty". Gallie talked about how her classmates at HKC spoke "Hong Kong English" with lots of Chinese sentence final particles added at the end of an English sentence. Gallie said that she had become more aware of her own pronunciation because of the "Hong Kong English" she heard in class. While talking to her local Hong Kong peers, Gallie said that sometimes she would also speak "Hong Kong English". She told me that she would listen to more English songs and watch more English television programs so that she could, in her words, "get the accurate pronunciation". The English songs and television programs would help her recall the way she spoke English in Australia.

During the last interview, Gallie talked about the type of English she would like to learn in future. Like Brandon, Gallie said that she had learnt quite a lot of vocabulary from the English class at HKC and yet, she could hardly use them in her social life. She couldn't see the connection between the course content and her everyday life.

4.2.3   Gallie's English learner identity: Both an insider and outsider

Since her primary studies, Gallie constructed herself as different from students who studied in Chinese-medium schools. She talked about her experience when studying alongside the Chinese-stream students in the primary English classroom, "I noticed that some students were very quiet in my English class. Those students probably came from Chinese-medium kindergartens. I think they might find it hard to study in an English-only learning environment." Moreover, Gallie also compared herself with those students who studied in the science stream.

Gallie pursued her secondary education in the arts stream. She held the perception that arts students generally had higher English proficiency than science students. To prepare students for the oral English paper in the public examination, Gallie's secondary school organized group discussion practice for all the students. In each group, there were

students from both the arts and science streams. Gallie said that arts students often performed better than science students during these group discussion practices,

> While we (both arts and science students) were having group discussions, I found that some science students could not express their ideas clearly in English. Sometimes, they just stopped in the middle of the discussion as they could not think of the right word to use in English. They just remained silent.

Gallie was also aware of the difference between arts and science students in terms of English writing skills. She believed that arts students wrote better in English whereas science students seldom needed to write their assignments in English. Their subjects were less language-loaded. Such perception comes in line with Brandon's views towards the difference between arts and science students in terms of English learning.

Throughout her English learning journey, Gallie always perceived herself as one competent English learner. However, such perception began to change when she studied in Australia. Gallie believed that her English proficiency was less than satisfactory,

> I felt that the whole English class performed better than me. My English was the worst in class...All the other students performed better than me…They wrote really well, especially those students from Singapore. They were really good at the English language. I found it very difficult to catch up with the others.

Gallie described herself as a rather "passive" English learner back then. She seldom asked questions in class. Gallie explained that the English teacher in the first school term was not supportive and she felt intimidated by the teacher's unfriendly attitude. Gallie thought that her English was not good enough and she would rather remain silent in the classroom. Though Gallie did not enjoy her English class, she knew that she could not give up on the language as she needed it for her academic studies. Gallie therefore made efforts in seeking out-of-school English learning opportunities. For example, she would browse through English thesaurus websites so as to learn more new vocabulary for her English writing.

While studying in Hong Kong, Gallie never perceived her learning peers as competitors even though all students had to compete for the limited space at the university. Rather, she perceived them as "learning partners", with whom she was working together to improve her English skills. However, when Gallie was in Australia, she noticed the keen competition among students as all students would like to get into the university the following year. Gallie said that each student was working individually though occasionally they would help each other out, "The learning environment was very competitive. Some of my classmates helped me with my homework. However, they were just willing to help me on one part only and then, I had to work on the remaining parts on my own."

Though Gallie had developed her confidence in using English over time, she felt that she was very different from the local Australian students,

> I would like to improve my English so as to immerse myself into the local culture. However, I later realized that, no matter how hard I tried, there would always be a distance between me and the locals. Yes, there was a difference.

Gallie shared with me one example how she was different from the locals,

> The local students would sometimes use slang in their conversation. I did not understand what they were saying. I felt there was a distance between me and them. I was just an international student there. It required something other than just my English knowledge when talking to them…I was an outsider. I was not part of their group.

Gallie found it difficult to get access to the locals' social network. After spending three years in Australia, Gallie went back to Hong Kong to continue her post-secondary studies.

Upon her re-entry, Gallie perceived herself different from the other local Hong Kong students. Having stayed in Australia for three years, Gallie perceived herself as having higher English proficiency than her peers. As Gallie had already learnt about academic English in Australia, she did not encounter any difficulties in the English courses at HKC.

Gallie said that when compared with her English learning in Australia, she became less motivated in the Hong Kong English classroom, "I was not motivated to make any efforts in my English learning…Though I might not be the very top student in the English class, I knew that there would always be someone who would do worse than me. I did not worry much about my English learning here at HKC."

Though Gallie had been receiving education in Hong Kong before going to Australia, Gallie felt like an "outsider" when studying alongside her local peers at HKC. She constructed herself as different from the other Hong Kong students. Gallie mentioned that her group mates would usually use Cantonese in group discussions. Though Gallie would like to use English as much as possible, she could not do so, "You could not speak to them (her group mates) using all English. I was just afraid that they would not understand." Gallie claimed that her English was better than the others',

> With regard to the English language, I do think that my English was better than the others'. Once you had the experience of living in an English-speaking country…you would have a comparative advantage over the others, in terms of English language skills.

It is interesting to note that although Gallie insisted on speaking English in group discussions, she sometimes chose to speak Cantonese to her group mates. She told me that she did not want to be seen as an outsider of the group. In addition, Gallie also said that she usually took up the leader's role in her group. She was often the designated speaker, who presented the group's ideas to the rest of the class after each discussion. Gallie stated that, sometimes, she would intentionally remain silent in the group so as to let her peers speak English more.

4.2.4   Summary

Unlike the other student participants in this study, Gallie had greater exposure to the English language since she was small. Starting from her kindergarten studies, Gallie had been studying in English-medium schools. Moreover, she also had the experience of staying in an English-speaking country for an extended period of time. Prior to her post-

secondary studies in Australia, Gallie perceived herself as proficient in the English language. She thought that the English proficiency of English-medium students was generally higher than that of Chinese-medium students. Apart from learning English in formal academic settings, Gallie was invested in out-of-school English learning on a personal level. She took part in a range of English extra-curricular activities such as the Hong Kong schools speech festival. Though Gallie indicated her interest in learning the English language, she was also aware of the instrumental functions (Gardner, 1985) of the English language. In kindergarten, Gallie perceived English as a tool for her to communicate with her peers. And in her secondary school, Gallie recognized the fact that in order to attain good results in her content subjects, she had to first perform well in her English language.

The instrumental functions of English had become even more acute when Gallie was in Australia. Gallie wanted to become part of the local students and in order to do so, she had to first improve her English skills. The English language was the gateway to the local social network (e.g., Norton, 2000a). Gallie's desire to become part of the local group seemed to have motivated her to invest more in English learning. However, no matter how hard she tried, Gallie remained as an "outsider". During her stay in Australia, Gallie felt that English had become part of her life. However, she did not feel in the same way after she went back to Hong Kong.

Back in Hong Kong, Gallie experienced re-entry shock (e.g., Citron, 1996; Jackson, 2008, Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). She had to cope with the differences between the teaching format in Australia and that in Hong Kong. Gallie perceived herself as different from the other local Hong Kong students and it took her some time to adapt to the learning environment at HKC. At HKC, Gallie experienced an identity struggle while thinking of which language to use in the English classroom, "It was very natural for us to discuss in English while studying in Australia…Hong Kong students (in HKC) found it strange to speak in English." Most of the time, Gallie insisted on using English and yet, her wish to affiliate with her local Hong Kong peers drove her to use Cantonese instead. She did not want to be the "outsider", being isolated by her Hong Kong peers. Her multiple identities (a Hong Kong student while at the same time a returnee student)

shaped and informed her language use in the classroom. Moreover, her returnee identity also led her to invest more in out-of-school English learning opportunities in Hong Kong. Gallie found that her English speaking skills were not as good as before and she was trying to think of some ways to polish up her skills, "I had been very busy and I had not talked to my English-speaking friends (from secondary school) for quite a while. I think I have to contact them after my examination. I would also listen to English songs more (to polish my English skills)." Her investment in English learning had deepened upon her re-entry as she would like to keep her English proficiency up. Gallie's story lends support to Norton's (2000a) claim that identity is "multiple and contradictory" and "a site of struggle" (p. 127). And Gallie's constantly changing identities have influenced her investment in English learning.

4.3   Jack, a responsible and hardworking boy scout

> "I feel better learning English at the post-secondary level as we learn it as a means of communication rather than learning it as a subject to master in order to pass the public examination and enter university."

Jack was a communicative and outspoken young man. During the interviews, Jack provided a detailed account of his English learning journey. And at times, he would criticize the present education system and talked about how it had limited his English learning opportunities. Jack was the eldest child in his family and he lived with his parents and one younger sister. Jack's family spoke Cantonese at home. He recalled that the only time his mother spoke English at home was teaching him English letters using an ABC chart when he was little. Jack also said that his family seldom watched English television programmes. Jack had never visited any English-speaking countries. His English learning mostly took place in formal academic settings. Besides English, Jack had also learnt Mandarin as a language subject in school since his primary studies.

Jack was a member of the boy scouts. He devoted most of his free time to organize activities for younger scout members. During the interviews, Jack felt excited talking about his participation in scouts' activities and he often said that he could apply the skills learnt from scout activities to his English learning. For example, in one oral presentation

assignment, Jack's English lecturer described his performance as "well prepared" and "confident". Jack said that, "I learnt much about presentation skills from scout activities and I had developed my confidence in public speaking through those activities."

During the time of this study, Jack was pursuing the physical science programme at HKC. He expressed his wish to work in the medical field after graduation. Jack recognized the importance of English in his career development. He once said, "A lot of the references in the medical field are in English. Moreover, there are many medical terms in the field…Sometimes, I just got stuck on one English word and that really affected my learning."

When I met Jack in the last interview, he mentioned about his wish to learn more about everyday English instead of just academic English. Similar to Brandon and Gallie, he could not see the connection between what he learnt from school and his social life.

> I am able to write academic or laboratory reports in English. But if you are talking about English for everyday use such as having conversational exchanges, I don't think I am able to do that. I don't think I can learn everyday English from the English courses here (at HKC).

4.3.1   Jack's English learning journey: Learning little by little along the way

Jack received his education in Chinese-medium schools prior to his studies at HKC. He began his English learning at the age of three at a Chinese-medium kindergarten. All the English teachers were local Hong Kong teachers. Jack did not talk much about his kindergarten English learning. He only remembered English was taught through songs and games,

> It was an enjoyable English learning experience back then... I didn't have to worry about making any grammatical or spelling mistakes in my school work. I did not have any resistance to the English language. I did not have any frustration at all.

After his graduation from the kindergarten, Jack attended a Chinese-medium primary school.

During his primary education, Jack learnt English as a language subject and he was taught by local English teachers. Jack claimed that his primary English learning was only about "rote memorization", "I felt that I was being forced to memorize the spelling of all the words from the English textbook…To prepare for the English examination, I had to also memorize all the answers in the class exercise." Jack did not enjoy his English learning at the primary level, "I do not think rote memorization is a proper way to learn English and there were not many opportunities for me to speak English in the classroom." Whenever Jack tried to speak English to his classmates, he would be told to switch back to Cantonese. Jack felt frustrated and he believed that only English should be used in the English lesson. Jack indicated that the lack of an English-rich learning environment in his primary school was one main cause of his weak English foundation, which later affected his English learning at the secondary level.

Jack was not interested in English learning at the primary level as the teachers adopted a traditional teacher-centered approach, with the teachers standing in front of the class and teaching them grammar and vocabulary according to the textbooks. After he graduated from primary school, Jack attended a summer English course at the British Council. That was Jack's first out-of-school English learning activity and yet, he did not have a pleasant learning experience. Jack shared with me one memorable event from the summer course.

> I remembered that the instructor was a native English speaker. I did not understand a single word that the instructor said. He once asked the class to queue up, alphabetically, according to the first letter of our first name. I did not understand his instruction. I just followed my friend and stood next to him. I did not stand in the correct place and the teacher later pulled me out from the queue. I still remembered the incident…Since then, I had developed strong resistance to that English summer course…I felt like I had done something wrong and that incident really embarrassed me.

Jack did not think the summer course helped improve his English skills. After that summer, Jack began his secondary studies in a Chinese-medium school.

Jack had a difficult time with English during the transition from his primary to secondary education. He often received a low mark in the English examination. He found that he could no longer rely on rote learning in the secondary English classroom. He would like to improve his English and yet, he did not know how. Moreover, Jack also felt the pressure when studying alongside his peers. He indicated that there were some English proficient students in his class, "I gave up when I compared my English with theirs'. The difference in our English level was just too big." Moreover, Jack felt like a failure when he was working on his English exercises.

> I got only two out of ten answers correct. The feeling of failure was intense and I was reluctant to continue working on those English exercises. Yes, the teacher went through the answers with us and yet, I did not understand the teacher's explanations. At the end, I gave up and I just put my English learning aside.

Jack would rather put more effort on other subjects such as Mathematics. It was not until his secondary three that Jack felt a little bit better in his English learning.

When Jack was in secondary three, his English class was divided into two small groups based on students' English proficiency. There were about 10 students in each group. Jack was put in the remedial group. During that year, Jack was taught by a native English-speaking teacher. While recounting his learning experiences in the remedial class, Jack felt excited and said, "I did not feel that I was left behind. I felt better and less like a failure." The native English-speaking teacher provided students with more opportunities to use the English language instead of just asking students to work on the English exercises. There was more interaction in class. Jack believed that the remedial class exerted a positive impact on his English learning, "I no longer felt scared when seeing a native English speaker…I did not feel scared when speaking the language". However, such a positive impact did not linger through Jack's senior secondary studies. When Jack progressed to secondary four, he began to develop his resistance to English learning again.

From secondary four onwards, there were a lot of examination drills in the English classroom. Once again, Jack developed an intense feeling of failure, "I did not get many answers right in those examination practices…I just wanted to give up. I just wished to get a pass in the public examination, well with a bit of luck." Like all the other student participants in this study, Jack attended English tutorials after school in order to better prepare himself for the public examination. Though some student participants indicated that these English tutorials focused mainly on examination techniques, Jack thought that the tutorials were very useful and he believed that he had learnt a lot about English grammar and sentence structure. Jack did not receive satisfactory results in his public examination and he decided to retake it. Thus, he attended an evening school to prepare for the examination. Jack did not think the English class at the evening school really helped improve his English skills as the English teacher turnover rate was high, "Each teacher only taught for several months…and they did not teach us the techniques to tackle the public English examination papers." Jack retook the public examination two years after and he began his post-secondary studies at HKC in September 2011.

Prior to his studies at HKC, Jack worried about his English learning as he did not know what the teaching format would be like and he heard that most of the students at HKC were highly proficient in English. His worries soon disappeared. When he studied at HKC, Jack felt more at ease when he discovered that his English class was a mixed-level class. He also enjoyed the interactive learning environment at HKC. Jack's English lecturer required all students to use English in the classroom. To Jack, such English-only teaching policy was conducive to his English learning. However, when I met Jack again during the second semester, he told me that he lost interest in learning the English language.

Jack did not enjoy his English learning during the second semester as the English class was very much teacher-centered.

> Ms. Chan (pseudonym) just read from the PowerPoint slides. We just sat there and listened to her…The class was less interactive…Even if there's group discussion, we were not very clear about what to talk about. We did not sit in

circles when having discussions. We just talked to the one who sat beside us. The seating arrangement did not provide a conducive environment for group discussion…And we used Cantonese in our discussion.

Jack became less motivated to speak English in class and he believed that he had to seek more out-of-school English learning opportunities, "I had to turn to my friend, Billy (pseudonym), for help", Jack said. Jack met Billy in a Boy Scout activity. Billy taught computer programming at a post-secondary institution in Hong Kong. Jack took the initiative to write English essays regularly and asked Billy to help correct the essays. Jack found Billy's feedback to his writings very helpful and greatly helped improve his writing skills.

When we met again in the last interview, Jack had already completed his first academic year at HKC. Jack stressed that he would like to learn more about English for everyday use, "I had no problem writing academic reports. But if you are talking about having conversations with native English speakers…[or] writing letters and emails in English, I don't think the English class at HKC can teach me that." Jack wanted to learn, in his words, "more practical English".

4.3.2   English learning and Jack: "Is it a bridge or a barrier?"

During the interviews, Jack mentioned several times about his limited English proficiency, "I did not have a strong English language background". And he claimed that it was because his primary and secondary English classroom did not encourage the use of English in class. Jack always perceived the lack of an English-rich learning environment as the biggest barrier to his English learning. During his secondary studies, Jack was very concerned about his performance in English as he wanted to get into the medical program at the university, which had a higher English proficiency requirement. He perceived English as an important key to one's academic success.

Some students did very well in their content subjects in the public examination…But sadly, they did not get a good grade in their English and they couldn't get into the university. English is a means of communication, well, like a

bridge that connects one to other cultures. It should help facilitate our learning of other subject areas. But then, I felt that it was more like a barrier, stopping students from acquiring knowledge in other fields. I was a bit confused.

Similar to Brandon and Gallie, Jack perceived secondary English learning as learning about examination techniques. Jack was not interested in the language itself. He simply perceived English as one pragmatic tool, which helped him gain access to higher education or better career.

When I met Jack after the first school term, Jack expressed that he enjoyed English learning more at the post-secondary level as he no longer needed to worry about the public examination. Jack seemed to have developed a different perception towards the English language. He acknowledged the importance of English in helping him achieve his career goal -- to work in the medical field. And yet, he added that "here at HKC, I felt that I was learning English as a means of communication. It was more than just a compulsory subject which I had to take in order to sit for the public examination". Moreover, Jack mentioned about his wish to use English outside the academic settings.

English is an international language. We have to be proficient in this language. I would like to use the language at ease in my daily life…When you meet someone from other countries, you will talk to them in English… It (English) is a medium through which I could communicate with others. Being a scout leader, I sometimes have to go overseas for international scout events. English is essential for me to talk to others.

Moreover, Jack also described English as a bridge that connects him to people from other cultures, "I have to build a stronger bridge so as to communicate with other people…And at present, I am still trying to figure out how to make this bridge stronger."

4.3.3   Jack's English learner identity: "I am different from the English-stream students."

Because of his Chinese-stream background, Jack often perceived his English proficiency as "below average" in the post-secondary English classroom. He positioned himself as an

English learner with limited English proficiency. During the interviews, he talked about the differences between students with Chinese- and English-stream background.

> I have a friend who graduated from an English-medium school. One time, I saw him writing a press release in English for a school event. He wrote clearly and fluently, without any difficulties at all. I wondered "why there was such difference between my writing skills and his?

Jack believed that students from the English-stream had greater exposure to the English language and they had already built a strong foundation in English since secondary one. Thus, they could focus more on other content subjects while preparing for the public examination. This explained why English-stream students tended to perform well, not only in their English language, but also in other subjects. Jack claimed that, "For us (Chinese-stream students), not only we had to work hard on the content subjects, we also needed to work on our English language too. Most of us just aimed at getting a pass in the English papers." Jack also claimed that the first three years of secondary education were the most critical to one's English learning. Jack believed that those three crucial years contributed to the differences in English proficiency between Chinese- and English-stream students.

Though Jack described his overall English performance as "below average" in class, he contended that he had better reading skills among the various aspects of English because of all the examination drills in the secondary school. However, when Jack progressed to the post-secondary English classroom, he began to question his reader identity. He explained that he encountered difficulties when reading literary texts like a novel.

> I got myself an English novel. When I started reading the first few pages, I found that I did not understand most of the words as well as some of the sentence structures. At that moment, I began to question my reader identity. I understood many English texts in examination papers. But when I was reading literary works like a novel, I encountered difficulties in understanding its content…I wondered if I was just a reader in a particular area (the academic setting). It was meaningless if I could just understand academic texts.

Along his English learning journey, Jack developed a "love-hate relationship" with his learning peers. Under a heavily examination-oriented education system, Jack perceived himself competing against his learning peers. However, there were also times when he described his peers as learning partners. For example, he considered working as a group was one effective way to learn English better. He believed that he could learn much from his group mates. He told me that he felt helpless when being asked to write an English essay on his own. He did not know whom he could turn to for advice. While working with his classmates on an English research project, Jack felt more at ease, "I no longer had to work alone on my English assignment."

4.3.4   Summary

Jack had been living in a Cantonese-only community and the English language did not play a role in his social life. Jack's use of English was limited to formal academic settings. He strongly believed that the lack of an English-rich learning environment at his primary and secondary level had set him apart from his English-stream counterparts. Jack did not enjoy his primary English learning as it was grammar-oriented. He only recalled that there was a lot of copying from the English textbooks. Jack's English learning experience at the secondary level was also an unpleasant one because of all the examination drills in school. Having noticed that the English lessons at school would not help him improve his English skills, Jack was invested in seeking out-of-school English learning opportunities. For example, he also took the initiative to write English essays regularly and asked his friends to correct them. Jack was aware of the institutional constraints (an English curriculum that focused on examination drills), which might have limited his English learning and so, he was active in seeking alternatives. Jack's action lends support to Little's (2000) notion of "learner autonomy" which states that "learners take their first steps towards autonomy when they begin to accept responsibility for their own learning" (p. 24).

Throughout his English learning journey, Jack's perception of the English language was closely tied to the pragmatic functions of English. He noticed the importance of English in his academic and career development. English had always been the "linguistic capital" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991) to Jack. It was only when Jack progressed to the post-secondary

English classroom that he described English as "a means of communication" and a "bridge" that would connect him to other worldviews. It appears that the more interactive post-secondary English classroom had shaped Jack's perception towards his English learning. English was no longer only a means that enabled him to get access to higher education and secured him a better career path. English would also help connect Jack to the outside world.

4.4   Lindsay, an English Lover

> "Learning English is like visiting an amusement park. It is fun and I enjoy every minute of it."

Lindsay was a lively and cheerful nineteen-year old young woman who always wore a smile on her face. During the interviews, Lindsay felt excited about sharing her English learning experiences, showing her enthusiasm in learning the language. Lindsay also learnt Mandarin as a language subject in school and yet, she indicated that she did not speak it well. Lindsay was the only child in her family. At home, she spoke Cantonese to her parents. Lindsay expressed that her parents were very supportive of her English learning.

> Yes, we [Hong Kong students] have formal English learning at school and yet, I think family also plays an important role in our English learning. Like my parents, they stimulated my interests in learning English. We always watched English movies and television programs together. Some people may choose to watch the Cantonese dubbed version of English television programs. As for us, we always watched the original version and I think that helped polish up my English skills.

Apart from watching English television programs together, Lindsay also had the opportunity to travel to English-speaking countries twice with her family. She remembered her first trip was going to Brisbane. She did not recall anything from the trip as she was very little. Lindsay had her second overseas trip during the summer in 2011. She went with her parents to Melbourne for a week. Lindsay enjoyed the trip and expressed that she did not find any difficulties talking to the native English speakers

there. After the trip, Lindsay was determined to further improve her English, especially her oral English.

Lindsay did not participate in any English extra-curricular activities in her primary and secondary school. Like Brandon, Gallie and Jack, Lindsay attended after-school English tutorials when she was in secondary four and five in order to better prepare herself for the public examination. She commented that those English tutorials mainly focused on equipping students with examination techniques. In her free time, Lindsay worked as a private English tutor for a primary school student. She indicated that such teaching experience provided her the opportunity to constantly revise her English grammar.

Lindsay had been very interested in language studies and she expressed her wish to further her studies in the English language upon graduation from HKC.

4.4.1 Lindsay's English learning journey: Loving the English language

Different from the other student participants in this study, Lindsay recalled her English learning began at the age of five at primary school. When Lindsay was small, she was put in a day care centre. She recalled that there was no English learning at the centre. Lindsay then attended a Chinese-medium primary school. There were both local and native English-speaking teachers. She remembered the English class taught by the local teachers was mostly bilingual. For example, when teaching English grammar, the teacher spoke in Cantonese to explain difficult grammatical concepts. As for the class taught by the native English-speaking teacher, it focused more on English speaking skills.

> With regard to the teaching format, the native English-speaking teachers were very different from the local ones. In those local teachers' English classes, we just sat there and listened to the teachers. And then we would do exercises together. However, the native English-speaking teachers liked to play games with us.

Upon graduation from her primary school, Lindsay attended an English-medium secondary school. Though the school claimed itself adopting English as the language of instruction, Lindsay said that the teachers sometimes used Cantonese to supplement their

teaching. The English lessons from secondary one to three were very much teacher-centered and it was not until secondary four that there was group discussion as students had to start preparing for the oral English section in the public examination. However, during the group discussions, students, including Lindsay, would only speak in English when the teacher was around. At the end of her secondary five studies, Lindsay sat the public examination.

Lindsay received a C grade (considered as a pass with credit) in her English language subject in the public examination. However, she did not receive satisfactory results in other content subjects. Lindsay decided to self-study (without formal schooling) for a year and retake the public examination in the following year. Lindsay's parents were very supportive of her decision. She received better results the second time she took the examination. For English language, she received a B grade. Lindsay then began her studies at HKC in September, 2010. Lindsay did not worry much about her English learning at HKC. However, she did express that she needed time to adjust herself to the interactive post-secondary English classroom at HKC. She recalled her English lecturer once said, "You are not taking an examination now. Don't just sit there and remain silent".

Lindsay seized every opportunity to speak English during group discussions in the post-secondary English classroom. During my class observation, I could see that Lindsay took the lead in class activities and motivated her group mates to speak English more. However, when I met her again in the second semester, Lindsay expressed that her use of English in discussion became less. She explained that the discussion topics were more academic and most of the time, her group needed to use Cantonese to clarify some important concepts. Moreover, similar to Jack, Lindsay believed that working as a group helped with her English learning. "Not just about English learning," she said, "it's also about learning from others' ideas…Each of us learnt different things from the English class. When we were working together on the English project, we could share with each other what we have learnt from the lesson."

When I first met Lindsay, she already had finished her first year at HKC. Lindsay felt that her English had improved a lot.

> I had built a sound foundation in English grammar and I learnt more vocabulary, which really helped with my English writing. I also felt more confident when speaking English in public. In the past, I used to feel scared when being asked to speak English in front of the class…I think my writing skills had also improved. When writing English essays, I used to write down whatever came to my mind. But now, I will think over the essay topic and think about how I should organize my ideas.

When I met Lindsay at the end of her second academic year at HKC, Lindsay talked about her expectations from the English class at HKC. Different from Brandon, Gallie and Jack who wanted to learn more practical English, Lindsay expressed her wish to learn more about academic English, especially how to write academic English.

4.4.2　English learning and Lindsay: "English is my favourite subject."

During the interviews, Lindsay often expressed her enthusiasm for the English language. Apart from learning the language in formal academic settings, Lindsay made a concerted effort to seek greater exposure to the language. While watching English television programs at home, Lindsay would sometimes jot down the new vocabulary she learnt from the programs. She also enjoyed listening to English songs, "I enjoyed listening to the songs played in the English television programs. I would search those songs online and as I was listening to them, I would read the lyrics too."

Lindsay claimed that her English learning was mainly driven by her interest in the language. She said,

> Everyone knows how to speak English. For sure, being proficient in the language helps…it's important to meet the English proficiency requirement for university admission and yet, that's not the main reason why I learn English. I learn the language because I am really interested in the language itself.

She said that the English language had always been her "favourite subject" in school, "When you enjoyed the lesson, you could follow the lesson easily. Everything seemed easier to understand and you did not really need to prepare much for the examination." Lindsay also mentioned that she got much satisfaction from her English class as she did really well in it.

Though Lindsay stressed that she had a great interest in the English language, she also mentioned about the instrumental functions of English and its impact on her academic career.

> I really enjoy learning English and I love attending all the English lessons. I think English really helps me understand other subjects... When I was reading the Psychology textbook, I could scan through the chapters very quickly as I recognized most of the vocabulary that I learnt from the English lesson. It's very effective.

Lindsay also mentioned that English could enhance her intercultural communication, helping her understand people from other cultures. During the time of study, Lindsay had applied for a volunteer English teaching summer program to Cambodia. She described the importance of English in the trip, "You need English for this trip…English helps me communicate with people from other cultures."

Lindsay had high expectations for herself. She had received an A grade in English in the previous school term at HKC. She expressed that she would like to invest more in her English learning in order to get an A+ in the second semester. She explained that students who received an A+ in English could get the principal's recommendation letter which would help with her academic and career development.

4.4.3   Lindsay's English learner identity: Both a passive and active English learner

Lindsay described herself as a "passive English learner" before studying at HKC. She did not enjoy her English learning in her primary (mostly grammar-oriented) and secondary (full of examination drills) school. It was only until secondary four and five that Lindsay

had more opportunities to practise speaking English. While studying at HKC, Lindsay was determined to take up a more active role in her English learning and she explained, "I did not do well in the public examination. I had made up my mind and decided to work harder since then."

With regard to her English skills, Lindsay perceived herself as a competent English speaker. She was more assured of her English speaking skills than writing skills. Though Lindsay was confident in her oral English, she mentioned that she would feel a bit anxious when speaking English alongside students with study abroad experiences, "Students who had studied abroad could speak more fluent English…They have better accent and good grammar…I felt a bit anxious if I were to speak English in front of them."

When I met Lindsay during the second semester, Lindsay told me that she had become less active in her English learning. She explained to me that she did not have many opportunities to discuss the English project with her peers because of the different timetable of her group mates. Moreover, the group discussions were conducted in Cantonese as her group mates found it easier to discuss some difficult concepts in Cantonese.

Looking back at her English learning experiences, Lindsay described herself as both an active and passive English learner. She explained that she was a passive learner because she had been learning English within a prescribed English curriculum. However, she was an active learner on a personal level. She would make efforts to gain greater exposure to the language outside the classroom. For example, she would read English newspapers and sometimes, she would jot down the unknown words and look them up in the dictionary.

Lindsay did not perceive her learning peers as competitors. She believed that it was meaningless to compare her own academic performance with others', "There would always be someone who performed better or worse than me. It was more important to think of some effective ways to improve my English skills."

4.4.4   Summary

Similar to Jack, Lindsay described herself as a passive English learner under the examination-led English curriculum. Because of her unsatisfactory performance in the public examination, Lindsay was determined to take a more active role in her studies including her English learning at HKC. She seemed to have become a responsible learner who realized her "own efforts are crucial to progress in learning, and behave[d] accordingly" (Scharle & Szabó, 2000, p. 3). She made attempts to seek out-of-class activities to polish up her English skills (e.g., she searched online for her favourite English songs and she would read the English lyrics while listening to the songs). Lindsay also watched English television programs with her family. Lindsay commented that all these out-of-class activities helped polish up her English speaking and listening skills. Lindsay was able to receive an A grade in her end of term English examination at HKC. Lindsay's story lends support to Little's (2003) and McCarthy's (1998) claim that learner's involvement in planning their own learning will enhance learners' motivation in and awareness of their learning.

During the interviews, Lindsay positioned herself as a more competent English learner when compared with her peers in the post-secondary English classroom, especially with regard to her English speaking skills. And she rated her English speaking skills as "fluent". However, she would question her speaker identity if she had to speak English in front of those students who had studied abroad or were of mixed parentage. Lindsay perceived them as "native English-speakers" and they were the "legitimate speakers of English", with good accent and proper grammar. Lindsay also mentioned that these students tended to form a group of their own during class discussions. Lindsay perceived herself as different from these students. This lend supports to Norton and Toohey's (2004) claim that, "language is not simply a means of expression or communication; rather, it is a practice that constructs, and is constructed by, the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future" (p. 1). The presence of these "native English-speaking students" had influenced Lindsay's perception of herself as an English learner as well as her level of confidence in using the language.

While Lindsay had stressed that her English learning was mainly driven by her interest in the language, she still considered the instrumental functions of English and believed that it would help with her academic career. Lindsay strove hard to get an A+ in her English language so as to get a recommendation letter from the principal at HKC, which in turn, would help her get into the university. She also mentioned other advantages of being proficient in English such as having a higher chance to be selected for the volunteer English teaching summer program to Cambodia. It was evident that Lindsay was aware of the "linguistic capital" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991) of English.

4.5   Maggie, a competitor

> "We (Hong Kong citizens) cannot live without Chinese and English in Hong Kong as we need to use them to communicate with others. We have to learn them well."

Maggie was a driven and determined young woman. She was the third child in her family. Maggie had one elder brother and sister and one younger brother. At home, the whole family spoke Cantonese. Maggie recalled that the only time that she spoke English at home was when her elder sister helped her do revision during her primary studies. Maggie did not participate in any English extra-curricular activities during her primary and secondary education. Her English learning was very much limited to formal classroom settings. At school, Maggie also learnt Mandarin as a language subject. When Maggie was in secondary three, she took an eight-day trip to the United States (U.S.).

Maggie was excited when she talked about her trip to the U.S. She told me that she participated in an international competition when she was at secondary three. The competition aimed to enhance students' problem-solving skills by providing them different types of tasks to finish within a designated period of time. Maggie was selected by her school to participate in the competition and she was qualified to enter the final, which was held at one university in Massachusetts. During the trip, Maggie met students from all over the world and she lived with all the other finalists on the university campus. Maggie described her trip to the States as one memorable English learning experience. She recalled that there were abundant opportunities for her to actually use the language in

her social life, "Not only I had to speak to the other students in English, I also got the chance to do my grocery shopping in English. That was something I would never do in Hong Kong." Maggie claimed that the trip helped develop her confidence in speaking English, "I found that my English was not that bad after all. People in the United States understood me when I talked to them."

Besides her trip to the States, Maggie did not have many out-of-class English learning opportunities. In her free time, she sometimes listened to English songs and watched English television programs. Like Lindsay, Maggie would sometimes read the lyrics of the English songs, trying to understand the meaning of the songs. Maggie also said that while listening to the English songs, she could learn more about English pronunciation and intonation.

Similar to the other student participants in the study, Maggie felt the pressure from the heavily examination-oriented English curriculum during her secondary studies. She contended that such pressure drove her to work harder, "The keen competition among students drove me to work better, which in turn, helped me learn English more efficiently."

4.5.1   Maggie's English learning Journey: "It's a competition."

Maggie did not remember much about learning English in kindergarten. She just recalled that it was a Chinese-medium kindergarten and it was like a day-care center. There was no formal English teaching. Maggie only recalled the whole class sometimes sang English songs or played games in English together. She believed that her kindergarten English classroom mainly aimed to stimulate students' interest in the language. Maggie said that it was not until when she got into her primary school that she really learnt all the letters of the English alphabet.

Maggie pursued her primary education in a Chinese-medium school. She was taught by local English teachers from primary one to three. From primary four onwards, not only Maggie had to attend the regular English lessons, she was also taught by a native English-speaking teacher once a week. She recalled that the native English-speaking teacher

would play English games with the whole class, focusing on developing students' English speaking skills whereas the lessons taught by the local teachers were more grammar-oriented. Maggie did not enjoy the English lessons during her primary education as the local teachers adopted an English-only approach in the classroom. Different from Jack, Maggie did not like an English-only learning environment. She said the English teachers insisted using English even if the class did not understand the lesson, "I was resistant to English learning during that time…The teacher did not use Cantonese in explanation." Maggie also mentioned that many of the English teachers in her school taught according to the textbooks and there were not any games or activities in class.

After her primary studies, Maggie went into a bilingual secondary school. Both Cantonese and English were used in teaching. The medium of instruction was subject-specific during the first three years of Maggie's secondary studies. From secondary one to three, Maggie had been learning history, science and mathematics in English. As for the other content subjects, Economics and Geography, Cantonese was used during the first school term while English in the second. From secondary four onwards, English was used as the medium of instruction for all content subjects as the school had to prepare students for the public examination, in which they had to write all examination papers in English.

When Maggie was in secondary one, she was streamed into an elite class. However, for English, she had to attend the remedial class. The remedial English class was divided into two smaller classes, taught by two different teachers. Maggie was put in the group taught by a local English teacher. She recalled that the local teacher would give the class a test every week so as to help students revise their English grammar and vocabulary. After spending a year in the remedial class, Maggie could attend the English class with her elite peers in secondary two. She enjoyed the secondary two English class as the teacher was very encouraging and she taught English through songs and movies. Moreover, the teacher would also have regular dictation with the class to help keep up students' English standard. Maggie said she really enjoyed those English lessons. That English teacher was the first person who stimulated Maggie's interest in English learning. However, Maggie

said that her English performance began to decline when she proceeded to senior secondary levels. She explained that,

> The English teacher at that time was a native-English speaker. I did not really understand what the teacher was saying…we [the whole class] were discussing among ourselves what the teacher was trying to say. I remembered there was one time, the teacher saw us talking to each other and he just asked us to stand outside the classroom as punishment.

Maggie also explained that she was not used to the teaching format of that native English-speaking teacher, "To prepare for our essay writing assignment, the teacher asked us to do brainstorming at home instead of discussing our ideas with others in class." The teacher also asked the class to write a draft before submitting the essay. However, the teacher would not give any feedback on their draft and so Maggie did not know how to improve her English writing. She considered that as the main reason why she always received low marks in her English essays at that time.

During Maggie's senior secondary studies, the English lessons focused mainly on preparing students for the public examination. Similar to the other student participants, Maggie attended private English tutorials after school so as to better prepare herself for the examination. Maggie expressed that the English tutorials were very effective as they equipped her with the techniques to tackle examination questions. She mentioned one memorable experience at the tutorial centre. She remembered there was one native English-speaking instructor at the tutorial centre, who arranged English speaking sessions in order to help students prepare for the English oral paper. Maggie enjoyed the oral practice as she could practise her English skills with students from other secondary schools. Maggie said that in her school, she knew her classmates well. When having group discussions, she and her classmates were very "polite" as they would take turns in expressing their ideas one after another. However, at the tutorial centre, Maggie was not familiar with her learning peers. She became more active and seized every opportunity to speak more in English. If she did not speak up, she might have lost her turn in the

discussion and she could not receive any feedback from the tutor. Maggie told me that the tutor was the second person who stimulated her interest in learning English.

Upon her graduation from the secondary school, Maggie began her post-secondary studies at HKC. Like Jack and Lindsay, Maggie found it difficult to adapt herself to the post-secondary English classroom at the beginning. She was not quite used to the teaching format at HKC. In Maggie's secondary school, the English teachers would provide students with guidance and support every step of the way. However, Maggie said, "At HKC, students have to be active in their own learning…If you don't understand something, you have to take the initiative to ask lecturers questions." Furthermore, Maggie was not used to the course schedule at HKC. During her secondary studies, Maggie had an English lesson every day. But at HKC, she only had English lessons twice a week. It took her some time to get familiar with other students in class. And Maggie believed that because of that, some students felt uncomfortable when speaking English in front of others and they would choose to use Cantonese in group discussions. Maggie said,

> I found that my English learning was not effective at all…Everyone was speaking in Cantonese. If I insisted on speaking English to my group mates, I might get isolated…There were many group activities in class. I did not want to be isolated by the others. I need to work with someone in group activities.

Maggie also shared with me her frustration while learning English at HKC,

> When I first got here (HKC)…I had no idea what the English course was about. After I received the course outline, I saw that one of the assignments was essay writing and I began to feel anxious as my English writing skills were not that good.

Maggie felt the same way during the second semester,

> I had to write a research report for the English course…I was so nervous as I did not know how to write one. That was why I was so afraid of attending the English class at that time. I did not learn anything about report writing before in my

secondary school and now, I have to learn how to write one in just three months'
time (the second semester).

When I met Maggie in the last interview, she expressed her wish to invest more in her
English listening and speaking skills, "I would like to improve my listening and speaking
skills…as a lot of the lecturers used English in their teaching. Sometimes, I found it
difficult to catch up with what they said in class." Although Maggie worried about her
course assignments, she did enjoy her English learning at HKC, especially during the
second school term,

> I like the learning atmosphere during the second semester…the whole class spoke
> English in the lesson. There were many class activities such as role play. I could
> actually use the language. We shared with each other our ideas and opinions in
> English.

4.5.2   English Learning and Maggie: "It's a means to determine who the winner is."

As mentioned in section 4.5.1, Maggie's interest in the English language was greatly
influenced by her English teachers. During the time when she was taught by the two
particular teachers, Maggie became very interested in English and she did not think that
English learning was a difficult task. However, from secondary four onwards, Maggie's
English learning focused mainly on past examination paper drills and Maggie began to
perceive English as a means to determine who was eligible for university admission.
Such perception lingered throughout her post-secondary English learning. She described
her English learning at both the secondary and post-secondary levels as a "competition".
At the secondary level, "English learning was like a long-distance running race. It was
simply a test of students' perseverance. And at HKC, English learning was like a short-
distance race during which you needed to sprint down to the finishing line." While
studying at an English-medium post-secondary institution, Maggie did not think it helped
with her English learning. Instead, English-medium instruction exerted a negative impact
on her English learning.

Maggie pursued the social science program at HKC. During her first year of studies, she took Psychology as one elective subject.

> All the references were in English…I did not understand many of the technical terms in the references…I did not really want to read those references…I did not even want to read anything written in English. Even after I looked up all the difficult words from the dictionary, I did not understand what the whole passage was about…I just wanted to give up at that time…I tried to avoid reading anything written in English".

Similar to Gallie, Jack and Lindsay, Maggie emphasized the instrumental functions of English and she talked about how the English language could secure her a job in the future,

> I do not think any employers would hire me if I could not write proper English…We (Hong Kong citizens) cannot live without Chinese and English in Hong Kong as we need to use them to communicate with others. We have to learn them well.

4.5.3   Maggie's English learner identity: "Are we competitors or learning partners?"

While sharing with me her English learning experiences, Maggie often compared her English proficiency with that of her peers. For example, she would compare herself with the more proficient students in the primary English classroom and sometimes, the comparison between herself and those outstanding students made her lose her interest in learning the language.

> Those students did really well in their English…It appeared to me that they did not really have to work harder to attain good results. As for me, I paid much effort in learning the language and yet, I was not able to get a good grade in the subject. I therefore gave up on my English.

Maggie described herself as an active English learner in her secondary school. She indicated that the public examination drove her to work hard on her English. And among

the various aspects of English, Maggie was confident in her speaking skills. She seized every opportunity to speak English more in class. When she progressed to the post-secondary English classroom, Maggie still perceived herself as an English speaker. Whenever there were group discussions, Maggie said she and her group were more active than the other groups. The other groups, according to Maggie, were very quiet and passive in class activities. On the contrary, her group was active in sharing their ideas with the rest of the class and they raised questions for the teacher. Moreover, Maggie became even more active during the second semester. She explained that she needed to go and look for references for her English group project and she found that very helpful, "While I was looking for relevant references for the group project, I gained more exposure to the English language. In the past, I seldom visited any English websites. I read more in English while doing the project". Although Maggie described herself as an active English speaker in the English classroom, she expressed that sometimes she was just a passive learner under the prescribed secondary English curriculum, "The teacher just spoon-fed us with all her teaching materials…She just delivered the course content to us. Well, I tried my best to understand what I learnt in class". This comes in line with Lindsay's perception of herself as a passive English learner under the examination-led education system.

At the beginning of Maggie's studies at HKC, Maggie did not feel the intense competition in the English classroom and she perceived her peers as "learning partners". Each student had a chance to participate in and contributed to group discussion. However, Maggie later discovered that those students, who were more proficient in English, tended to look down on the less proficient ones. Those better students made her feel bad and inferior in the English class. Maggie began to feel the tension and perceived them as "competitors" in class. Maggie felt the pressure from those students and yet, she viewed the pressure as a positive force, which drove her to work harder so that she could be more like them. However, Maggie expressed that it was tiring sometimes to always compete with her learning peers.

> Her (one of the English proficient students) English was really good and I felt
> inferior to her…Whenever we worked as a group, the teacher would only call on

her to answer all the questions. That's why we (Maggie and the other group members) did not have many opportunities to speak English in the discussion…She spoke English really well and that made our English sound relatively bad.

4.5.4   Summary

Similar to Brandon, Jack and Lindsay, Maggie's English use was quite limited to formal school settings. Maggie was not active in English extra-curricular activities. The only overseas experience she had was her trip to the United States to participate in an international competition when she was in secondary three. Maggie claimed that the trip stimulated her interest in the English language, "After the trip, I felt that English was a very useful language. I came to see that learning the language was very interesting and I would like to continue learning it." However, her interest in English did not last long. Upon her re-entry to Hong Kong, Maggie began to lose her interest in the English language under the examination-oriented education system.

Throughout her English learning journey, Maggie often compared her English skills with that of her learning peers. She felt inferior to those who were proficient in English and she perceived English learning as one competition. English was a means to determine who was qualified for university studies. In view of this, Maggie worked hard to improve her English as she would like to become a member of those proficient students. However, Maggie would sometimes struggle regarding her language use in the classroom. Maggie would like to use all English in the classroom as she would like to polish up her English skills. But sometimes, Maggie was not able to do so as her learning peers would use Cantonese and she had no choice but to switch to Cantonese. She did not want to be isolated by her peers.

When I saw Maggie at the end of the second school term, she indicated that she would continue pushing herself to improve her English, "At HKC, you really need to take an active role in your own learning. I do not want to lose (to the others in the competition)".

4.6   Stanley, a pragmatist

> "To me, English is a tool, while at the same time, it also resembles art. It's a tool as I needed it to understand other subjects such as Physics…English also resembles art as I recalled my lecturer once wrote an English poem to express his feelings. The poem was full of metaphors and rhyme. I was drawn by the artistic beauty of the poem."

Stanley was a soft-spoken and polite nineteen-year old young man. He was always clearheaded when recounting his English learning experiences. During the interviews, Stanley told me that he had set a clear goal for his English learning at HKC and he had a well-thought-out plan to achieve it. Stanley was the eldest child in his family. He lived with his parents and two younger brothers. At home, Stanley spoke Cantonese to his family. At gatherings when there were older family members, Stanley's parents would speak Hakka, a Chinese dialect spoken in the southeastern part of China. Though Stanley couldn't speak Hakka, he understood a few simple greetings in the dialect. Stanley's parents were supportive of his English learning when he was little. He recalled that his parents would play some English audio recordings at home, hoping that Stanley would get more exposure to the English language. However, Stanley thought that listening to those audio recordings did not really help him much as he was small at that time and he did not understand anything from the recordings. Like Lindsay, Stanley mentioned the impact of family support on English learning.

> There was one student in my secondary school who did very well in the English language subject. His parents gave him lots of support and advice on his English learning and they also shared with him their own learning experiences, like how to tackle difficulties when learning English.

Having noticed the positive impact of family support on English learning, Stanley taught his two younger brothers English at home and helped them with their revision. Moreover, Stanley would also share with them his own learning experiences.

Stanley began to learn English at the age of three in a kindergarten. Like the other student participants, his English learning was quite restricted to formal classroom settings. He also learned Mandarin in school as a language subject. Besides English and Mandarin, he also learnt Japanese during the summer prior to his studies at HKC. He only learnt the language for three months. Stanley expressed that he enjoyed learning the Japanese language and yet, he did not have time to continue learning it because of his busy study schedule at HKC.

Stanley recalled he participated in some English extra-curricular activities during his secondary studies. Similar to Gallie and Maggie, Stanley participated in the annual Hong Kong schools speech festival when he was in secondary one. He remembered he had a lot of practice prior to the competition and he really enjoyed such experience as he thought the practice helped boost his confidence in public English speaking. Moreover, Stanley remembered his secondary school organized the "English day" every Wednesday, during which there were many English game booths set up on the campus. Stanley enjoyed playing those games as he felt that he could actually have the chance to use the language outside the classroom. Stanley also liked listening to English songs at home and he felt excited when talking about it, "I learned a lot from the lyrics…Sometimes I would analyze the sentence structure of the lyrics…I enjoyed doing that."

Among all the student participants in the study, Stanley was the only one who participated in the English extra-curricular activities at HKC. He was the internal secretary of HKC's English club. Stanley met with other committee members three or four times a month and all the meetings were conducted in English. Stanley really enjoyed being a committee member of the English club as he had more opportunities to use the English language.

4.6.1 Stanley's English learning journey: On his way to becoming a goal-oriented learner

Stanley's English learning began at the age of three when he was studying in a Chinese-medium kindergarten. The English class was taught by local teachers. Both Chinese and English were used in the lesson. Stanley said he really enjoyed kindergarten English

learning, "I was very interested in learning the English language at that time…I would like to learn more than just what was there from the textbook."

Stanley pursued his primary studies in two different Chinese-medium schools. He expressed that the English class in his first primary school was very much teacher-centred. There were about thirty students in one class and all the students were sitting in rows. Stanley said he only remembered the whole class would read the English textbook together and they needed to copy vocabulary and sentences from the textbook. As for his second primary school, Stanley said it was less demanding when compared to his first one and he also enjoyed the English class more.

> The English class was divided into two halves, each being taught by a local and a native English-speaking teacher alternatively. The English class became smaller and it was mainly activity-based. Learning English through activities was something new to me…I was more active in expressing my ideas in English in a small class.

Stanley indicated that he did not like learning English in a big class, "We just learned the vocabulary, sentence structures and grammar from the textbook and we memorized them and that was all…I seldom had any interaction with others in one big class."

After his primary studies, Stanley was admitted to an English-medium secondary school. However, his school had to switch the medium of instruction to Chinese when he was at secondary two. It was because his secondary school had to comply with the mandatory mother-tongue (Chinese) teaching policy, which was implemented in the academic year 1999-2000. As a result, all subjects were taught in Chinese and Stanley learned English as a language subject. Stanley recalled that the English class in his secondary school was divided into two small groups and each group was taught by one local teacher and one native English-speaking teacher alternatively. There were group discussions during the lesson and yet, his group mates only spoke in English when the teacher was around. Similar to Gallie, Jack and Maggie, if Stanley insisted using English in the discussion, his group mates would just ignore him and continued using Cantonese. When Stanley was

recounting his learning experiences at the secondary level, he said he enjoyed the oral English practice the most,

> It gave me great satisfaction when seeing my group mates nod in agreement with what I said…However, some students would sometimes intentionally criticize your performance. They would give you malicious comments. You just had to learn how to deal with those students.

Stanley studied at HKC upon his graduation from the secondary school. Stanley enjoyed the English class at HKC as there were many class activities which he believed would provide him with more opportunities to actually use the English language. Another reason why he enjoyed his post-secondary English learning was because he felt less peer pressure at HKC. Stanley expressed clearly that he did not like being criticized by his peers, especially when they criticized his English speaking skills. Though Stanley said he enjoyed the more interactive English learning at HKC, he did not think the class helped him much with his English learning.

> Yes, we learnt English grammar here. However, it was a bit like water off a duck's back. I did not have many opportunities to practise using it…The same applies to the vocabulary I learnt in class. I would like to actually use the vocabulary in my daily life.

When Stanley progressed to the second school term, he found that his learning was being constrained in some way, by the English lecturer.

> The lecturer gave us a lot of English exercises. He had a well-thought-out plan to push us to work harder. In the lesson, he would sometimes call on someone to answer his questions. I did not like learning English this way. Those exercises just took up a lot of my time, affecting my learning. You know, each student learns differently at a different pace.

Stanley felt that he was being forced to complete all those English exercises, "Sometimes, I was not able to finish all the exercises. That did not imply that I was lazy. It's just that I wanted to make good use of my time." What Stanley meant was that he

would like to spend more time on other subjects as those English exercises were meant to be supplementary exercises. He did not see why he had to finish all of them.

Though his English learning in the second semester was not pleasant, he described his overall English learning at HKC as "colourful", "I did not just learn what was there on the lecture notes or just practise my listening skills through the English audio recordings. I did manage to have some opportunities to actually use the English language (through group discussions)."

4.6.2   English learning and Stanley: "It is both a tool and art."

During the interviews, Stanley mentioned several times that he was interested in the English language. And similar to Lindsay, Stanley believed that one cannot achieve success in English learning unless he or she is interested in the language itself. Stanley told me that he was interested in reading Psychology references and he preferred reading the English version (even if there was also a Chinese version of the reference). He said, "You could only get the flavor when reading the English version." Stanley believed that reading English reference books helped improve his comprehension and writing skills.

As mentioned at the beginning of section 4.6, Stanley perceived the English language both as a tool and art. As a tool, English could help him understand other content subjects such as Physics. Stanley also stated that he could apply the skills he acquired from the English lesson to other subjects too.

> I remembered I just learnt about summarizing skills in the English class. And around that same time, I had to write a summary in a Chinese assignment. I therefore applied the techniques I learned from the English class to writing that Chinese assignment. I felt great as I could apply what I learnt to other subjects and that gave me great satisfaction.

While viewing English as art, Stanley appreciated the metaphoric language in English poems. When he was listening to English songs, Stanley paid particular attention to the meaning of the lyrics and he said English songs evoked a different range of feelings when compared with Chinese songs.

Besides listening to English songs, Stanley also developed a habit of watching CNN (Cable News Network) news since his secondary studies. He began watching CNN news when he was preparing for the public examination. Stanley believed that he improved both his listening and speaking skills a lot while watching the news program. Stanley said he paid particular attention to the news anchor's accent and he tried to speak like him. Stanley thought that his pronunciation had become more accurate and that was why he received a good grade in the oral section of the English examination paper. Stanley stopped watching CNN news after the public examination. When I met Stanley during the second semester, he told me that his English pronunciation was not as good as before and he decided to resume watching the news program in order to get a more "accurate" pronunciation. Stanley placed great emphasis on his English pronunciation, "I just attended a university admission interview. It's very important to have accurate English pronunciation so as to leave a good impression to the admission committee…Those who could speak English with accurate pronunciation look more professional."

Stanley believed that during his primary and secondary studies, he had been learning what was there in the English textbooks only and his English use was restricted to academic contexts. This comes in line with what Brandon, Jack and Gallie said about the disconnect between what they learnt in class and their social life. Stanley expressed that it would be better if he could actually use the language in everyday life.

Though Stanley enjoyed learning English at HKC, his perception towards English learning had changed after the first school term.

> Yes, I really enjoyed the post-secondary English class. However, I wondered why I only received a B+ in the first school term (Stanley expected to get an A instead)…I began to think about whether I should put effort into tasks which would not count towards my final grade.

Stanley indicated explicitly that he would no longer "invest" in English tasks that would not count towards his final grade. He said, "I have learnt my lesson from the first term". Stanley became a goal-oriented learner in the second term. He said he had always been a goal-oriented learner in other content subjects but not for the English language. However,

as Stanley was not satisfied with the grade he received in the first term, he decided to change his learning approach. In other words, Stanley began to perceive English as just one other academic subject he needed to master in order to attain a good grade in the final examination. He would only put more effort on those tasks which could earn him a good grade. Stanley said that he would continue adopting the same approach towards his English learning at HKC.

4.6.3 Stanley's English learner identity, "I do not like being criticized by the others."

The way Stanley constructed himself as an English learner was closely tied to his learning peers. Stanley was confident in his English speaking skills and he perceived his speaking skills outperformed his peers', "When I spoke English, I could show to the others I could speak the language and I could speak it well". And similar to Maggie, Stanley also perceived himself as always competing with his peers in the English classroom.

> I put a lot of effort into the tasks which were assessed by the teacher… For example, I participated actively in group discussions…I wanted to get a better grade in English. I also wanted to show to the others (his peers) my strength (his English speaking skills).

As mentioned earlier, Stanley sometimes felt unsure of his speaker identity as his English performance was criticized by the English proficient students in his secondary school. At HKC, Stanley also noticed that there were some students who were more proficient in English. Stanley perceived himself as inferior to them, "Those students always ranked the first in class…and my English performance would never be like theirs."

While studying at HKC, Stanley struggled with his use of English in group discussions. Similar to Jack, Gallie and Maggie, Stanley tried to maintain his English speaker identity by insisting using English in group discussions.

> Well, the whole group did try to conduct the discussion in English and yet, they were not very active. I tried to present my ideas in English. I tried. But it turned

out that I was the only one who spoke in English…I felt very discouraged and I
had no choice but to switch to Cantonese. Well, I gave up.

Stanley explained that he did not want to feel being "alienated" or "isolated" by his peers
and so he chose to give in. Stanley had made informed choices regarding his language
use in the classroom. His wish of being a member of the "in-group" (students speaking
Cantonese) led him to use Cantonese in discussion.

4.6.4   Summary

Like all the other student participants in the study, Stanley was aware of the instrumental
functions of the English language. He believed that being proficient in English would
sharpen his competitive edge. Stanley had set a goal for his English learning – to get a
better grade in English and he was clear about how to achieve that. He adopted a goal-
oriented strategy, "I would only work on the tasks which would count towards my final
grade." This displays Stanley's exercise of his agency, adopting a strategic use of his
learning methods in response to his immediate context (e.g., Gao, 2010). Another
example of Stanley's strategic use of English learning methods was watching CNN news
in preparation for his public examination.

Stanley had always been confident in his English speaking skills. And yet, he assumed an
inferior position when studying alongside the English proficient students. Moreover, his
English speaker identity was also challenged by his local peers, who often spoke
Cantonese in class discussions. Though Stanley would like to maintain his speaker
identity in his group, he was not able to do so as he did not want to be branded as an
outcast among his peers. As we can see, Stanley's choice of using Cantonese in group
discussions was due to solidarity reasons (Jackson, 2008). His language choice was
closely linked to his affiliation to his Cantonese-speaking peers.

4.7   Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the six student participants in this study. I retold their English
learning stories from their kindergarten to post-secondary studies. The stories were
constructed together by the participants and me. The learning stories began with a

description of the participants' family and language background, followed by their English learning journey, their perception of the English language and their learner identities in relation to their learning peers. All the six participants had been learning English within the same education system (from their kindergarten to secondary studies) and yet, they had different English learning experiences and they constantly constructed and reconstructed their perceptions towards English learning and themselves as an English learner over time and across different learning sites. Their perceptions were shaped and informed by the interaction with their peers inside the English language classroom. The stories presented in this chapter help set the context for the discussion in Chapter 5.

While constructing the stories of the six focal participants, I gained a better understanding of the challenges faced by them during their course of English learning. Moreover, I also came to see clearly how they constructed and reconstructed their perceptions towards English learning and their learner identities along their learning journey. Drawing upon the theoretical notions described in Chapter 2, I will discuss, in the next chapter, the relationship between learning experiences, language learning and identity (re-)construction with reference to the six participants' English learning stories.

Chapter 5

5   Reading Through Students' English Learning Stories

As stated in Benson and Nunan (2005), language learners' previous educational experiences provide valuable insights about their language learning process. In Chapter 4, I presented the six focal participants' English learning narratives, focusing on their learning experiences at different stages of their academic journeys. In each of the participants' learning narratives, I attempted to reveal how the participants perceived their own course of English language learning and their relationship with peers in the English classroom. While retelling their learning stories, the participants brought together disconnected parts of their learning experiences and attached meanings to them. Moreover, the participants relived their learning experiences and shared with me their ups and downs along their learning trajectories. As revealed in their learning narratives, the participants constantly constructed and reconstructed their conceptualizations of English language learning and themselves as English language learners. In this chapter, I will present and discuss the recurrent themes that emerged from the six participants' English learning experiences. I intend to examine the participants' narratives collectively. As described in Chapter 3 (the methodology chapter), a thematic analysis across the participants' narratives helps reveal how their stories intersect and provides readers the multiple perspectives that emerged from the intersection of their stories.

Through my discussion, I aim to draw readers' attention to the impact of the participants' prior learning experiences on their current English learning at the post-secondary level. Moreover, I also aim to show how the participants negotiated and (re-)constructed their identities throughout their English learning process. The discussion was informed by the theoretical perspectives presented in Chapter 2: i) language learners are active meaning-makers, who learn to use their L2 to engage in interactions with others and to construct and co-construct experiences with others (sociocultural approach towards second language acquisition); ii) language learners have multiple identities that change over time and space, and are reproduced in L2 interactions (Norton's (2000a) conceptualization of identity); and iii) language learners' ongoing identity formations

affect the extent to which they invest in their language learning (Norton's (2000a) construct of investment). In short, the discussion aims to explore the link between language learning experiences, identity (re-)construction and investment in language learning in relation to English learning in the Hong Kong context.

Despite the territory's 156-year-long history of colonial rule, Hong Kong is a somewhat monolingual society with 90% of its population speaking Cantonese as their first language (Census and Statistics Department, 2011). The use of English is limited to formal domains such as government administration, education and law (Evans, 2000). It is no wonder that the six participants in this study claimed that their English learning was, for the most part, restricted to formal educational settings. Moreover, the retelling of their English learning experiences adhered closely to the timelines of their academic careers . In view of this, the sections below are organized according to the different stages of the participants' academic journeys: pre-primary school years (section 5.1), primary education (section 5.2), secondary education (section 5.3), and post-secondary education (section 5.4). In doing so, readers will see how the participants conceptualized learning English and their English learner identities across time and space.

In each section, I will present and discuss the following major themes that arose from the participants' English learning experiences during the aforementioned stages::

- pre-primary school years: early exposure to English at home (5.1.1) and alphabet-recognition-led instruction (5.1.2);
- primary schooling: language use in school (5.2.1), the teaching practice of local and native English-speaking teachers (5.2.2), and the participants' out-of-class English learning activities (5.2.3);
- secondary schooling: examination-led instruction (5.3.1), out-of-class English learning activities (5.3.2), streaming arrangement in school (5.3.3), and factors of successful English learning (5.3.4);
- post-secondary schooling: English learning and teaching format (5.4.1.1) and the practicality of English learning (5.4.1.2).

At the end of each section, I will also discuss the participants' conceptualizations of their English learning and their learner identities in relation to their peers in the English classroom.

5.1 English Learning Experiences during Pre-primary School Years

5.1.1 Early exposure to English at home

In the past few years, there has been a common saying in Hong Kong – "不要讓孩子輸在起跑線". In English, this translates as, "Do not let your child lose at the starting line". For many parents, it is of great importance to give their children an advantage over their peers by enrolling them in a wide range of extra-curricular activities (e.g., piano lessons or ballet lessons). These parents believe that such activities will give their children a better chance of getting into so-called "prestigious schools" and thus, providing them with the best education. One of the most common extra-curricular activities is English play-groups. Owing to Hong Kong's colonial past, English has always played a hegemonic role in the territory's education system. Many Hong Kong parents are willing to spend a fortune to send their children, some as young as two years old, to English-medium play groups or pre-schools so that they will be immersed in an English-rich environment and thus, be able to enter English-medium primary and secondary schools in the future. Lai & Byram (2003) state that some Hong Kong parents even send "recommendation letters, [make] donations and personal requests" (p. 323) in order to secure their children a place in English-medium schools. Moreover, it is also common for Hong Kong parents to use English learning materials (both printed and audio) at home to prepare their children for English learning in formal academic settings. For parents, it is crucial to give their children a head start by exposing them to the English language as early as possible.

In this study, the parents of the six student participants were not proficient in English. Unable to teach English to their children, parental support of English learning was often in the form of encouragement. For example, Jack described how his mother exposed him to the English language prior to his kindergarten studies, "I recalled that my mother

showed me the letters of the English alphabet using an ABC chart. You know, A for apple, B for boy and so on." As for Stanley, his mother often played English audio recordings at home in order to familiarize him with the language. When compared to the other four focal students, Brandon and Gallie had more opportunities to use English at home at an early age, as their family had hired a Filipino domestic helper. The two participants claimed that they were already accustomed to speaking English at a very young age. For Gallie, she also had more opportunities to write in English when she was younger. Gallie had been writing letters in English to her cousins who lived in Canada and Australia. Of all the participants in this study, only Lindsay and Maggie claimed that they did not have any contact with the English language at home prior to their pre-primary education. Though the six participants had different types and levels of exposure to English prior to their formal English learning, they all commented that early exposure to English at home did not have a great impact on their English learning. They considered those English learning activities at home more as a stimulus for their future English learning in formal educational settings.

5.1.2   Learning English in kindergarten: Alphabet-recognition-led instruction

The Hong Kong government does not provide free pre-primary education. Kindergartens in Hong Kong are operated by either private or non-profit-making organizations and cater for children aged 3 to 6 years old. A fee remission scheme is provided for needy parents[13] to ensure that all children receive kindergarten education. Approximately 95% of Hong Kong children over the age of 3 attend kindergarten (Rao & Li, 2009). As stated on the website of the Education Bureau (2012), "most kindergartens operate on a half-day basis and offer upper kindergarten, lower kindergarten and nursery classes". Some kindergartens also provide whole-day classes and operate with an attached child care centre for children under three years old. As stated in Chapter 3, all kindergarten (and kindergarten-cum-child centres) devise the curriculum in accordance with the pre-primary curriculum guide developed by the Hong Kong Curriculum Development

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[13] Families that are in need of financial assistance.

Council (2006). The curriculum guide states the six key learning areas at the kindergarten level: physical fitness and health, language, early mathematics, science and technology, self and society, and arts. With regard to language learning, the curriculum guide states, "during early childhood, developing proficiency in the mother-tongue is of primary importance. Cantonese is most Hong Kong children's mother-tongue and should also be the medium used in pre-primary settings" (p. 29). As for English, it should be introduced to "enrich children's language experience and provide exposure and understanding of other cultures associated with the language learnt" (p. 29). In Hong Kong, some kindergartens felt the pressure to "provide the kind of preschool education that parents desire (a more academic focus to prepare children for primary school) rather than one that is more child-centred" (Rao & Li, 2009, p. 241). Fung and Lam (2008a, 2008b) also contend that parents expect their children to learn seriously in kindergarten and teaching should be geared towards "preparing young children for primary schools and, in particular, toward preparing them to get into a 'good school'" (2008b, p. 160). In other words, parents place great emphasis on kindergarten education as it ensures their children the road to future academic success.

In this study, all six participants entered kindergarten at the age of three. With the exception of Lindsay and Maggie, the participants reported that their formal English learning began at kindergarten. For Lindsay and Maggie, kindergarten was more like a daycare centre, and did not offer any formal English lessons. They only recalled playtime, during which they might have had exposure to some simple English words. As for Brandon, Jason and Stanley, they shared similar English learning experiences in kindergarten. All three talked about learning the English alphabet and words through songs and games. For example, Stanley recalled, "At kindergarten, I learned the English alphabet. I also learned how to combine English letters to form words." Although these three participants were not able to recount clearly their English learning experiences in kindergarten, they all agreed that their kindergarten English learning focused mainly on English word recognition. Different from Brandon, Jack and Stanley, Gallie's English learning at the kindergarten level appeared to be more structured and in her words, "more serious".

Gallie studied in an English-medium kindergarten in which she learnt all the subjects in English, except the Chinese language. One might expect that an English-only environment helps facilitate students' English learning. However, this was not the case for Gallie. She was discontented with the heavy workload in her English class,

> There were lots of worksheets and dictations. The English lessons were not activity-based. My kindergarten was very serious about students' English learning. As a small child, I just felt immense pressure to perform well in English...I did not enjoy learning English back then.

At that time, Gallie perceived learning English as an important task to accomplish in school. Gallie mentioned in the interview that her kindergarten placed great emphasis on students' English performance by giving students intensive practice. This comes in line with one Quality Assurance Inspection annual report, conducted by the Hong Kong Education Bureau (2003), that states "80% of the kindergartens still put much emphasis on writing skill training, giving excessive drilling and copying assignments to children. Some kindergartens even required children to memorize and dictate words…" (p. 4). Moreover, the incident in which Gallie was not allowed to write Chinese meanings when learning English vocabulary (as described in her learning narrative in Chapter 4) frustrated her. Gallie found it meaningless and tiring to memorize the meaning of English vocabulary. Similar to Gallie, Jack also claimed that his English learning was more than just singing songs or playing games, "We had to copy words from the English textbooks. There were spelling exercises too." However, different from Gallie, Jack did not find those English exercises mechanical. He stated,

> It was an enjoyable English learning experience back then…I didn't have to worry about making any grammatical or spelling mistakes in my school work. I did not have any resistance to the English language. I did not have any frustration at all.

When it came to kindergarten English learning, all the participants, except Gallie, described their learning experiences as "fun" and "enjoyable". As the participants

narrated and re-narrated their learning experiences during the kindergarten years, how did they conceptualize their own English learning at that time?

5.1.2.1 Conceptualizations of English learning at kindergarten: "English learning was fun."

While recounting their English learning at the kindergarten level, all six participants indicated that they did not encounter any difficulties in learning the English language. During that time, English learning was all about learning the English alphabet or some simple English words, mainly through games and songs. For Gallie and Jack, they were also required to complete English worksheets and spelling exercises. All participants, except Gallie, studied in a Chinese-medium kindergarten. Both Chinese and English were used in the English class. While the other participants perceived English as simply one set of skills they had to acquire in school, Gallie claimed that, at a very young age, she already perceived the English language as the language for her survival in school.

Gallie was very vocal about her kindergarten English learning. As mentioned earlier, she did not consider her learning experience an enjoyable one. She remembered clearly that her English teachers put great emphasis on boosting students' English performance through lots of quizzes and dictations. English was introduced to Gallie as the only language that could be used in the classroom (e.g., Gallie was not allowed to write down the corresponding Chinese meaning when learning English words). Moreover, the majority of Gallie's peers were native English-speaking students. This might explain why she perceived English as the language for her survival in her school community, "There was a 'need' for me to learn English well…I had to accept the fact that I could only use English in my school…If I did not learn the language well, I could not speak to anyone." Gallie's language use in kindergarten was constrained under the hegemonic effect of the dominance of English in school. As stated in Toohey and Norton (2010), "language learners desire to become members of other communities" (p. 184). For Gallie, English represented a means towards entry into her school community, which was mainly comprised of native English-speaking students. English was a means towards her acceptance by her English-speaking peers. At a very young age, Gallie already noticed

the pragmatic benefits of English proficiency, and the "usefulness of L2 proficiency" (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005) was the greatest driving force for her to learn English well.

5.1.2.2   English learner identities in the kindergarten English classroom

As stated in Menezes (2011b), "learning contexts are always changing and so are identities…" (p. 70). When the six participants proceeded to their kindergarten studies, they began to develop relationships with their peers and teachers. These new relationships informed and shaped the participants' learning experiences, which in turn, fashioned how they positioned themselves in the classroom. Looking back at their English learning experiences in kindergarten, all six participants perceived themselves as passive and receptive learners in the classroom. The traditional teacher-centred English classroom might have informed these perceptions. Interaction was unidirectional, mainly from teacher to students. Seldom did the participants talk about interactions amongst students in class. In kindergarten, all participants, except Gallie, positioned themselves as members belonging to the same learning community (which was comprised of local Hong Kong students). While the other participants considered themselves to be on equal status as their peers with regard to English learning, Gallie talked about how she felt she was different from her peers in the kindergarten English classroom.

The fact that Gallie was visibly different from most of her peers (who came from English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada) already set her apart from the other students. Her sense of self was deeply rooted in her perception towards her own English performance. Gallie recalled that she often compared herself with her English-speaking peers in terms of English proficiency. She identified herself as inferior to those students and thought that she would never achieve native-like proficiency in English, "At that time, I felt that my English would never be like theirs (the English-speaking students)…They are native English speakers." Besides comparing herself with her peers in school, Gallie was also aware of the differences among local Hong Kong English learners. In one social gathering in her kindergarten, Gallie noticed that some of her Hong Kong peers spoke in English when talking to their parents. Gallie considered these students as more competent and successful English learners as they were

brought up in English-rich home environments. Moreover, she also compared herself with students from Chinese-medium kindergartens. During one interview, Gallie talked about her cousin who studied in a Chinese-medium kindergarten.

> I found that my English textbook was very different from my cousin's. My English textbook contained a lot of difficult English words and all the definitions were in English. I was so surprised when I found that my cousin's English textbook provided Chinese meaning for the English vocabulary in each chapter…Well, at that time, I felt that I knew more English words than my cousin.

Because of her English-stream background, Gallie often positioned herself as a more competent English learner in front of other English learners from Chinese-medium schools. However, she had a sense of inferiority when studying alongside her English-speaking peers. The way Gallie perceived herself as an English learner was context-dependent. It was evident that her learner identity was not static. Rather, it was negotiated and constructed through the L2 interaction with her peers (Norton, 2000a).

One other interesting observation was Gallie's language choice in the kindergarten English classroom. As mentioned earlier, Gallie wanted to draw upon her first language (Chinese) while learning English vocabulary and yet, she was not allowed to do so. She expressed that on many occasions, she had to wrestle with her language use in class. It appeared that her "Chinese self" came into conflict with the development of her English learner identity. Gallie's case lends support to Norton's (2000a) notion of identity as "a site of struggle" (p. 127) and identity as "multiple and contradictory" (p. 127). Though Gallie was uncomfortable with the English-only policy in her kindergarten class, she was aware of the fact that it was imperative to learn English well in order to become a member of her immediate learning community. It seemed that she had no choice but to give up using Chinese in her class.

All six participants attended three years of kindergarten, after which they entered primary school. Five of the participants pursued their primary education in Chinese-medium schools. Only Gallie studied in an English-medium primary school. In Chinese-medium primary schools, students learn English as a subject and all other subjects are taught in

Chinese. As for Gallie, she learned all subjects in English except the Chinese language and Chinese history.

5.2 English Learning Experiences during Primary School Years

In this section, I will first present the common threads that run through the participants' English learning experiences at the primary level. These common threads are: i) language use in school; ii) teaching practice in the English classroom; and iii) out-of-class English learning activities. In the later part of this section (sections 5.2.4 and 5.2.5), I will explore how the participants conceptualized their English learning and learner identities in the primary English classroom.

5.2.1 Language use in school

One recurring theme in the participants' English learning experiences in primary school is the language use in school. As mentioned earlier, Gallie studied in an English-medium primary school. When compared with the other five students, Gallie had relatively more exposure to the English language. She had more opportunities to use the language both in and outside the English classroom. For example, she recalled that all extra-curricular activities at her school were conducted in English, "My school organized different types of extra-curricular activities every week. For example, you could learn cookery or gardening. All the activities were conducted in English. Thus, we learned a lot of vocabulary in different areas. I really enjoyed those activities." Gallie mentioned several times that her English-medium education helped her build a solid foundation in English, which she perceived as one comparative advantage over other Hong Kong English learners who studied in Chinese-medium schools. While Gallie spoke highly of the English-rich learning environment at her primary school, the other student participants did not seem to believe that an English-only environment would necessarily facilitate one's English learning.

While learning English in a Chinese-medium primary school, five participants (Brandon, Jack, Lindsay, Stanley and Maggie) recalled that they seldom had the opportunity to use English outside the classroom. Even within their English class, their teachers used both

Chinese and English in teaching. It was only when the participants were taught by a native English-speaking teacher that they could practise speaking English. To strengthen students' English learning, the Hong Kong Education Bureau has implemented the Native English-speaking Teachers (NET) Scheme since the academic year 1998-1999. The NET scheme aims to "provide an authentic environment for children to learn English" (Education Bureau, 2014). Under the NET scheme, at least one native English-speaking teacher is assigned to each primary school in the public sector. The NETs are mainly responsible for improving students' English speaking skills. As a result, besides having regular English lessons taught by the local teachers, the participants were also required to attend the NET's class, which focused mainly on oral English. These oral lessons ranged from once every week to once every two weeks and they were mostly activity-based. However, unlike Gallie, some participants expressed their frustration when they had to learn English in an English-only environment.

Brandon recalled,

> We (the whole class) were very small back then. The teacher spoke really fast and we could not follow the lesson. We did not know what to do. Most of the time, we just sat there and talked to each other.

Maggie also talked about her English lessons from primary one to three studies, during which the local teacher adopted an English-only policy in class, "She (the local teacher) only used English during the lesson. We did not really understand what she was saying. She refused to use Chinese in class…That's why I was a bit resistant to learning English at that time." Maggie said that she felt better when she proceeded to primary five and six as her English teacher used Chinese when explaining some difficult grammatical concepts. During those two years of primary studies, Maggie felt more at ease in the English classroom and she was less reluctant to learn the language. For Jack, Lindsay and Stanley, their local English teachers code-switched between Chinese and English in the English class. To them, it was common for teachers to use Chinese to supplement their English teaching in Chinese-medium schools. The five participants did not perceive an English-only learning environment was particularly helpful to their English learning at

the primary level. They stated that their knowledge of English was still very limited at that time and they preferred more Chinese to be used in the English class.

Drawing upon the participants' English learning experiences in primary school, it appeared that an English-only learning environment was not welcomed by all the participants. Gallie was the only one who spoke highly of English-medium education and how it exerted a positive impact on her English learning. However, when the five Chinese-stream participants recounted their English learning in secondary school, they acknowledged the advantages of studying in an English-rich learning environment and they perceived English-medium education as one identity marker, which differentiated the more competent English learners from the less competent ones.

5.2.2 Teaching practice in the English classroom: Local teachers vs. NETs

Another recurrent theme that emerged from the participants' primary English learning experiences is the teaching practice in the English classroom. All of the participants, except Gallie, claimed that their English learning at the junior primary levels (primary one to three) was very much teacher-centred and grammar-intensive. For example, Maggie recalled that her school placed great emphasis on teaching students English grammar and thus, she had to work on a lot of grammar exercises. At the beginning of the English lesson, her teacher usually taught according to the textbooks, and later asked the whole class to work on the grammar exercises together. Jack, Lindsay and Stanley also shared similar experiences. They commented that the local English teachers often adopted a traditional teaching approach - the teacher stood in front of the class and taught English according to the textbook. Besides English grammar exercises, there were also dictation and tests. The participants associated their primary English learning with a lot of rote memorization. Seldom did they interact with their peers in English. As Stanley put it, "the only occasion in which we could actually speak the language was when there were speaking practice exercises in the English textbook."

As described earlier, the focal participants were required to attend oral lessons taught by the NETs. Apart from Jack, all participants compared the NETs with local Hong Kong

teachers regarding their teaching practice. The participants claimed that the NETs' lessons were often activity-based and more interactive. Although some participants felt frustrated because of the English-only learning environment in the NET's class, they acknowledged the fact that the NETs provided students with more opportunities to use the language. For example, Lindsay recalled,

> …the NETs would ask us to form groups for discussion once the lesson started. The local teachers would never do that. They often started the lesson by saying, 'Today, we are going to talk about this (a particular topic), please turn to page X (page number) in your textbook.

In a similar vein, Maggie and Stanley also thought that they had more opportunities to practise speaking English in the NET's class and they both expressed that they enjoyed learning English through games and discussions. Lindsay, Maggie and Stanley described the NET's class as more "enjoyable" and "fun". Different from the other focal participants, Gallie did not find any differences between the local teachers and the NETs in her school.

Gallie stated that the local teachers in her primary school seldom taught according to the textbooks. "The local teachers often engaged us in group discussions", she said. Moreover, Gallie indicated her preference for being taught by the local teachers,

> I believed that local English teachers had a better understanding of our (Hong Kong students) English learning. Sometimes, we might speak Chinglish in class because of language transfer (negative L1 transference). Local teachers understood why we did so…I found that the local teachers were more patient. They would correct our mistakes and taught us how to use or speak English properly. As for the NETs, they just perceived our Chinglish as careless or silly mistakes.

From the findings, it is evident that the participants held similar views towards their English learning at the primary level. They described their English class as "teacher-centred" and "grammar-intensive". English learning centred on copying words and

sentences from textbooks, memorizing English vocabulary, and being tested and quizzed on English grammar. Moreover, most of the participants claimed that they did not have the opportunity to interact with their peers in English except in the NETs' class. Gallie was the only one who could practise speaking the language both in and out of the English classroom. Looking back now at their learning experiences in primary school, the participants did not think their English learning was effective after all. They complained about the teacher-centeredness of the English class, as well as the memorization of grammatical rules and English vocabulary. It was no wonder that some participants claimed that they were more engaged in out-of-class English learning activities, which were more motivating than their formal English lessons.

5.2.3   Out-of-class English learning activities

During their primary education, all participants participated in various out-of-class English learning activities, which included private English tutorials at home or tutorial centres, English extra-curricular activities in school, the annual Hong Kong schools speech festival, listening to English songs, watching English movies, English learning at home and overseas trips. The participants held different perceptions towards the impact of out-of-class activities on their English learning.

5.2.3.1   Private English tutorials

Attending private English tutorials has been a common phenomenon in East Asian regions, including Hong Kong (Bray, 2006). Bray (1999) and Stevenson and Baker (1992) describe private tutoring as a "shadow education system", which is additional to formal school education. Bray (2006) states that some students manage to handle their school work, and yet their parents still invest in tutoring so as to maintain their children's competitive edge. It is generally believed that children receiving private tutoring are "able to perform better in school", and in the long run, they can "improve their lifetime earnings" (p. 515). According to Bray and Kwok (2003), in Hong Kong, some 35% of secondary 1 – 3, 47% of secondary 4 – 5 and 70% of secondary 6 -7 students received private tutoring. The researchers also stated that more than 50% of both low-income and

middle-income families in Hong Kong spent 1.1 to 5% of their monthly household income on private tutoring.

In this study, Brandon and Jack attended private English tutorials during their primary school years. When Brandon was in primary four, his mother hired a native English speaker to teach him phonics at home. The private tutorial lasted for six months. Looking back now, Brandon did not think the private tutorials helped him much with his English learning, "Well, at that time, I just perceived the private tutorial as one extra-curricular activity. I did not particularly like or dislike it." Different from Brandon, Jack attended an English course in a more formal academic setting. During the summer prior to his secondary studies, Jack attended an English course at the British Council. All of the instructors were native English speakers. Jack shared with me his unpleasant learning experience there, "I did not understand one single word the instructor said. I did not think there was anything special about that English course." As mentioned in Chapter 4, Jack remembered the instructor once asked the class to queue up alphabetically according to the first letter of their first name. Jack did not understand the instruction and stood in the wrong place. He expressed that he felt embarrassed when the instructor pointed out his mistake. Since then, he had developed resistance to the summer course. Drawing upon Brandon's and Jack's experience, it appeared that supplementary English tutorials did not necessarily facilitate students' English learning. And for Jack, he even developed a sense of failure during that summer course.

5.2.3.2   English extra-curricular activities in school

Among the focal participants in this study, only Gallie mentioned the English extra-curricular activities at her primary school. As stated in Chapter 4, all of the extra-curricular activities in her school were conducted in English and she had learnt a lot of English vocabulary through the activities (e.g., trick-or-treating at Halloween; also see section 4.2.1 in Chapter 4). Gallie also said that, "…I think my school made a lot of efforts to motivate students to learn English, making us feel that English learning was not that difficult after all. We felt more eager to learn the language."

5.2.3.3   The Annual Hong Kong Schools Speech Festival

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the annual Hong Kong schools speech festival is organized by the Hong Kong Schools Music and Speech Association. It is one of the largest inter-school competitions in Hong Kong. The competition consists of many sections such as solo verse speaking and prose speaking. Gallie had been taking part in the festival since her primary studies. She spoke highly of her participation in the festival, "My primary school often encouraged students to take part in the speech festival. I remembered when I was at primary five, more than half of my class participated in it…I enjoyed all the practice and preparation before the competition." Gallie believed that the speech festival led her to invest more in her English learning, and as she put it, "…(the speech festival) made me want to do better (in my English learning)." Another participant, Brandon, also had the opportunity to participate in a poem recitation in the festival. Brandon recalled that it was his private English tutor who recommended that he participated in the competition. However, he did not feel the same way as Gallie, "I did not quite understand why the tutor recommended me to participate in the competition. I practised for several months. I did not win any prizes in the festival." At that time, Brandon felt compelled to participate in the festival. He did not think the festival had any impact on his English learning.

Besides learning English in more structured out-of-class activities (e.g., private English tutorials and participation in the speech festival), some participants also talked about learning English through popular culture (e.g., listening to English songs and watching English television programs).

5.2.3.4   Popular culture

Lindsay recalled that she began watching English television programs at home when she was studying in primary school. Lindsay stated that it was her parents who sparked her interest in watching these programs. Since then, she avidly followed different American television series such as "Gossip Girls". Lindsay was excited whenever she talked about the television series or the celebrities. She indicated that such habit had a positive impact on her English learning, as she wanted to improve her English so as to understand the

characters' words. Maggie also mentioned that she started off listening to English songs along with her friends in primary school. Later, she became more and more interested in English songs and even searched online for the song lyrics. Sometimes, she would read the lyrics while listening to the songs.

5.2.3.5   English learning at home

In his study, Palfreyman (2011) examined the role of family support in language learning. He stated that family support for English learning often comes from language learners' "significant others", whom Palfreyman (2011) referred to as "other people who are often more significant to them [language learners] than their teachers" (p. 17). In this study, both parents and siblings constituted the major resources for the participants' English learning at home. However, the data suggests that the participants seemed to capitalize on this resource only during their early years of schooling. This may be due to the fact that most of the parents were not proficient in English. Moreover, the participants' siblings were also busy with their own school work. For example, Maggie talked about how her sister helped her revise for the English examination when she was at primary four and five. During that time, Maggie's sister was studying at junior secondary levels (S1 to S3). When her sister proceeded to the senior levels (S4 to S7), Maggie had to rely more on herself, as her sister needed to concentrate on the preparation for the public examination. As for Gallie and Lindsay, their parents helped them with English learning, but only up to their primary studies. The data supports Palfreyman's (2011) contention that family support played an important role in one's English learning. As the participants grew older, they became the resources which their younger siblings could capitalize on. When Gallie, Jack and Stanley proceeded to their secondary studies, they took up the teaching role at home and helped their younger siblings learn English.

5.2.3.6   Overseas trips

In this study, only Brandon and Lindsay had the opportunity to travel overseas during their primary studies. When Brandon was at primary six, he participated in a summer English program in Toronto. During the trip, Brandon met students from different countries and recalled that he had to communicate with them in English. He remembered

that he had to attend English lessons everyday and all in-class activities were conducted in English:

> Yes, we talked to each other in English. We were very young back then. All of us were not very proficient in English. Though we did not really understand what each other was saying, we had a lot of opportunities to speak the language in that summer program. In Hong Kong, we seldom need to speak English…That's (the trip) the first time I spoke English in unfamiliar settings. I felt great.

Brandon spoke highly of his overseas experience and claimed that the trip helped build up his confidence in speaking English. Another participant, Lindsay, also went overseas once during her primary school years. However, she did not recall anything about the trip, only that she and her parents went to Brisbane, Australia for a holiday.

When compared with their kindergarten English learning experiences, the participants were more vocal about their English learning at primary school. How did they conceptualize English learning during that time?

5.2.4 Conceptualizations of English learning at primary school: "It's all about grammar."

When the participants studied at primary school, they all perceived English as one academic subject they needed to perform well in order to proceed to more senior levels. The participants mainly associated their English learning with "learning about grammar and vocabulary", "rote memorization", "dictation", "spelling exercises", and "copying from textbooks". Only Gallie talked about her interest in learning the language, which stemmed from the English extra-curricular activities in her school. All participants reported that they seldom considered why they had to learn the language. They just felt that they were compelled to learn it well, but were not engaged in the learning process. For example, Stanley found his English lessons boring and recalled that he sometimes fell asleep in class. However, some participants did mention that when they were learning in the NETs' oral English class, they found that English learning could be "interesting", "fun" and "enjoyable". Most important of all, they came to see that they could use the

language in real life situations and that English was not just something they read from a textbook.

Besides perceiving English as an academic subject, Gallie also considered it as a "communication tool". Similar to her kindergarten studies, she noticed that competence in English was vital to her "survival" in school, as she needed the language to learn other content subjects and to communicate with her English-speaking peers. For Jack, he conceptualized the English language as a "barrier" and his English learning as a "tough job". He felt that English was very distant from him, "At that time, learning English, to me, was like learning a complete new system…I had to learn everything from scratch. It was hard." Looking back at his primary English learning, Jack said,

> I think English is like building a bridge, which can help me reach out to the others. English grammar is like sand and stones, the building materials. I think I was given some sand and stones from the primary English classroom and yet, I was not taught how to build the bridge using those materials.

He continued, "If we (himself and his learning peers) were supposed to learn English as a communication tool. I don't think my prior learning at primary school helped achieve that."

During their primary education, most participants conceptualized English as "something you must learn well" in school. They did not find English learning personally relevant, which might explain why they were not very motivated to learn the language. The traditional teacher-centred and grammar-intensive English class also reinforced the idea that English was just something you "describe it/talk about it" rather than "speak it" (Menezes, 2011a, p. 67).

5.2.5   English learner identities in the primary English classroom

Identity construction, for many learners, is 'at the centre of their language learning processes" (Huang, 2011, p. 229). The way language learners position themselves in the language classroom influence their investment in learning the target language. As described in section 5.1.2.2, the participants, except Gallie, considered themselves on

equal footing with their peers in kindergarten. However, when they proceeded to the primary level, they began to construct themselves as different from the others with regard to their English proficiency.

5.2.5.1   Less competent English learners

Brandon, Jack, Maggie and Stanley perceived themselves as less competent English learners in the primary English classroom. For Brandon, he claimed that his English level was below average because of his limited knowledge of English. He identified himself as belonging to "the lower rank" in his class. He remembered his classmates could speak fluent English,

> They could speak like the English teacher…They usually got full marks in English dictations and had strong reading comprehension skills. I recalled that they did not need to use the dictionary. They just knew all the words in those reading comprehension exercises.

For Maggie, she also compared her English performance to that of her peers, "My English skills were relatively poor when compared with the others. I did not do well in grammar exercises. At that time, I just gave up learning English grammar and put it aside." Maggie responded to her failure in a positive way. She made efforts to reduce her sense of inferiority by concentrating more on learning English vocabulary, "I did not want to lose to the others (her peers in class). Thus, I focused more on improving my English vocabulary." While using the word "lose", Maggie seemed to position herself as a rival against her classmates, competing for higher grades in the English subject. Having realized that she might not be able to achieve good results in English grammar, Maggie chose to work more on vocabulary, with the aim of boosting her overall English performance. Maggie tried to surmount her failure by putting more effort into learning English vocabulary. Instead of being a passive and powerless English learner, Maggie was active in seeking alternative ways to overcome her difficulties in English learning.

Similar to Brandon and Maggie, Jack also positioned himself as a less competent English learner. In order to brush up on his English skills, Jack spoke as much English as possible

in the class. However, he was often asked by his peers to switch back to Cantonese during group discussions. Similar to the student participants in Jackson's (2008) study, Jack's use of English in contexts where there were no native English speakers present was considered as "showing off" and he was being isolated as a non-in-group member. Jack expressed his frustration, "Yes, I would like to practise speaking English more in class, and yet I did not want to be ignored or isolated by the others." In most cases, Jack gave in and spoke Cantonese. This comes in line with Jackson's (2008) claim that language learners are "mindful about who they wish to identify with" (p. 37). Jack believed that his use of Cantonese in group discussions would help connect him to his immediate learning community, while English would just set him apart from his peers. How Jack positioned himself in the English classroom was closely linked to both his immediate learning community (Cantonese-speaking peers) and the target language community, which he aspired to. While using Cantonese in group discussions, Jack was valued as one in-group member and thus, he had the right to speak in the discussion. On the contrary, his use of English marginalized him as an outsider. Jack's case supports Norton's (1995) idea that language learners constantly negotiate their identities during the course of language learning and learner identity is "multiple and contradictory" and sometimes, "a site of struggle" (p. 15-16).

Similar to Brandon, Jack and Maggie, Stanley also considered himself as a low-proficient English learner in his class. The way Stanley positioned himself in the English classroom hinged upon his English proficiency. Stanley recalled that some of his peers could speak fluent English, and he felt frustrated and nervous whenever he gave presentations in front of them. Stanley's identity as an English learner was closely linked to his perception of his English proficiency and how he might be judged by his peers. He did not want to make any mistakes in English and "lose face". His sense of inferiority in front of the more competent students sometimes held him back from using English in class.

5.2.5.2   "We are all the same."

Among the six participants, only Lindsay and Gallie did not differentiate themselves from their learning peers. For example, Gallie claimed that "my school provided students with a friendly learning environment, in which we aimed to improve our English

performance together. We seldom compared with each other with regard to our English performance." However, Gallie did mention once about how she was different from her peers who graduated from Chinese-medium kindergartens. She recounted, "When having group discussions in English, the Chinese-stream students were shy and passive and they sometimes remained silent during the whole discussion. I think those Chinese-stream students were not very used to the English-only environment in the school." Gallie positioned herself as an English learner with a strong English-stream background. She noticed the gap between herself and the Chinese-medium students and she saw herself as having a more advantageous learning environment than her Chinese-medium counterparts. Gallie's view of her English language ability as an asset or a competitive edge reveals her positive identity as a successful English learner. For Lindsay, she believed that she had a similar English level as her peers. During the interviews, she did not talk much about the differences between herself and her peers. She expressed to me that she never compared herself to her peers with regard to English proficiency. Rather, she was more concerned about the teaching practice and the learning environment in her primary English classroom, as those aspects were more important when it came to one's English learning. Lindsay expressed that "it's futile trying to compare yourself with others. That won't help with my English learning."

Drawing upon the participants' learning experiences in primary school, one can see that the participants, except Lindsay, perceived themselves as different from their learning peers. The way they conceptualized themselves as English learners in relation to their peers was closely linked to their perceptions of their own and their peers' English proficiency. Moreover, it is noteworthy that some participants' (e.g., Jack and Gallie) language choice in the classroom hinged upon their affiliation with their immediate learning community. For example, Jack's wish to be accepted as an "in-group" member drove him to use Cantonese instead of English in group discussions. His fear of being positioned as an outsider held him back from using English in class, which contradicted his wish to improve his English skills. As we shall see in the later sections, the other participants also experienced similar situations in their secondary English classrooms.

5.3 English Learning Experiences during Secondary School Years

After six years of primary education, the focal participants entered secondary school (at the age of 12). In Hong Kong, students are streamed into either Chinese- or English-medium secondary schools based on their academic performance. Table 8 below shows the language stream in which the participants pursued their secondary education.

Table 8: Participants' Secondary Education Background

Participants	Secondary education						
	Junior			Senior		Matriculation	
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7
Jack	CMI						
Brandon	CMI						
Maggie	CMI/EMI (subject-specific)			EMI			
Stanley	EMI	CMI					

Participants	Junior			Senior		Educational path after S5	
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5		
Gallie	EMI			EMI		Pursuing her S6 studies (EMI) for six months and then left for Australia	
Lindsay	EMI			EMI		One-year self-study for the public examination (HKCEE)	Pursuing the preparatory program at HKC (EMI)

As opposed to the other four participants, Gallie and Lindsay did not complete all seven years of secondary education. Gallie pursued her S6 studies for six months and then left for Australia to pursue her post-secondary education. Lindsay self-studied at home (without formal schooling) for a year after her S5 studies. She retook the public examination the following year, and later entered HKC to pursue her post-secondary education. As can be seen in Table 8, Jack and Brandon studied in a Chinese-medium secondary school. As for Maggie, she received her junior secondary studies (S1-S3) in either the Chinese- or English-stream (depending on the subject; also see section 4.5.1 in Chapter 4) and later in the English-stream at the senior levels (S4-S7). Stanley's secondary school was originally English-medium but it later switched to Chinese-medium as it had to comply with the government's mandatory mother tongue (Chinese)

teaching policy. In this study, only Gallie and Lindsay pursued English-medium education throughout their secondary school years.

In the following sections, I will present the following four recurrent themes that emerged from the participants' learning experiences in the secondary English classroom: i) preparation for the public examinations; ii) out-of-class English learning activities; iii) streaming arrangement in school; and iv) factors of successful English learning.

5.3.1 Preparation for the public examinations: "It's all about past examination paper drills."

Prior to the 2009-2010 academic year , Hong Kong students pursued three years of junior and four years of senior secondary studies, followed by three years of post-secondary education. Students were required to sit two public examinations: i) Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) at the end of their S5 studies; and ii) Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) at the end of their S7 studies. Students needed to achieve at least a D grade or above in English, so as to meet the minimum language requirement for university admission. Figure 4 below shows the secondary and post-secondary education structure prior to the academic year 2009 – 2010.
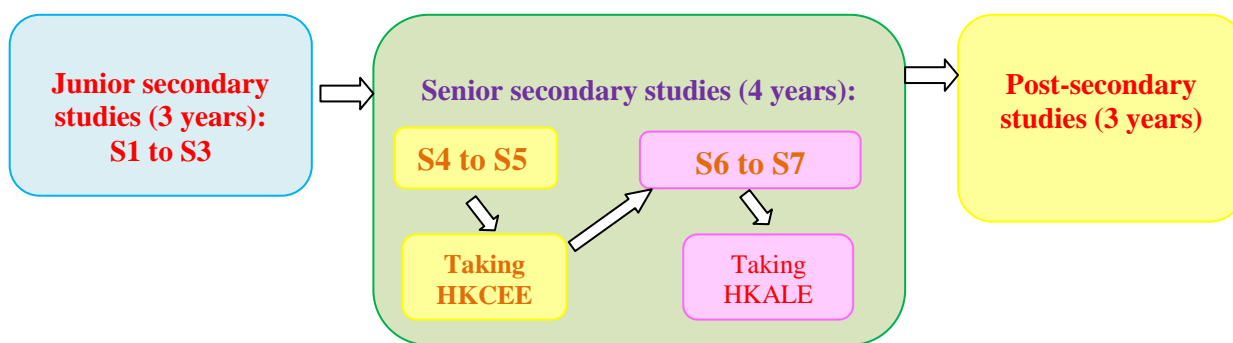
Figure 4: Structure of Senior and Post-secondary Education prior to the Academic Year 2009-2010

However, beginning in the 2009-2010 academic year, the Hong Kong government implemented the new 3-3-4 scheme for senior secondary and post-secondary education. Under the 3-3-4 scheme, the four-year senior secondary studies were replaced by three

years, and students would take four years to complete their undergraduate program. There is only one public examination, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), at the end of their secondary studies. In this study, all six participants pursued their secondary education prior to the implementation of the new 3-3-4 education scheme. As mentioned in Chapter 3, students in HKC either continue their studies at university or enter the job market upon their graduation from HKC. During the interviews, the six participants indicated their plans to further their studies at the university. After two years of study at HKC, they can then transfer to year 2 of most 4-year university programs. In some cases, year 1 HKC students with outstanding academic performance will be admitted to year 1 of 4-year university programs.

As all six participants studied under the old senior secondary education system, they had to sit two public examinations (HKCEE and HKALE) instead of one (HKDSE). This may provide clues as to why a dominant recurring theme that emerged from the participants' secondary English learning experiences was the preparation for the two public examinations.

With regard to their English learning at the secondary level, the participants' major concern was getting high grades in the public examination. It was of great importance to maintain good academic standing in order to proceed to more senior secondary levels, and later, to get into the university. All of the participants associated their English learning with past examination paper drills and they described their learning experience as "intensive" and "tiring". They all recalled that their English classes concentrated on equipping them with the skills and techniques to tackle examination questions. Very often, the teacher asked students to work individually on past examination papers and the teacher would go through the answers with the class. For all the participants, preparation for the two public examinations seemed to have constituted their most memorable English learning experiences at the secondary level.

Although all six participants mentioned the intensive examination paper drills in the English class, they held different perceptions towards the examination-led instruction. For Brandon, he felt that he did not really learn any English at all, "I think my English

learning had actually stopped since my primary studies." Brandon complained about the intensive drills and he did not consider himself learning anything about the English language. Rather, he was just learning the examination techniques. Jack also held negative feelings towards his English class. He claimed that he seldom got his answers correct in the past papers drills. Even if his teacher explained the answers to the class, Jack did not understand the explanations, "I didn't even understand the fundamentals of English, and how was I supposed to understand the teacher's explanation?" The past paper drills left Jack in a "sink or swim" situation. The repeated failure he experienced had been a setback along his secondary English learning trajectory, which might explain why he would rather spend more time on studying the content subjects.

Another participant, Gallie, also expressed her discontent with the examination-oriented English curriculum and the intensive past examination paper practice in school. Gallie recalled that besides working on the past examination papers in class, her school also arranged supplementary lessons after school to ensure all the students were successful on the English examination. Gallie remembered she had to stay after school two or three days a week just to work on the past papers, "For example, we worked on the reading comprehension section[14] one day and then the writing section on the following day. It was just tiring". Gallie was under immense pressure to take in the content that could be tested on the examination. All past paper drills and mock examinations exerted an adverse impact on Gallie's secondary studies. In the end, she decided to pursue her education overseas following the completion of her S5 studies.

Different from Brandon, Gallie and Jack, the other three participants, Lindsay, Maggie and Stanley did not hold negative opinions towards the past examination paper practices. They seemed to accept the fact that the drills were necessary, as they needed the techniques and skills to achieve success on the examination. Stanley, in particular, enjoyed the practice for the oral paper. Through the oral practice, he could demonstrate

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[14] The English language examination consists of five sections which include writing, reading comprehension, practical skills, listening and speaking.

his knowledge of English in front of his peers. He claimed that he received great satisfaction whenever he saw his peers nodding in agreement with what he said.

Although the examination-led instruction exerted a negative impact on some of the participants' motivation in English learning, all six participants said that they came to see clearly their weaknesses and strengths in English learning through the examination practice and thus, they were more able to make concerted efforts to work on their weak points.

5.3.2　Out-of-class English learning activities

Another recurrent theme that emerged from the participants' secondary English learning was their participation in out-of-class activities. One dominant activity was attending private English tutorials.

5.3.2.1　Private English tutorials

All participants, except Jack, attended English tutorials at private tutorial centres. These tutorial centres focus on the public examination syllabi and aim to equip students with answering techniques and tactics. The five participants attached different meanings to their learning experiences at the tutorial centre. Brandon attended the English tutorials at the beginning of his S6 studies. He talked about the instructor who taught him how to get higher marks in the English paper, "The instructor suggested us to focus more on the reading comprehension section as it counts the highest in the overall mark of the English paper." In the end, Brandon got the highest mark in the comprehension section and claimed that he would not have done so if he did not attend the private English tutorials. Like Brandon, Gallie also found the private tutorials useful in preparing her for the public examination.

Gallie enjoyed the teaching format at the tutorial centre as the instructor would assign students to small groups based on their English proficiency. By doing so, the instructor was able to cater to students' diverse learning needs. Instead of working solely on past examination papers in the tutorial, Gallie said,

Each lesson focused on one particular topic and the instructor would teach us a lot of useful vocabulary. For example, in one lesson, the instructor talked about environmental protection. I remembered that we read many passages on the topic and we learnt a lot of vocabulary in that area.

Gallie indicated that she had learnt much vocabulary from the tutorials, which really helped with her English writing. Gallie also spoke highly of the oral practice at the tutorial centre. During the oral practice, she met students from other secondary schools. She felt that when compared with the practice in her school, the practice at the tutorial centre resembled the actual public examination as she could practice with students from other secondary schools. Maggie also shared similar views.

Maggie attended private English tutorials since her S4 studies. Like Gallie, Maggie also enjoyed the oral practice at the tutorial centre. She recalled that there was one native English-speaking instructor who arranged oral practice for students every week. Maggie attended the sections regularly. Not only could she practise with students from different secondary schools, but Maggie commented that all practices were conducted in English. Maggie stated that at school, her classmates sometimes spoke Cantonese during the oral practice, which was why Maggie spoke highly of the oral practice at the tutorial centre. Different from Gallie and Maggie, Lindsay and Stanley did not particularly like or dislike their English tutorials.

Lindsay did not think there was any difference between the English lessons in school and the private tutorials,

During the tutorials, we just sat there and listened to the instructor. We kept on working on the past papers…We were there to learn how to get better grades in the examination. For example, the instructor taught us English expressions that we might use to impress the examiners.

Stanley not only had to attend the English lessons at the tutorial centre, but he also had private tutorials at home. Stanley said the two tutorials complemented each other, "I think the tutorials at home helped brush up my reading comprehension and writing skills while

those at the tutorial centre helped with my oral English." Stanley did not indicate whether the tutorials were helpful or not, but felt that it was a common practice for Hong Kong students to attend private tutorials during their secondary studies.

5.3.2.2   English extra-curricular activities in school

Some of the participants' secondary schools were very supportive of students' English learning. For example, Maggie's secondary school organized English activities to celebrate different festivals. Maggie recalled the Chinese mid-autumn festival, when the English teachers would write English riddles on the lanterns. The lanterns would be given to those who could solve the riddles. Maggie was excited when recounting such activities, as she was once successful in solving a riddle and was given a lantern as a gift. Maggie also said that there was radio broadcasting in her school, which played English songs during lunch hours. Stanley also shared similar experiences at school. Stanley's secondary school organized an "English Day" once a week. On that day, there were numerous English game booths on the campus. Stanley enjoyed "English Day" as he felt that he could actually use the English language in real life. Besides the English extra-curricular activities in school, some participants also mentioned their participation in the annual Hong Kong schools speech festival.

5.3.2.3   The Annual Hong Kong Schools Speech Festival

Gallie, Maggie and Stanley took part in the English poem recitation section during the speech festival. All three participants spoke highly of the experience, especially Stanley. Stanley thought that the competition helped boost his confidence in speaking English in public. Since that time, he began to position himself as a competent English speaker among his peers. Similar to their primary school years, some participants had also learned English through popular culture.

5.3.2.4   Popular culture

Listening to English songs and watching English television programs were the two most common out-of-class learning activities mentioned by the participants. In order to understand the English songs, some participants (e.g., Brandon, Lindsay, Maggie and

Stanley) would read the lyrics and look up unfamiliar words in the dictionary. Lindsay also read English novels like *Twilight* and teenagers' magazines such as *Seventeen* for leisure. Every time when Lindsay talked about American television programs or American celebrities, she became extremely animated. Sometimes, she even shared with me the details of each episode of the television program. Lindsay claimed that she learnt a lot of colloquial expressions while watching the television series.

5.3.2.5   Overseas trips

As mentioned in her English learning narrative, Maggie participated in an international competition in the United States when she was in S3 (see section 4.5 in Chapter 4). Maggie described the trip as an eye-opening experience for her. The trip enabled her to use English in her everyday life. In Hong Kong, Maggie seldom had the opportunity to speak English, except in the English classroom. After the trip, she became more confident in her English proficiency. Though Maggie only stayed in the United States for one week, she claimed that what she learned from the trip was much more than what she had been learning in her English class. Maggie stated that she had become more motivated to learn the language after the trip, "English learning was actually quite interesting. I came to see the significance of learning English." As for Brandon, he went to Canada to attend his cousin's wedding during the summer prior to his studies at HKC. Unlike Maggie, Brandon did not speak English much during the trip. Although Brandon's cousins spoke mainly English, Brandon talked to them in Cantonese. Brandon claimed that he did not make any real gains in English learning during the trip, and yet he became more aware of his learner identities. Brandon told me that even though he and his cousins are Chinese and they have been learning English as a second language, he felt that his cousins could speak fluent English, like a native English speaker. Brandon noticed the differences between himself and his cousins, whose English learning environment appeared to be more advantageous than his own.

5.3.3   Streaming arrangement in school

In this study, all the participants, except Stanley, were streamed into different English classes (elite, regular and remedial) during their secondary studies. The streaming was

based on either student's overall academic or English performance. Table 9 below shows the different English classes to which the participants were assigned when learning English at the secondary level.

Table 9: Streaming Arrangement of English Classes

Name	Junior levels			Senior levels		Matriculation	
	S1	**S2**	**S3**	**S4**	**S5**	**S6**	**S7**
Streaming based on English performance							
Brandon	Elite			No streaming arrangement			
Jack	Regular		Remedial	No streaming arrangement			
Streaming based on overall academic performance							
	S1	**S2**	**S3**	**S4**	**S5**	**S6**	**S7**
Gallie	Elite						Left for Australia
Lindsay	Elite	No streaming arrangement				Did not pursue matriculation	
Maggie	Remedial	Elite					
Stanley	No streaming arrangement in school						

Jack was frustrated when he first got into his secondary school. He studied in the regular English class during the first two years of his secondary studies. He remembered, during those two years, that he did not perform well in English. He always got his answers wrong in the English exercises. Because of the continuous setback in his English learning, he developed a sense of failure and felt hopeless with regard to his own learning. He felt that he had no control over his English learning. When Jack was at S3, he was assigned to the remedial English class, which was taught by a NET. Jack described the NET's class as a catalyst, which led him to re-orient himself in English learning. The NET's class was much smaller and more interactive. There were many opportunities for Jack to practise using the English language, "I felt better studying in the remedial class…I became more confident when speaking the language, especially to a native English speaker." Jack further added, "I began to perceive my English learning differently." Before attending the NET's class, Jack perceived English learning as "a tough job". In the NET's class, he was given the chance to speak the language. He became more and more interested in English learning as he could "see" himself using the language in real life. Jack described his learning in the remedial class as a breakthrough

in his English learning. However, such positive feelings wore off quickly when he proceeded to his senior studies (S4 – S7). After his S3 studies, Jack went back to the regular English class. Jack stated that the class from S4 to S7 was similar to those from S1 to S2. It was less interactive than the NET's class. Once again, Jack lost his interest in learning English. Similar to Jack, Maggie also studied in a remedial English class when she was at S1.

When Maggie proceeded to her secondary studies, she was streamed into an elite class based on her overall academic performance. However, for English, she was required to attend the remedial class. Maggie believed that she gained a lot from the remedial class, as the English teacher helped her revise her English grammar and vocabulary, "We had English tests every week. All those tests and English exercises pushed me to work harder". After studying for one year in the remedial class, Maggie was able to go back to the regular English class and learn English with her elite counterparts.

As for Gallie, she had been assigned to an elite class since S1. She believed that English learning in her school was the same in all the different classes, "I did not see anything 'special' when studying in the elite class…The students in my school were generally competent in English." As for Brandon, he was streamed into the elite English class at junior secondary levels (S1 – S3). Like Gallie, Brandon did not see any difference between his elite class and the other regular English classes. As for Lindsay, she only recalled there was streaming during her S1 studies and the streaming was subject-specific. Lindsay was streamed into the "English class". She said students in this class were relatively better in their English performance. Lindsay commented that she did not see the purpose of such streaming as she found students in other classes (e.g., mathematics class and science class) were also good at their English. I asked her what it was like studying in the "English class". Lindsay replied, "Well, we just sat there and listened to the teacher. Sometimes, the teacher called on us to answer her questions. Seldom did we have any interaction in class." Lindsay said that from S2 onwards, there was no more streaming in her school because of the adverse labelling effect. As for Stanley, there was no streaming in his school. This might explain why he commented that the English level of the students in his class was quite varied.

5.3.4   Factors of successful English learning

While the participants reinterpreted their secondary English learning experiences during the interviews, they reflected on the factors that might have led to one's success in English learning. These factors include: a) teachers' guidance; b) conducive learning environment; and c) family support.

5.3.4.1   Teachers' guidance

Brandon, Lindsay and Maggie emphasized that their English teachers had played a vital role in their secondary English learning. Brandon recalled how his English teacher helped improve his English writing,

> One time, I got my essay back and it was full of grammatical mistakes. I went up and asked the English teacher what I could do to improve my writing skills. She asked me to rewrite the essay and she would help me correct it. At the end, I rewrote the essay six times and each time, my teacher would help correct and explain my mistakes.

Because of that experience, Brandon strongly believed that English teachers play a crucial role in one's English learning. He perceived English learning as a "never-ending challenge" and he claimed that no one could overcome such a challenge without the guidance and support from an experienced teacher. Lindsay also talked about her English teacher at the junior secondary levels. Lindsay spoke highly of this English teacher as she would patiently explain difficult grammatical concepts to the class. Lindsay recalled that she understood all the lessons very well and she said, "I had a thorough understanding of each lesson. I did not have to do any preparation for the English examination. I felt great whenever I received good results in the examination and that made me want to do better."

As mentioned in section 4.5.1 in Chapter 4, there were two English teachers who sparked Maggie's passion for mastering the English language. The first one was the local teacher during her S2 studies. Unlike the traditional teacher-centred English class, Maggie remembered the local English teacher taught English through movies and songs. Maggie found that such teaching practice was more "lively", as she could actually "see" the

language being used in everyday life. Moreover, Maggie also talked about the English instructor at the private tutorial centre, who spurred her interest for English learning. Maggie stated that the instructor gave constructive feedback on her performance during the oral practice and the feedback helped prepare her for the public examination. Besides teachers' guidance, some participants also conceptualized a conducive learning environment as one crucial factor in one's success in English learning.

5.3.4.2   Conducive learning environment

While retelling her English learning experiences at the secondary level, Gallie often spoke highly of the English-rich environment in her school. Most of Gallie's learning peers were native English speakers. While studying in an English-only environment, Gallie got accustomed to speaking the language and she often talked about how English-medium education had helped her build a solid English foundation, which gave her the competitive edge over other Hong Kong students. Like Gallie, Lindsay also talked about the conducive learning environment in the NET's class in her secondary school.

Lindsay enjoyed attending the NET's lessons during her secondary studies, "We often had debates in the English class. The NET's class provided us with lots of opportunities to improve our oral English." In a similar vein, Jack felt that the remedial class taught by the NET also offered him a conducive environment in which he could, in his words, "face the English language". He no longer felt anxious when speaking the language. As for Stanley, he also considered a supportive learning environment as a very important factor in one's English learning. During the interviews, he complained about the use of Cantonese in his secondary English classroom. Stanley recalled that he wanted to use as much English as possible in class, as that was the only time he could actually speak the language. However, whenever he tried to speak English during group discussions, his classmates would ignore him and continue the discussion in Cantonese. Stanley felt frustrated, "When everyone was using Cantonese in the lesson, you had no option but to speak Cantonese in the discussion." Stanley commented that the lack of an English-rich environment in school exerted a negative impact on his English performance. Besides a conducive learning environment in the English class, the participants also spoke of the role of family support in facilitating their English learning.

5.3.4.3   Family support

When it came to out-of-class English learning activities, Lindsay often spoke of her parents and how they stimulated her interest in English popular culture. Lindsay started watching English television programs with her parents during her primary education and since then, it had become a habit. While watching the English television programs, Lindsay and her father sometimes repeated the lines after the main characters. Lindsay expressed that such practice helped her remember some colloquial English expressions and slang, and sometimes she would try using them in her daily life. Lindsay strongly believed that her family provided a supportive environment for her English learning at home. This provides evidence for Palfreyman's (2011) claim that, "family relationships afford bonding ties, linking family members closely and having a strong facilitating or hindering effect in learning beyond the class" (p. 25). Gallie and Stanley also considered family support as an important factor in one's English learning, especially when parents are proficient in English. Gallie recalled that some of her local Hong Kong classmates would speak English at home and Gallie thought that they came from an environment that was advantageous to their study of English. Stanley also mentioned one of his friends whose parents were very proficient in English, "I knew that his parents gave him many effective tips for learning English well. That really made a difference."

As described in section 5.2.4, most of the participants perceived their English learning in primary school as the study of English grammar and vocabulary, and English was one academic subject they had to do well in school. What about their perceptions towards English learning at the secondary level? What meanings did they attach to their learning experiences?

5.3.5   Conceptualizations of secondary English learning: "It's all about examination preparation."

While learning English under a heavily examination-oriented curriculum, it is not surprising that all the focal participants perceived English as a compulsory subject they had to study for the public examination. Moreover, it was one very important subject that they must do well if they wanted to get into university. As the participants grew older,

they came to see clearly the significance of English in both their academic and career development. In order to get into the local universities, they had to get at least a D grade or above in English in the two public examinations (HKCEE and HKALE). For all six participants, the biggest concern was getting high grades in all subjects, including the English language. Their conceptualizations of English learning had to be understood with reference to the broader social context in Hong Kong. As mentioned earlier, English has been playing a hegemonic role in the Hong Kong society because of the territory's colonial past. The English language was one of the two official languages in various domains such as government administration, education and law (e.g., Evans, 2000, 2013; Poon, 2004, 2009). Under the influence of the colonial legacy of English, English represents the gateway to one's academic and career success. The participants noticed the power of the English language and the economic, social and political advantages associated with the language. The participants were learning the language for an instrumental or practical purpose (Gardner, 1985; Ricento, 2005). They were aware of the fact that English serves as "linguistic capital" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991) and English learning could help them get access "to a wider range of symbolic and material resources" (Norton, 2000a, p.182). All participants felt that they were pressured to master the language well in order to gain prestige for themselves. While becoming proficient in English, the participants would be able to gain the membership of their desired communities (e.g., educated elites and well-paid professionals).

Looking back at his experiences in the secondary English classroom, Brandon felt that his learning was, in his words, "completely out of track". Brandon explained to me that he felt lost and was confused at that time. To him, English learning seemed to be about learning how to tackle examination questions. Brandon conceptualized his English learning as the memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary, "English learning at the secondary level was like playing Lego. You have to learn how to make use of different pieces (such as nous, verbs and adjectives) to build what you want (e.g., writing a piece of English essay)". As mentioned earlier, Brandon also conceptualized English learning as a "never-ending challenge", "Once you have overcome a challenge, you will encounter another one. You don't know when it's going to end." Jack also shared similar feelings.

Jack did not have an enjoyable English learning experience at his secondary school. He only felt a bit better when studying in the remedial class at S3. The remedial class made Jack feel that English was something more than just an academic subject. It was also a means of communication. However, when Jack proceeded to his senior secondary levels (S4-S7), he began to see English as a barrier, which stopped him from acquiring knowledge in other fields. This might be due to the fact that Jack chose to study science subjects in English at the beginning of his S4 studies. He understood that unless he could master the English language well, he would not understand the science subjects and he might not be able to achieve his dreams – to work in the medical field. However, his repeated failure in the past English examination paper practices led him to lose his confidence in English learning. He felt detached from the language and out of place. On one hand, Jack had negative feelings towards English; while on the other hand, he knew that he had to master the English language in order to perform well in other subjects. Jack said that his repeated failure in those past paper drills was the main source of his frustration. The adverse impact of the public examination can also be seen in Gallie's case.

Prior to her secondary studies, Gallie was interested in learning English. However, her interest was overshadowed by her desire to get high grades in the examination during her secondary studies. Her investment in English had less to do with her interest in the language than with her wish to maintain good academic standing. Similar to Jack, Gallie felt stressed because of the mock examinations and past paper practice in school and she gradually developed resistance to learning the language. Similar to Brandon, Gallie and Jack, Lindsay and Stanley were also concerned with the enhancement of their English proficiency in order to get higher marks in the public examination. For example, Lindsay was invested in learning more English expressions, "The English expressions helped make my writing look more sophisticated. Yes, I could use those expressions to impress the examiners and thus, I could get higher marks." Stanley told me that, during his secondary studies, he did not care about anything except getting higher marks in the examination. He just paid attention to the content that could be assessed in the examination. He also stated that he had become more "target-oriented". Like Stanley,

Maggie also held a grades-oriented perspective towards her English learning. However, Maggie also started to relate her English use to more than just the academic settings.

As described earlier, Maggie went to the United States for a competition at S3. During her stay in the States, Maggie came to see that she could apply what she learned in the English class to real life situations. Since that time, Maggie had become more invested in learning the language. While reinterpreting her experiences in the States, Maggie came to a conclusion that, "We (Hong Kong citizens) cannot live without Chinese and English in Hong Kong as we need to use them to communicate with others. We have to learn them well." Maggie realized that her use of English was not only limited to formal classroom settings, but that it also has a functional purpose in social contexts – English can serve as a communication tool.

From the data, it can be seen that all the six participants perceived English as mainly one academic subject in the secondary school curriculum. Such perception was reinforced by the intensive past examination drills and the heavily examination-oriented education system in Hong Kong. Being aware of the "linguistic capital" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991) of English, the participants were compelled to learn the language well in order to climb up the social ladder (e.g., to become an elite in the society).

5.3.6　Learner identities in the secondary English classroom

During their secondary education, the participants became more aware of their position in the English classroom. The data reveals that they became more concerned about how the others perceived them as English learners. In Hong Kong, the public examination plays a pivotal role in students' academic career. Only those top-performing students can get into university. While studying under such a highly selective education system, it is no wonder that the six participants often compared their academic performances with that of their learning peers. Some participants, such as Maggie, perceived their peers as competitors, competing for limited seats in the university. On the contrary, other participants, such as Lindsay, perceived their peers as learning partners with whom they could work and overcome the challenges in English learning. In this section, I will

present how the participants perceived themselves as English learners in the secondary English classroom.

5.3.6.1   English performance

When Jack got into secondary school, he immediately noticed the differences in the levels of English between himself and his peers. Jack claimed that he felt anxious during the transition from his primary to secondary studies:

> In the past (while studying in primary school), I worked hard to memorize what I was taught and I got some 70 marks (out of 100) in the English subject. But when I got to my secondary school, I only got 40…Other students were doing much better. I remembered the English teacher always liked to call on the more proficient students to answer questions in class. I chose to remain silent in class most of the time even if I knew the answers to the questions.

Jack did not feel comfortable speaking English in front of those English proficient students. As Jackson (2008) states in her work, "feelings of inadequacy, especially when interacting with speakers who are more proficient [for example, Jack's learning peers], may lessen their willingness to practise it" (p. 78). Jack constructed himself as a "failure" during that time and he felt misplaced in the English classroom. However, his sense of inferiority and misplacement had gone away when he studied in the remedial class at S3, "In the remedial class, I felt less like a failure". Jack claimed that he felt a sense of equality when studying alongside students at a similar English level. Jack opened up and tried to speak more English. However, his positive feelings towards English learning were short-lived. Once Jack went back to the regular English class (from S4-S7), he once again felt that he was left behind. He felt frustrated because of his continuous setbacks when doing the past examination paper practices. During the interviews, Jack told me that his inadequacy in English might stem from his science background.

5.3.6.2   Science vs. arts stream

Jack had studied in the science stream since his S4 studies. He decided to sit the science examination papers in English[15]. While recounting his English learning experiences in secondary school, I found that Jack often identified himself with the other science students in his school. His strong affiliation with the science-stream exerted an impact on his perception of himself as an English learner. To Jack, the arts subjects were language-loaded and thus, arts students generally had more opportunities to practise writing and speaking English, and their English standard was higher. In Jack's case, it appeared that studying English was associated more with his identity as a science student, rather than an English learner. It can be seen that Jack's perception of his English learner identity was inextricably linked to his identity as a science student. Similar to Jack, Brandon also considered himself as a less competent English learner in the classroom because of his science background.

Brandon attested that his English was not as good as the arts students. He compared himself with his friend who studied in the arts stream, "My friend (in the arts stream) liked to watch English news and read history books. He was knowledgeable about difficult political issues and he knew all those different political terms in English." Brandon continued, "Science students seldom wrote English essays. We often wrote equations and formulas in our assignments." Gallie also talked about the differences between science and arts students with regard to English learning.

Gallie was an arts student during her secondary studies. While having group discussion practices in the English class, Gallie was assigned to a group which consisted of both science and arts students. Gallie recounted this:

> I noticed that some science students did not perform well like the arts students. The arts students usually spoke more during the discussion. I think we (arts students) performed better in group discussions… I found that some science students could

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[15] Students could choose to sit the HKCEE and HKALE papers (for the content subjects) in either Chinese or English.

not express their ideas clearly in English. Sometimes, they just stopped in the middle of the discussion as they could not think of the right word to use in English. They just remained silent. Most of the time, arts students dominated the whole group discussion.

Gallie attributed the differences in English level between arts and science students to their exposure to the English language. Similar to Jack and Brandon, Gallie believed that arts students had more opportunities to practise using English, both spoken and written. As for the science students, most of their subjects were non-language-dependent and they dealt mostly with equations and formulas. It can be seen that the participants' sense of self in relation to their peers was inextricably intertwined with their prior learning experience as a science or arts student. This lends support to Sakui and Cowie's (2008, p. 106) claim that a language classroom is not just simply a place where the target language is taught, as students will bring into the classroom their previous educational experiences.

5.3.6.3   Attitudes towards English learning

During the interviews, Maggie positioned herself as a hardworking English learner, who held a positive attitude towards her English learning. In her last two years of secondary education (S6 – S7), Maggie worked extremely hard to improve her English for the public examination,

> I was more hardworking than my peers. I did not have a solid English foundation and I feared that I would be left behind. I therefore did a lot of the past examination papers, even though the teacher did not ask me to do so.

This comes in line with what Oxford, Meng, Yahun, Sung and Jain (2007) state in their work, that fear is "what leads learners to the breakthroughs they make in re-orienting themselves" (p. 160) and psychological anxieties are "catalysts for the immense effort and courage students need in order to transform themselves into successful learners and users of the language…" (p. 160). Maggie's fear of being left behind in class pushed her to work hard to improve her English skills. As for her classmates, they did not pay much attention to English learning as they thought language subjects were not as important as

other content subjects in the public examination. These students held the perception that if they performed well in the content subjects, they only needed a "D" grade in English in order to meet the minimum language requirement for university admission. Maggie was discontented with and annoyed by these students' attitudes. She constructed herself as different from them, as she made concerted efforts to seek more out-of-class learning opportunities to practise her English, such as the regular oral practice at the private tutorial centre (see section 4.5.1 in Chapter 4).

Like Maggie, Stanley also talked about his peers' attitudes towards English learning and how he was different from them. Stanley assumed a positive identity as an English learner and he constructed himself as a competent English speaker among his peers. He recalled during one oral practice in school how each student was asked to prepare an individual five-minute presentation on a given topic. Stanley was well-prepared for the practice, and yet his peers were not ready for the practice and they did not know what to say when it came to their turn. "They just wasted my time," Stanley said. Stanley was annoyed by these students' attitudes and he emphasized that he was very different from them in terms of their attitudes towards English learning.

5.3.6.4   Imagined identities

While preparing for his public examination, Stanley said that he watched CNN (Cable News Network) news every day. He practised his oral English using the news anchor as a point of reference. Stanley told me that he wanted to learn to speak like a native. His investment in English learning can be understood with reference to his desire to become a member of the "native English speakers". While visualizing himself speaking like the news anchors, Stanley assumed an imagined identity in the target language community. His desire to speak like the news anchor drove him to invest more in his English learning.

As mentioned earlier, Lindsay's parents stimulated her interest in watching English television programs. Lindsay told me that she acquired an abundance of English vocabulary and idiomatic expressions from watching the programs. Furthermore, similar to Stanley, Lindsay also wished to speak English fluently like the characters in the television programs. Her desire to become a member of the target language community

led her to invest more in her English learning. One interesting point brought up by Lindsay was how she perceived herself as both an active and passive English learner:

> I was a passive English learner under the examination-oriented English curriculum. Because of all those intensive drills for examinations, I assumed a receptive role in the classroom – I just sat there and listened to the teacher. I completed all the tasks assigned by the teacher and I was learning what was prescribed in the examination syllabi. However, I considered myself as an active English learner when it came to my out-of-class English learning activities.

It seems that the English popular culture had provided Lindsay an avenue for her to resist (or struggle against) her position as a passive learner and Lindsay was able to exercise agency over her English learning.

As revealed in their English learning experiences, the participants' construction of their learner identities was informed by their perceptions of their own English performance, their subject discipline (science vs. arts stream), and their attitudes towards English learning. Some participants also visualized themselves as members of their imagined communities (e.g., the target language communities) and their imagined identities exerted an impact on their investment in English learning. The findings of this study come in line with Chik's (2008b) work that students generally constructed themselves as different from others through English performance. Chik (2008b) also mentioned that her participants perceived out-of-class activities as one differentiation marker. In other words, her participants considered themselves as different from their peers by the out-of-class activities they attended. However, this is not the case for the student participants in this study. During the interviews, the six participants focused more on the format or structure of their out-of-class learning activities and whether such activities helped improve their English. Moreover, different from the participants in Chik's (2008b) work, the six student participants in this study also identified themselves as arts or science student when talking about their secondary English learning experiences. As we shall see in the following sections, their identity as either an arts or science student exerts an impact on their investment in English learning.

All students, except Gallie and Lindsay, completed their seven years of secondary studies. After completing their secondary education, the six participants embarked on a different post-secondary trajectory. In the section that follows, I will present the recurrent themes that emerged from their post-secondary English learning experiences.

5.4   English Learning at the Post-secondary Level

To set the context for the discussion, Figure 5 below shows the participants' post-secondary education path and their age when they entered HKC.
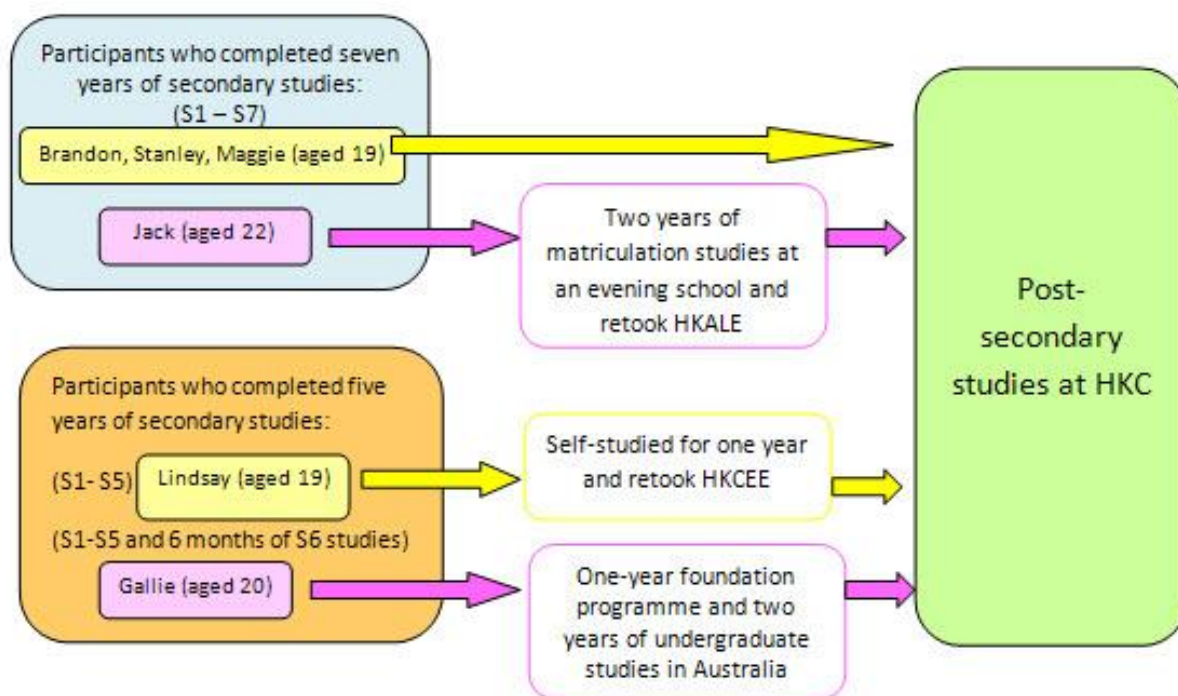
Figure 5: Participants' Post-secondary Education Path

In the sections below, I will present the common threads that run through the participants' post-secondary English learning experiences: i) teaching and learning format at HKC; and ii) differences between academic and everyday English. I will then discuss the participants' perceptions towards their current post-secondary English learning at HKC as well as their learner identities in the English classroom. Particular attention will be paid to how the interactions within their post-secondary English

classroom might have changed their perceptions towards English learning and their learner identities in relation to their learning peers.

5.4.1 English learning experiences during post-secondary school years

5.4.1.1 Teaching and learning format at HKC

As described in section 5.3.1, the six participants learned English under a heavily examination-oriented education system and they equated their English learning to mainly past examination paper drills. Once they had completed their secondary studies, the six participants seemed to be free from all the institutional constraints and began to perceive their English learning in a different way. Most participants described their post-secondary English learning as "more enjoyable". Brandon, Maggie and Stanley went into HKC upon their completion of seven years of secondary studies. Brandon described his English learning at HKC as a "long-lost friend". He liked the learning atmosphere at HKC. Brandon said that he felt more motivated in his learning when everyone in his class was speaking English. During his secondary studies, Brandon only concentrated on examination drills,

> It was alright if I did not pay attention in class at that time (secondary school) as I could always work on the next set of past papers in the next lesson. I did not think I had missed out anything. However, at HKC, I had to concentrate more in class as each lesson focused on a different topic. I had to make efforts in order to do well.

To Brandon, that was what an English class should look like. Jack also shared similar views.

Jack claimed that when he proceeded to HKC, he no longer needed to learn English under an examination-oriented curriculum. He especially enjoyed his current English class which provided abundant opportunities for students to practise using English. Different from the other five participants, Jack repeated his matriculation studies (S6 – S7). During those two years, Jack had also been learning English through intensive examination paper

drills. It was no wonder that Jack considered the English classroom at HKC as more interactive which enabled him to practise speaking the language. Lindsay also talked about the interactive and activity-based English class at HKC. Like Brandon and Jack, Lindsay became more motivated in her English learning. She often took the initiative to answer teachers' questions, something that she would never do in the secondary English classroom. Lindsay strongly believed that the group discussions in her class helped enhance her English speaking skills. In the same vein, Stanley also enjoyed his postsecondary English learning. Stanley was given more opportunities to express his ideas in English. However, not all participants were accustomed to the interactive learning environment at HKC. Maggie told me that at the beginning, she had a difficult time adapting to the learning environment at HKC. Different from her secondary school, the English lessons at HKC were more "relaxed" and student-centred. Maggie was not used to such teaching practice, as she claimed that her secondary English teacher would guide her every step of the way with regard to her English learning. For example, her English teacher would explain in detail the steps of completing an assignment. She knew what the teacher expected of her in the assignment. However, the English lessons at HKC relied more on students' independent learning. Maggie had to make decisions for herself and plan her own learning,

> It took me some time to get used to such teaching practice. But still, it would be better if I were given more information of what each lecture was about so that I could make better preparation prior to the lecture (at HKC, students were only given a course outline in the first lesson, which listed only the topic of each lecture).

Maggie's case comes in line with one post-secondary student participant, Elyse, in Chik's (2008b) study. Elyse, a first year post-secondary student, expressed that "…no one will force you to do anything. If I want to have better English, I have to rely on myself" (Chik, 2008b, p. 158). Though this was the case, Maggie enjoyed learning English at HKC as the teaching practice was more flexible than the examination-led instruction in her secondary school.

Unlike the other five participants, Gallie had the experience of studying abroad. She had pursued her post-secondary education in Australia for three years before she went back to Hong Kong. Owing to her learning experiences overseas, Gallie claimed that she had no difficulties in adapting herself to the learning environment at HKC. According to Gallie, the English curriculum at HKC was similar to the one in the Australian institution, "The English courses (in the two places) were very similar. Both of them focused on academic English and aimed at training students to become independent English learners." When compared to her English learning in Australia, Gallie claimed that the teaching practice at HKC was relatively more rigid. Because of the lockstep teaching method, Gallie said, "I had a feeling that I was once again studying under a heavily prescribed English curriculum (similar to her English learning at the secondary level in Hong Kong)."

5.4.1.2 Differences between academic and everyday English: "Can I use that in my everyday life?"

Another recurrent theme that emerged from students' English learning experiences at HKC was the practicality of the course content, especially the English vocabulary they learnt in class. Brandon, Gallie and Jack admitted that they had built a rich English vocabulary throughout the course, and yet they questioned if they could actually use those words in everyday life. Brandon said, "I seldom came across those words in newspapers or on the internet." Jack also held similar views. He stated several times that "I seldom use those words outside class." Jack expressed his wish to learn more practical English, "Well, I was able to write my assignments in English. But then, it would be difficult for me to carry out a conversation with native English speakers. I don't think I have sufficient vocabulary to cope with day-to-day topics." For Gallie, she did not think the vocabulary she learnt from the English class helped her much with her writing. She confessed to me that she only learned them to get a high grade in the end-of-term English examination and she forgot all of them once the examination was over. Different from Brandon, Gallie and Jack, Lindsay thought that the vocabulary she learnt from her class helped with her English writing. However, Lindsay was dubious about the effectiveness of one writing assignment. She commented that the writing assignment was too specific. In the assignment, students were asked to write a personal statement for university

admission. Lindsay admitted that the assignment helped with her university application, and yet she thought that the writing skills she learnt were "too specific" and were too "restrictive". Lindsay wished that she could learn more about different types of writing from her post-secondary English class.

For Stanley, he claimed that the English course at HKC helped him revise his grammar. However, there were not enough opportunities to practise using it in connection with other aspects of English learning such as speaking and writing. Stanley did not encounter any difficulties in completing the grammar exercises, which were mostly fill-in-the-blanks questions. What Stanley wanted was the opportunity to actually practise using it in real life situations. Like Stanley, Maggie also talked about learning English grammar at HKC. She indicated that the course focused too much on tenses. To her, grammar was more than just tenses. It was also about other aspects, such as word usage. Maggie stated that she had been learning academic English since primary school. She considered her English writing too formal and would have liked to learn everyday English use, such as email writing. The comments from Brandon, Gallie, Jack, Lindsay and Stanley come in line with Elyse's (the student participant in Chik's (2008b) study) perception towards the English course at her post-secondary institution. According to Elyse, she was only learning "scientific English" (the English course was developed for science students) and she believed she did not get "any good English input" or "any more [grammar] nor [sentence pattern]" (Chik, 2008b, p. 159).

Based on her data collected from two post-secondary students (one studied in Hong Kong while the other in London, the United Kingdom), Chik (2008b) claims that the participants' discussion of their post-secondary English learning focused "almost entirely on their out-of-class English learning" (p. 211). However, this is not the case for the six participants in this study. Although the participants talked about their out-of-class English learning, the findings suggest that while recounting their English learning experiences at the post-secondary level, they still focused more on in-class English learning. Occasionally, they talked about out-of-class English learning opportunities, and yet learning English within the English classroom was the central theme of the discussion. This might be explained by the fact that the student participant (who studied in Hong

Kong) in Chik's (2008b) work only needed to attend one English course throughout her post-secondary studies and the participant in London only mentioned learning English through out-of-class activities (e.g., English debate team at his institution). At HKC, all students were required to take two English courses throughout their first year of studies. If they did not pass the courses, they had to retake them. This may explain why the participants' retelling of post-secondary English learning still focused largely on in-class learning.

From the data, it can be seen that when the participants were learning English at secondary school, they focused their attention on the content that could be tested in the public examination. While recounting their learning experiences, they often talked about how they were compelled to absorb the knowledge as prescribed in the examination syllabus. Seldom did they question what they had been learning. Now that they were free from the institutional constraints, they became more concerned with their own English learning needs. For example, as mentioned earlier, they had doubts about the content of the English course at HKC and identified clearly their own learning needs (e.g., Jack's wish to learn more practical English). In the following section, I will discuss how the participants conceptualized their English learning in the post-secondary context.

5.4.2 Conceptualizations of post-secondary English learning: "A new beginning?"

It should be noted that all participants elaborated more on their perceptions of English learning when retelling their postsecondary English learning experiences. This was not the case when they talked about their English learning at both the primary and secondary levels. All participants considered English learning at the primary and secondary level to be about getting better grades in the examination and that was the primary concern throughout their studies. They were compelled to learn the English language to meet the expectations of their schools (to get higher marks in the public examination as students' academic performance influences a school's ranking), parents (to maintain good academic standing so as to get into the university) and the society (to be fluent in the English language as the Hong Kong government equates enhancing students' English proficiency with Hong Kong becoming a world class city). Now that they were studying

at the post-secondary level, the participants seemed to be free from all the constraints and they began to attach more personal meanings to their English learning.

Brandon expressed that the examination-led instruction in his secondary English classroom was never about the English language itself. He wished to learn more about the English language system, such as its grammar and sentence structure, so that he could write and speak more refined English. Brandon stated that English learning could help expand his knowledge to other world-views, "English is spoken in many places. I would like to learn English better so that I could travel to other places and understand their cultures better." Jack shared similar views.

While learning English at HKC, Jack had more opportunities to speak the language in the English classroom. Jack told me that he could practise using the language in real life situations through class activities. He claimed that English learning has become "more meaningful",

> I came to see the significance of learning English…It (English) is a medium through which I could communicate with others. Being a scout leader, I sometimes have to go overseas for international scout events. English is essential for me to talk to others.

To Jack, it appeared that English learning had become more personally relevant. Moreover, English also represented a means towards Jack's career goals. Jack expressed his wish to further his studies in the medical field upon his graduation from HKC. He considered the English language as a bridge for him to get access to the knowledge in the medical field. Prior to his studies at HKC, Jack always felt that he was compelled to learn English. Now that he was free from all the mandatory English examinations, he came to think more about what English learning actually meant to him.

To Lindsay, English represented a means towards her academic success in other subjects,

> I think English learning helped me advance in other content subjects. For example, I found that I could apply the reading comprehension skills I acquired

from the English class to the subject, Psychology. I can now read Psychology references much faster than before.

Similar to Jack, Lindsay also related her English learning to communities that lie beyond her immediate academic context. As mentioned earlier, Lindsay planned to participate in a summer teaching program in Cambodia. She emphasized the importance of English for the trip, "You need English for this trip…English helps me communicate with people from other cultures." To both Jack and Lindsay, the future possibilities of going overseas shaped their perceptions towards English learning. While Jack and Lindsay visualized themselves visiting foreign countries, another participant, Gallie, had the actual experience living in an English-speaking country.

Prior to her studies at HKC, Gallie had studied in Australia for three years. While she was studying in Australia, she not only had to use English in school, she also needed the language to survive in her everyday life. During that time, Gallie mainly perceived English as a tool for her to i) understand other content subjects in school; and ii) communicate with the local students there. Because of her linguistic shock (e.g., difficulties in adapting herself to the Australian accent), Gallie developed strong resistance to English, "I really hated the language at that time… I had to force myself to learn it well." For Gallie, English represented a means for her entry to the local communities (both in and out of class). She told me that she wanted to become a member of the local students' community, and yet she was not able to do so because of her limited knowledge about colloquial English expressions. Gallie expressed that no matter how hard she tried, she would never belong to them. The fact that Gallie could not find any connection with the target language community contributed to her resistance to the language. As Ushioda (2007) states in her work, students would not be motivated in learning the target language when they do not connect with the language in any personal sense.

Gallie realized that it was not possible for her to improve her English speaking skills in a short time and she thought that it was more important to brush up her written English, as she had to write her assignments in English. In order to improve her writing skills, Gallie

claimed that it was important to first increase her English vocabulary, "I recalled that I browsed through the thesaurus from the internet, trying to learn more vocabulary. That really helped with my English writing." As time went by, she gradually regained her confidence in English use as she received good results from her assignments. Gallie also said that she began to open herself up and tried to talk to the local students after class, "We went to the mall after class and we chatted. I had spoken more English since then." Gallie's case supports Duff (2012), Siegal (1994) and Zuengler's (1989) contention that language learners are not passive vessels. They "made informed choices, exert influence, resist (e.g., remain silent, quit courses), or comply, although their social circumstances may constrain their choices" (Duff, 2012, p. 413). Gallie made informed choices to first invest more in brushing up her English writing skills, and then her speaking skills. She actively drew upon available resources in her immediate environment (e.g., her English-speaking peers) in light of her desire to achieve better results in school and to also become a member of the local communities. Gallie was successful in overcoming the adversity in her English learning, "I felt that English had become part of my life when I was in Australia". After her three years of studies in Australia, Gallie went back to Hong Kong and studied at HKC. Upon her return, she developed a completely different perception towards English learning in the Hong Kong context.

When learning English in the Hong Kong education context, Gallie perceived English learning as only limited to academic settings. English was no longer part of her life and she did not find English learning personally relevant. She felt that English learning at HKC was just the same as her English learning at secondary school, "It is just an academic subject. It is just a tool, which helps sharpen your competitive edge. If you are competent in English, you will have the comparative advantage over others, especially when looking for jobs." Her limited use of English in Hong Kong frustrated her, "I think my English level has been declining since I came back from Australia." To improve her English proficiency, Gallie indicated her plans to me during the last interview, "I would like to join exchange programs to overseas…I think I will also contact my English-speaking friends from secondary school." She attempted to seek more out-of-class English learning opportunities to offset the poor language learning environment in Hong Kong.

Similar to Gallie, Stanley also perceived English as one important means to sharpen his competitive edge in order to outperform others in the Hong Kong society. Stanley had always been proud of his English speaking skills. He once claimed that "when I spoke English, I could show to the others I could speak the language and I could speak it well." Stanley believed that whether one can speak fluent English affects how he or she will be judged or viewed by others. English learning represented a means to climb up the social ladder. To Stanley, fluency in English seemed to be an identity marker. He felt that if he could speak fluent English, his peers would look up to him and he would be considered as an elite. Similar to the student participants in Huang's (2011) study, Stanley perceived English speaking as "the image" (p. 239). He conceptualized English speaking as having the function of "image-projecting" (p. 239). "Fluency in English helped me leave a good impression in front of others, especially when I went for the interviews for university admission", Stanley said.

Different from the other participants, Maggie still emphasized the importance of English in her academic career when she studied at HKC. During the interviews, Maggie mentioned several times her worries over her English performance. Getting high grades in English was the primary concern. Since her secondary school years, Maggie's English learning had been driven by institutional forces (e.g., the two public examinations, HKCEE and HKALE). She seldom identified with the English language. Maggie only connected with English during her trip to the United States when she was S3. Her perception of English learning as "something she was required to do" seemed to have lingered throughout her studies at HKC.

When all focal students proceeded to the post-secondary level, they came to elaborate more on what English learning meant to them. As the data reveals, most of the participants still learned English for academic purposes (e.g., learning English to understand other content subjects), and some began to attach personal meanings to their learning. For example, Brandon, Jack, and Lindsay, related their English learning more to their personal life (e.g., communicating with people from other countries; getting to know more about other cultures).

5.4.3   Participants' multiple identities in the post-secondary English classroom

As described earlier, the six participants received their secondary education in either English or Chinese-medium schools. During that time, they learned English alongside students in the same language stream. And when they proceeded to HKC, they began to learn English with students from the opposite language stream. In other words, there were both Chinese- and English-stream students in the post-secondary English classroom. This may explain why during their post-secondary school years, the participants' awareness of their position in relation to their peers in the classroom was heightened. The participants differentiated themselves from their peers based on: i) language streaming arrangements; ii) academic discipline; and iii) overseas experience.

5.4.3.1   Language streaming arrangements

As shown in the participants' English learning narrative, one might see that the language streaming arrangements for secondary education exerted an impact on the participants' perception towards themselves as an English learner in their post-secondary English classroom. Brandon, Gallie and Jack held the perception that English-stream students were more competent in English as they had received their education in an English-rich learning environment, which Chinese-medium schools could not offer. Jack commented that English-stream students also performed better in other content subjects. To Jack, English-stream students had already built a solid foundation in English at their junior secondary levels (S1-S3) and thus, when they prepared for the public examination during their senior studies (S4-S7), they could focus more on the content subjects. As for him, being a Chinese-stream student, he found it difficult to juggle his English learning and the other content subjects. While he was studying English alongside the English-stream students in the post-secondary English classroom, Jack assumed an inferior position. He did not think he would be able to catch up with the English stream students with regard to English learning. Brandon also had similar feelings towards his Chinese-stream background.

Brandon also positioned himself as inferior to the English-stream students in the post-secondary English classroom. He believed that English-stream students already acquired sufficient English knowledge during their secondary studies, "We (himself and the English-stream students) were not on equal footing when learning English." As for Gallie, she always positioned herself as a competent English learner when compared with her Chinese-stream counterparts. She spoke highly of the English-rich environment in her school and how that helped her build a solid English foundation. Because of her English-stream background, as well as her extended stay in Australia, Gallie assumed a superior position among her peers in the English classroom at HKC,

> I think I already learnt most of the course content (the English course at HKC) when I studied in Australia…There would always be someone who performed worse than me at HKC. I did not really have to work really hard like when I was in Australia.

Gallie conceded that she preferred working more on other content subjects, as she knew she was able to handle the English course at HKC with no difficulties.

5.4.3.2   Academic discipline: Science vs. arts students

Brandon, Jack and Gallie affiliated themselves with their academic discipline when recounting their English learning. As described in section 5.3.6, the three participants already mentioned the differences in English learning between science and arts students at their secondary school. During that time, they were learning English alongside peers within the same academic discipline. While at HKC, the participants were learning English together with students from different academic disciplines. Thus, their awareness of the differences between science and arts students was heightened. The participants had deeply instilled within them the perceptions that arts students studied more language-loaded subjects and thus, they had more opportunities to practise using English. Being an arts student, Gallie noticed the science students seldom expressed their ideas in group discussions because of their insufficient vocabulary. That gave Gallie the impression that arts students were generally more competent in English. The academic discipline (arts or science stream) seemed to exert an impact on the three participants' perceptions of their

positions in the English classroom, thus affecting their investment in language learning. While perceiving themselves as inferior to the arts students, Brandon and Jack chose to remain silent during most of the group discussions and that might have limited their opportunities to practise using the language. For Gallie, she stated that she often assumed the role of leader during group discussions. In this study, the focal participants' awareness of self and other was also heightened because of the presence of returnee students in their English class.

5.4.3.3 Overseas experience: Local vs. returnee students

Besides local secondary school graduates, HKC also admits students with study abroad experience. During the time of study, the participants' English class included both local and returnee students. Brandon, Jack and Stanley believed that the returnee students generally had a higher level of English proficiency and they spoke like a native English speaker. While learning alongside the returnee students, the three participants assumed an inferior position. For example, Stanley had always been a confident English speaker. However, when Stanley needed to give presentations in front of the returnee students, he became unsure of his English speaking skills. He feared that he would make mistakes and he would "lose face". That was why he chose to remain silent and became more passive in front of the returnee students. The participants also commented that the returnee students often formed their own groups whenever it came to group discussions. For example, Lindsay stated that, "they (returnee students) often formed a group of their own. Well, I don't think they would let me join their group, even if I wanted to." How about Gallie? Being a returnee student herself, how did she perceive herself as an English learner among her local Hong Kong peers?

As described earlier, Gallie considered herself as an "outsider" in the English class in Australia. She was not able to fit into her school community because of her limited English proficiency. After she went back to Hong Kong, she positioned herself as a "Hong Kong English learner with overseas experience". During the interviews, Gallie told me that she was sometimes confused about her learner identities in the Hong Kong context. Because of Gallie's study abroad experience, the local students considered her as a successful English learner and thus, she was often chosen to be the "leader" in the

group. She was asked to speak on behalf of her group after each group discussion. However, Gallie sometimes refused to take the leader's role and wanted to be treated like other local Hong Kong students. She explained to me that her group members tried to shift all the responsibility to her (e.g., to give a presentation in class). Gallie resisted the leader's position imposed on her by remaining silent and letting other group members speak more in class. Moreover, she told me that she sometimes spoke Cantonese in group discussions as she did not want to "stand out from the others". She wanted to be accepted as one "in-group" member of the local students. Gallie's case lends support to Norton's (2000a) conceptualization of identity as "a site of struggle" (p. 127). Gallie felt betwixt and between; sometimes she identified herself more with the local Hong Kong students, while at other times, she affiliated with other returnee students in class.

Different from Brandon, Jack and Stanley, Maggie and Lindsay did not feel inferior to the returnees. Instead of seeing herself not able to catch up with them, Maggie perceived the returnee students as competitors, who pushed her to do better. Maggie looked up to the returnee students and she would have liked to improve her English so that she could become one of them. As for Lindsay, when studying alongside the returnees, she did not belittle herself. Lindsay considered the returnees as her learning partners, "Yes, we learned the same things in the lesson. But what we took in during the lesson was different. I think we could actually learn from each other."

As the data shows, the participants' sense of self in relation to their peers was shaped and informed by their prior English learning experiences (e.g., Chinese vs. English-stream; science- vs. arts-stream; local vs. returnee students). The participants were constantly constructing and negotiating their identities during the course of English learning. This supports Norton's (2000a) contention that identities should be understood with reference to learners' unique past and present experiences, as well as their desires and hopes for their future.

5.5   Discussion

In the previous sections, I presented the recurrent themes that emerged from the participants' learning experiences at different stages of their education. I also attempted

to show their perceptions towards English learning, as well as their learner identities throughout their English learning journey. In this section, I will discuss the findings in connection with the theoretical notions presented in Chapter 2. In particular, I will focus my attention on the relationship between learning experiences, identity (re-)construction and language learning.

5.5.1 English learning experiences: From "I was required to do so." to "It has become more personally relevant."

As stated in Chapter 1, the present study aims to examine the English learning experiences of Hong Kong post-secondary students, focusing on i) their perceptions towards their English learning and learner identities along their English learning journey; and ii) how these perceptions developed over time and across different learning sites. Throughout the study, I also aimed to explore the complex relationship between identity and investment in English learning. As the data reveals, the participants' perceptions of English learning and learner identities were deeply rooted in their prior learning experiences and the social and linguistic context in Hong Kong. As Harklau (2007) points out, language learners cannot be "studied or understood apart from their specific institutional and sociocultural context" (p. 643).

English, the former colonial language in Hong Kong, has been used in domains such as government administration, law and education. The language has been considered by the public as the gateway to one's success in academic and career development. In this study, the participants were exposed to the English language prior to their formal English learning in school. For example, Jack's mother taught him the English alphabet using an ABC chart at home. While reinterpreting their early English learning experiences, the participants acknowledged their parents' efforts to prepare them for their future English learning in academic settings. They seemed to understand their parents' intention to expose them to the language as early as possible. As Stanley stated in one interview, "my parents often played the English recordings at home when I was little. I knew they did it with good intentions. They wanted me to get familiarized with the language." All participants considered their early English learning at home as a fun activity, which stimulated their interest in learning the language.

During their English learning in formal academic settings, the participants perceived English as an academic subject, which they were required to perform well in school. As they gradually proceeded to more senior levels, the participants became more aware of the importance of English in their academic careers. All of them held an instrumental orientation (Gardner, 1985, 1991) towards their English learning – to get high grades in the public examination and to maintain good academic standing amongst their peers so as to get into the university. All the examination paper drills during the participants' secondary studies had reinforced the idea that English learning was equivalent to preparation for the examination. The participants were aware of the linguistic and cultural capital of English (Bourdieu, 1977; 1991). They invested in English learning with the understanding that they would "acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources which will in turn, increase the value of their cultural capital" (Toohey & Norton, 2010, p. 182).

Under the hegemonic influence of English, the fact that English represents a means to climb the social ladder has been deeply rooted in the participants' minds. It is no wonder that many participants perceived English as a tool to sharpen their competitive edge, both inside and outside school. They did not relate or connect with the target language. English was external to their personal life. When the participants progressed from their secondary to post-secondary studies, their conceptualizations of English learning underwent changes. The participants came to attach additional meanings to their learning. And as Shoaib and Dörnyei (2005) state in their work, when language learners move to a new phase of learning, the focus of their language learning will be sharpened. They will come to see more clearly their learning goals. In this study, the participants talked more about their learning goals during their later school years. English learning was not just simply about passing the examinations. For example, Jack perceived English as a bridge for him to get access to the wider community. Brandon also talked about learning English to understand other worldviews.

As the data suggests, for most of the participants, English was just an academic subject to start with and yet, as they gradually advanced throughout their academic career, they

came to attach more personal meaning to their learning process. Table 10 summarizes the participants' perceptions towards English learning at different stages of their schooling.

Table 10: Participants' Perceptions towards English Learning

Level of studies	Language learning orientations	Illustrative examples
English learning at home	Family-related	"My parents wanted me to get familiarized with the language."
Kindergarten	Academic-related	"It's about learning the English alphabet and vocabulary."
	Personal interest	"I was very interested in learning the English language at that time…I would like to learn more than just what was there from the textbook."
	Ability to integrate into the target language community	"There was a 'need' for me to learn English well…If I did not learn the language well; I could not speak to anyone (in school)."
Primary school	Academic-related	"To prepare for the English examination, I had to also memorize all the answers in the class exercise."
	Ability to integrate into the learning community	"Yes, we (the whole class) spoke in English."
Secondary school	Academic-related	"I needed English to cope with my studies (studying other content subjects in English)."
	Grades-oriented	"Most of us (science students) just aimed at getting a pass in the English papers."
	Goal-oriented	"…English learning was just about preparing yourself for the public examination."
	Access to the target language community	"Not only I had to speak to other students in English, I also got the chance to do my grocery shopping in English." *(Maggie's trip to the States)*
	Outperform learning peers	"When I spoke English, I could show to the others I could speak the language and I could speak it well."
Post-secondary	Academic-related	"I think English learning helped me advance in other content subjects."
	Access to wider community	"English is spoken in many places. I would like to learn English better so that I could travel to other places and understand their cultures better."
	Ability to integrate	"But in Australia, I couldn't live without the language. I had to force myself to learn it well."
	Goal-oriented	"Yes, I would like to polish up my English skills as I know I am going to need it for my future job."

Post-secondary	Outperform learning peers	"For example, I participated actively in group discussions…I wanted to get a better grade in English. I also wanted to show to the others (learning peers) my strength (English speaking skills)."
	Personal interest	"English also resembles art as I recalled my lecturer once wrote an English poem to express his feelings. The poem was full of metaphors and rhyme. I was drawn by the artistic beauty of the poem."

5.5.2   Re-interpreting the past and projecting into the future

As Gillette (1994) points out, language learners' history influences their motivation and strategies in language learning. Moreover, Norton (2000a, 2001) also suggests that language learners have a complex history and multiple desires, which impact their investments in language learning. In this study, the ways in which the focal participants made sense of their current experiences of language learning were informed and shaped by their prior learning experiences (Breen, 2001). In addition, the participants also reinterpreted their prior experiences in ways which enabled them to anticipate how they would act in new situations (Breen, 2001). In other words, they interacted with their histories and prior learning experiences, and such interactions influenced their expectations and directions for their future English learning.

While retelling their prior learning experiences, the participants re-interpreted their pasts in their current situations and at the same time, they looked into the future. A case in point was Gallie's recollection of her learning experiences in Australia after she went back to Hong Kong. During the second interview, which was conducted at the beginning of her studies at HKC, Gallie shared with me her struggle of trying to master the English language in order to survive in Australia,

> I really hated the language (English)…I didn't like the language. I wanted to stop learning it. But then, the problem was I couldn't do that. I didn't want to perform badly in my English…I had no choice but to improve my English.

During that interview, Gallie recounted her unpleasant learning experiences in Australia. When I met Gallie again in the third interview, she had already completed her first school term at HKC. In the interview, she revisited her study abroad experience. This time, she spoke highly of her English learning experiences in Australia, "English was part of me when I was in Australia…You don't have to use English in your everyday life here (in Hong Kong). To me, English is now just a school subject." It can be seen that Gallie re-interpreted her prior learning experiences (past) in relation to her current learning in the Hong Kong context (present). Gallie expressed her negative feelings towards the lack of

an English-rich learning environment in her immediate surroundings in Hong Kong. Her language use was only limited to academic settings. Towards the end of the interview, she told me she was making plans to join an overseas exchange program in the coming academic year (reassessing her direction for future English learning). Based on her prior learning experiences in Australia, and in Hong Kong (primary and secondary studies), Gallie seemed to have realized that she could not learn much from her current English class at HKC and thus, she made plans to seek more out-of-class activities to learn the English language. In Australia, Gallie assumed the role as a language user rather than a language learner. Upon her return to Hong Kong, she identified herself more as a language learner, whose learning was only restricted to academic settings. Gallie's reinterpretation of her prior experiences not only directed her future learning, but it also influenced how she perceived herself in relation to the English language (English learner vs. English user). Gallie's past experience has become a reference point or a benchmark for her future English learning.

As the data reveals, the participants' reinterpretations of their learning experiences also led some participants to question their learner identities. Jacks' learning story helps illustrate this idea. As described earlier, Jack considered himself as an English reader while retelling his English learning in the secondary English classroom. He was assured about his English reading comprehension skills. When I met Jack in the last interview, he had already finished his first year of studies at HKC and he told me his plans of taking the IELTS (International English Language Testing System). While talking about how he prepared for the IELTS, Jack suddenly expressed to me his doubts towards his reader identity. His doubts stemmed from his difficulties in doing the comprehension exercise in the IELTS practice. The IELTS practice consists of different types of writing such as newspaper articles, instructions and manuals. Jack expressed his difficulties in reading certain texts, such as manuals, and said, "I wondered if I was only a reader in academic settings?" His reader identity (developed during his secondary studies) was reinterpreted in relation to his current English learning (doing the IELTS practice) and such reinterpretation of his past led him to change his perception of English learning (as he wondered if he had been learning academic English only) as well as his reader identity. Like Gallie, Jack intended to seek out-of-class activities to improve his English. Jack

indicated that he had already bought some English novels, with the aim of improving his English reading skills. Both Gallie and Jack's case comes in line with the student participants in Chik's (2008b) study, who "crystallized, interpreted and re-evaluated their learning experiences" (p.220) while retelling their English learning stories.

The data in this study supports the idea that "experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). The participants positioned themselves in one continuum: "the imaged now, some imagined past, or some imagined future – each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2) As represented in Figure 6 below, the participants' past was reconstructed and reinterpreted by their present and they imagined their future in accordance with their reinterpreted past and the new present.
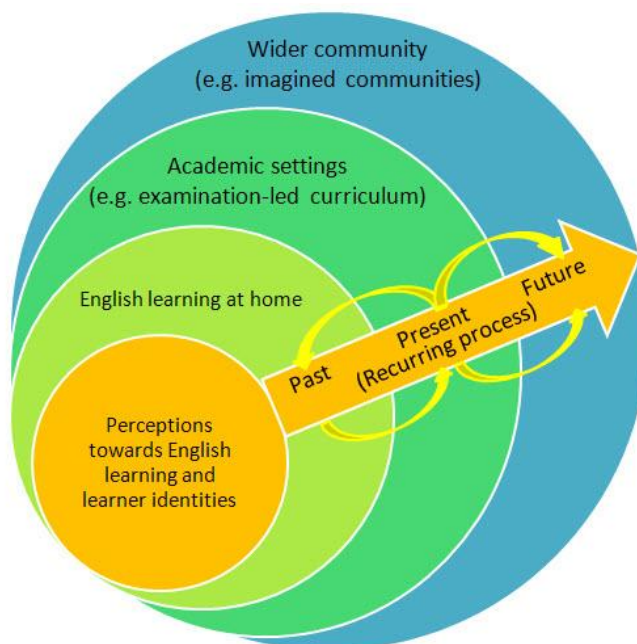
Figure 6: Participants' Reinterpretation of their prior Learning Experiences

As the participants' English learning is still ongoing, their perceptions of their current English learning and their reinterpretation of prior learning experiences will be constantly changing, and thus, their future will also be constantly reassessed.

During the interviews, I found that the participants were not only constantly (re-)constructing their perceptions towards English learning, but their perceptions towards their own learner identities also changed over time and across different learning settings. The participants took on multiple identities depending on with whom they were grouped and compared in the English classroom. As Harklau (2007) puts it, their identities were "shifting and mobile, an ongoing and never completed process of the remaking of the self" (p. 46). In the following sections, I will discuss the relationship between identity and language learning in relation to the focal participants' English learning experiences.

5.5.3   Multiple identities

Wenger (1998) states that learning is "an experience of identity" as it "transforms who we are and what we do" (p. 215). During the course of their English learning, the participants constructed and reconstructed a sense of who they were as an English learner. As the participants grew older, they gradually developed an awareness of "self" and "other" in the English class. Their retelling of the differences in English learning between "us" and "them" was frequent, especially when they proceeded to the post-secondary English classroom, which consisted of students with different educational background (e.g., Chinese- and English-stream; science and arts stream; study abroad experiences). Their transition from the secondary to post-secondary English class had heightened their awareness of their learner identities in relation to their peers. The way the participants positioned themselves in the classroom can be understood with respect to their prior educational experiences and their affiliations with different communities.

5.5.3.1   In-group affiliation and multiple identities

As Canagarajah (2004) points out, "What motivates the learning of a language is the construction of the identities we desire and the communities we want to join in communication and social life" (p. 117). Moreover, as Sade (2009) observed in her study, learners' motivation to learn the target language is due to their affiliations to a range of communities of practice. The identities they constructed in these different communities "interact with each other, influence and are influenced by each other" (p. 48). During the interviews, the six participants identified themselves with different communities while

recounting their English learning experiences. As Wenger (2000) puts it, identity is "an experience of multimembership; an interaction of many relationships that you hold into the experience of being a person, at once one and multiple" (p. 241-242). The participants' affiliations with their different communities impacted on their investments in English learning.

In her work, Norton (2001) states that there are three interweaving communities with which language learners will identify. These communities are i) the language learners' own biographical-historical community; ii) the learners' learning community (e.g., the target language classroom); and iii) the wider speech community, that learners aspire to join (possibly through imagination). Learners will move concurrently between these three communities. According to Norton (2001), language learners' conceptualization of these communities (in particular, how they identify with them) will influence their investments in or withdrawal from their language learning. Throughout this study, it was evident that the multiplicity of the participants' identities that arose through their membership in different communities contributed to their positioning in the English class. For instance, as described earlier, Brandon and Jack identified themselves as Chinese-medium students with a science background in the post-secondary English classroom. How they conceptualized Chinese-medium and science students as less competent English learners influenced their participation in class activities. They took on the roles of silent and subordinate English learners and were not invested in their English class activities. The same can be seen in Gallie's case.

While identifying herself as a returnee student, she assumed a dominant role in most of the group discussions in class. However, as we have seen earlier, her desire to affiliate with other Hong Kong English learners at HKC drove her to use Cantonese in group discussions. Her aspiration to belong to her immediate learning communities led her to use Cantonese instead of English in the classroom. Gallie's story best supports Norton's (2000a) idea of identity as "a site of struggle" (p. 127). Gallie was constantly negotiating and reconstructing her identities through her interaction with her learning peers both in Australia and Hong Kong. It is also noteworthy that Gallie's identity as a returnee student led her to become less invested in her English learning at HKC. Gallie did not identify

herself belonging to the English class at HKC. She expressed that she had already learnt most of the course content when she was in Australia and thus, she was more invested in other content subjects. Gallie's decision to invest less in her English learning at HKC can be explained by her lack of sense of belonging to her immediate learning communities.

5.5.3.2   Imagined identities and ideal L2 self

As mentioned earlier, Norton (2001) identifies three communities with which language learners will identify during the course of language learning. One of these communities is the wider speech community, often identified by language learners through imagination. Drawing upon Anderson's (1991) notion of "imagined communities", Norton (2011) explored how language learners' belonging to their desired communities (which lie beyond their classroom) influenced their language learning. Moreover, "an imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and learners' investment in the target language must be understood within this context" (p. 323). In a similar vein, Dörnyei's (2005, 2010) "ideal L2 self" also captures the essence of future possibilities and imagined identities with regard to language learning. Ushioda and Dörnyei (2009) state that the ideal L2 self refers to "the representation of the attributes that someone would ideally process (i.e. a representation of personal hopes, aspirations or wishes)" (p. 4). Moreover, the ideal L2 self reflects "desirable future images after attaining L2 proficiency" (Kim, 2009, p. 4).

In this study, the participants' investments in English learning can also be understood with reference to the identities they assumed in their imagined communities or their ideal L2 self. During the interviews, the participants often talked about their engagement in out-of-class activities. Of all the participants, Lindsay was particularly animated when talking about the American television programs she avidly followed. It can be said that her favourite television programs represented her imagined communities, which she could visit through frequent viewing. Lindsay stated that she sometimes jotted down unfamiliar colloquial English expressions used in the program so that she could practise using them in her real life. Lindsay was trying to picture herself using those colloquial expressions in real life situations. She envisioned herself as a language user rather than a language learner in her imagined target language communities. Similarly, as described

earlier, Stanley also visualized himself speaking like the news anchor in CNN news. His imagined identities within the target language speaking communities made him invest more in brushing up his oral skills. For participants like Lindsay and Stanley, they perceived the characters in the television programs or the news anchors as models of accurate English usage and pronunciation. Their desire to identify with the imagined English-speaking communities and to be recognized as English speakers led them to invest more in English learning. As Murray (2011) puts it, "visions of future participation in imagined communities can influence individuals' language learning trajectory…" (p. 77). Drawing upon the participants' English learning experiences in out-of-class activities, we can see that "pop culture such as movies and T.V programs has been a source of motivation for people to learn English" (Murray, 2011, p. 139) and it portrays the "imagined communities to which learners aspire to belong, thus, enhancing their motivation to learn the language of that community" (p. 139). The participants' visions of their ideal L2 self or imagined identities in the target language communities enhanced their investments in learning English. As Toohey and Norton (2010) point out, it is therefore important that language educators recognize learners' imagined communities so that they can "construct learning activities that engaged learners and that contributed to their desired trajectories toward participation in their imagined communities" (p. 184).

Figure 7 below shows the inextricable relationship among the multiple identities of the participants. The identities that they constructed in different communities informed and shaped their perceptions of their self in relation to their peers in the English classroom.
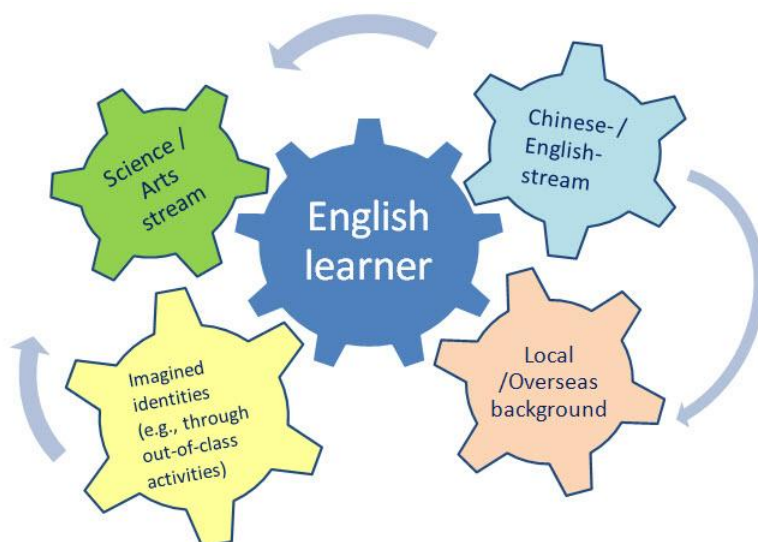
Figure 7: Participants' Multiple Identities with regard to their English Learning

5.6   Summary

In this chapter, I presented the recurring themes that emerged from the six participants' English learning experiences (from their kindergarten to post-secondary studies). I also presented their conceptualizations towards English learning and themselves as English learners at the different stages of their academic journeys. The findings of this study concur with previous work (e.g., Duff, 2002a; Kanno, 2003; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Norton, 2000a; Toohey, 2000) that language learners are active-meaning makers, who learn to use the target language to engage themselves in interactions with others and to co-construct experiences with others. Three major findings arose from this study.

First, the findings suggest that the participants constantly constructed and reconstructed their perceptions towards English learning in accordance with their prior learning experiences, the interaction within their English classroom and their hopes and desires for their futures. Similar to the students in Chik's (2008b) study, the focus of the six participants' English learning was generally shaped by formal schooling during their primary schools years, and the focus slowly shifted from formal schooling to out-of-class activities when the participants proceeded to more senior levels. However, Chik's (2008b) work focused mainly on "elite students" in Hong Kong. The student participants studied in top-banding English-medium schools. Moreover, when compared with the six participants in this study, the students in Chik's (2008b) work appeared to come from

highly-educated and affluent families. They generally received more resources regarding their English learning. For example, they had more opportunities to travel abroad (to English-speaking countries). Moreover, it was also noticeable that they were very much interested and engaged in learning English. On the contrary, the six participants in this study came from middle-class families and their parents had secondary-school-level English proficiency. It is no wonder that the participants' conceptualizations of English learning was largely informed and shaped by their formal schooling (e.g., the competitive learning environment both in and outside class), though at a later stage, they began to attach more personal meanings to English learning. The findings of this study added to an understanding of English learning experiences of Hong Kong students by revealing how both Chinese- (Brandon, Jack and Stanley) and English-stream (Gallie, Lindsay and Maggie) students conceptualized and made sense of their English learning during the course of their learning.

Second, the findings reveal that when the participants were retelling their English learning experiences, they constantly reinterpreted and re-evaluated their pasts in relation to their current learning and at the same time, reassessed or re-oriented their future directions in English learning. The findings come in line with previous work (e.g., Breen, 2001; Chik, 2008b; Cota, 1997; Cummins, 1994) that explores the impact of prior learning experiences on one's language learning. Similar to the student participants in Chik's (2008b) work, the six focal students "revisited their previous learning experiences to confirm or revoke their current conceptions" and it was through the retelling of their learning narratives that the participants "oriented the direction for their future language learning to lead to the next stage of learning" (p. 220). Different from Chik's (2008b) work[16], the participants in this study were all post-secondary students. As Chik (2008b) points out, the younger participants in her study were still "at the stage of crystallizing and interpreting their learning experiences" (p. 220) during the course of their English learning. As for the six participants in this study, it can be said that they were relatively

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[16] In Chik's (2008) study, only two (out of ten) participants were post-secondary students (one studied in Hong Kong while the other in London, the United Kingdom). All the other participants in the study were either primary or secondary school students.

more mature and they reached a more advanced level in terms of their English learning career. Thus, their learning narratives add to our understanding of the lingering adverse impact of a highly competitive and examination-driven education system on students' English learning and their perceptions of themselves as English learners. The findings reveal that when the participants proceeded to their post-secondary level (at which they were free from public examinations), the sense of competition was still deeply instilled into the participants. The findings point to the urgent need for a more learner-centred English curriculum in the Hong Kong context and the importance of raising language educators' awareness of students' prior learning experiences (e.g., Maggie had long been holding the perception that English learning was like a competition).

Third, this study demonstrates the multiple identities that students may take on within the English language classroom. The findings come in line with previous work on language learning and identity construction (e.g., Harlau, 2007; Kanno, 2003; Norton, 2000a, 2000b, 2013; Toohey, 2000) that language learners' multiple identities intersect with their language learning. Similar to the ESL learners in Norton's (2000a) study, the six participants' multiple identities (including their imagined identities) influenced their participation in classroom activities and their investments in English learning. It was especially evident when the student participants identified themselves as Chinese- or English-stream students, arts or science students, and local or returnee students. In her work, Chik (2008b) also talked about students' learning experiences in Chinese- and English-stream schools. However, her discussion focused mainly on the transition from primary to secondary education as all her participants pursued their secondary education in English-medium schools. The findings of this study add to an understanding of Hong Kong students' transition from Chinese-medium secondary to English-medium post-secondary education, for example the difficulties encountered by Chinese-stream students when they had to learn English in an English-medium post-secondary institution. Moreover, Chik's (2008b) analysis of post-secondary English learning only focused on two Hong Kong students (Elyse studied in a Hong Kong post-secondary institution, while Jack in London, the United Kingdom). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Elyse (in Chik's (2008b) study) was only required to take one English course throughout her post-secondary studies. The English course was developed mainly for science students. On the

contrary, the six focal participants' post-secondary English classroom was more diverse in terms of students' prior education background and learning experiences. Thus, the findings of this study provide more details about the post-secondary English classroom in the Hong Kong context and reflect the increase in diversity in Hong Kong's higher education sector.

As stated in Chapter 1, Block (2007) contends that there have been fewer identity studies in foreign language settings (the learning of a language in formal academic settings embedded in surroundings where the target language is not used in daily communication). The findings of this study add to an understanding of language learning and identity construction in foreign language contexts, especially post-colonial contexts such as in Hong Kong. The English language played an important role in the participants' academic career and their learning stories show that how the student participants felt they were compelled to learn the language well during most of their academic journey and how the language learning experiences led them to develop certain identities (e.g., Stanley perceived himself as a more competent English learner because of his fluency in spoken English). While examining the relationship between Hong Kong English learners, their prior learning experiences and identity (re-)construction, this study drew upon poststructuralist and sociocultural notions of language and identity, in particular, Norton's (2000a) theorizing of language learning and identity construction. Norton's (2000a) work focused on immigrants' English learning in an English-speaking country. In this study, I extended Norton's (2000a) conceptualizations of identity to English language learners in post-colonial contexts, investigating their lived English learning experiences and identity (re-)construction. I focused my attention on English learners in academic settings that were subject to the hegemony of English. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Norton (1995) called for a comprehensive theory that explains the complex relationship between language learners and their language learning context. In this study, I adopted Norton's (2000a) theorizing of identity and it served my purpose of exploring the constantly changing identities of the participants. This study reveals the diverse English learning experiences of the participants and serves as a basis for comparative studies on English learning experiences in other post-colonial contexts (e.g., Singapore) or foreign language settings (e.g., English learning in Denmark). Future studies on

English learners in different contexts can help expand and theorize the notion of identity (re-)construction.

In next chapter, I will address the three research questions in light of the findings. I will also discuss the educational implications of this study, followed by some recommendations regarding English language education, in particular, in the Hong Kong context.

Chapter 6

6 Conclusions

This study aims to examine the English learning experiences of Hong Kong post-secondary students, with a particular focus on their perceptions towards English learning and their identity formations along their academic journeys. Chapter 4 presents the participants' English learning narrative. The common threads that run through their narratives were described in Chapter 5. In this chapter, I give answers to the research questions raised in Chapter 1:

1. How do Hong Kong post-secondary students perceive their prior English learning and their learner identities along their English learning trajectory?

2. How do these perceptions impact their current English learning at the post-secondary level?

3. How do these perceptions develop over time and across different learning sites?

This chapter also presents the educational implications of this study and makes recommendations regarding post-secondary English language education, in particular, within the Hong Kong context.

6.1 Participants' Perceptions towards English Learning and Learner Identities

One overarching finding of the study is that the participants' perceptions towards English learning and their learner identities were informed and shaped by their prior learning experiences under the examination-driven education system in Hong Kong.

As children and adolescents (during their primary and secondary school years), the participants generally perceived the English language as merely an academic subject. Attaining better grades in English serves as a survival need – to proceed to senior levels and to enter a university. It appeared that they were bombarded with the message,

"English symbolizes wealth and power in Hong Kong" (Nunan, 2003, p. 597).This message was explicitly stated in the English Language: Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4 – 6), developed by the Curriculum Development Council and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (2014):

- English is the language of global communication. It is not only a powerful learning tool, a medium by which people gain access to knowledge from around the world, but also a medium through which they develop positive values and attitudes, establish and maintain meaningful relationships with people, increase their cultural understanding and expand their knowledge and world-views; [and]

- English is the language of international business, trade and professional communication. Traditionally much emphasis has been placed on English language learning in school. Such a tradition must be continued, since proficiency in English is essential for helping Hong Kong to maintain its current status and further strengthen its competitiveness as a leading finance, banking and business centre in the world... (p. 2)

During their secondary studies, the participants focused mainly on the "rewards" that English learning could bring them. For example, Stanley conceded that his English learning at the senior secondary levels (S4 – S7) had been "goal-oriented". He concentrated on the tasks that were assessed by his English teacher, tasks that would count towards his final grade. His investment in English learning could be understood with reference to his plans for the future – to pass the examinations with higher grades and gain a seat in the university. To most of the participants, English learning represented a means towards better academic and career prospects.

As revealed in the data, examination preparation seems to have characterized the participants' secondary English learning. The six focal students shared similar secondary English learning experiences to those of Chik's (2008b) student participants, especially learning English through past examination paper drills. In her work, Chik (2008b) also showed that the focus of her participants' English learning was largely shaped by out-of-

class activities. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the participants in Chik's (2008b) study had more overseas experiences. Most of them already attended supplementary English tutorials or travelled to English-speaking countries when they were in primary school. On the contrary, only two participants in this study (Brandon and Jack) attended private English tutorials during their primary studies and they both attended tutorials for only a short period of time (six months for Brandon and three months for Jack). Also, only two participants (Brandon and Lindsay) had the chance to travel overseas for vacation. What was clear was that some students in Hong Kong have adequate English resources to "enter and succeed in English-medium professional training programs and to earn qualifications for high-income professions" (Lin, 1999, p. 397). According to Chik (2008b), her participants were highly competent learners and the majority of them studied in elite English-medium schools. It appeared that the family background of the "elite students" already equipped them with "the right kind of attitudes and interest and skills and confidence in learning English" (Lin, 1999, p. 409). This may explain why the participants in Chik's (2008b) study were more interested in learning English (as compared with the six focal students in this study, who felt they were compelled to perform well in the English language). Moreover, Chik's (2008b) participants appeared to be more confident in taking the two public examinations. The findings of this study reveal that different groups of students responded to the examination-oriented education system in different ways. As pointed out by Lin (1999), some students (especially those from working class families) were "in a race with rules laid down by the privileged classes [students from highly educated and affluent families], who were already ahead of them" (p. 411). This study draws language educators' and policy makers' attention to the adverse impact of a highly competitive and examination-oriented education system on students, especially students who have limited symbolic and cultural resources that facilitate their English learning. It is therefore important for language educators to better understand students' prior learning experiences. As the findings in this study demonstrate, the participants' prior learning experiences have informed and shaped their participation in class activities, as well as their identity construction (e.g., Jack positioned himself as a failure whenever he talked about his difficulties in completing the English past paper practice).

As mentioned in Chapter 5, one major finding of this study was the multiple identities that the participants took on when retelling their English learning experiences. The findings demonstrate that the participants often compared themselves with their peers in terms of their English performance. For example, Brandon, Jack and Gallie positioned themselves differently in the English class according to their discipline of studies (arts vs. science stream). The participants also identified themselves as Chinese- (e.g., Jack) or English-stream (Gallie) students and local (e.g., Lindsay) or returnee students (e.g., Gallie). The identities that the participants took on affected their (non-)participation in classroom activities and investment in English learning. The findings of this study substantiate Norton and Toohey's (2002) claim that "language learners are not only learning a linguistic system" (p. 151), but they are also using the target language to "negotiate a sense of self within and across a range of sites at different points in time" (p. 181). Moreover, the social relations within those specific sites either facilitate or constrain opportunities for learners to use the target language. The participants' learning experiences described in Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate that what the participants had experienced in the past influenced how they perceived English learning and themselves as English learners, which in turn, affected their investment in English learning. For instance, Jack received his primary and secondary education in Chinese-medium schools. He was aware of the fact that his Chinese-stream background placed him in a subordinate role among his English-stream counterparts. Jack indicated that the English language input was limited in Chinese-medium schools and his school did not offer a conducive learning environment to his English learning. Such perceptions also led him to position himself as a less competent English learner in the post-secondary English classroom. In the same way, some participants such as Brandon and Stanley also placed themselves at a disadvantage when studying alongside returnee students. For example, Stanley assumed a passive and silent role in front of the returnees in the post-secondary English classroom, although he noted that he constructed himself as a confident English speaker at the secondary level. The data suggests that the participants constantly constructed and reconstructed their learner identities over time and across different learning sites (from secondary to post-secondary English classroom).The findings of this study add to the

existent literature on the post-secondary English language education in the Hong Kong context.

Evans and Morrison (2011a, 2011b) explore Hong Kong students' learning experiences in English-medium higher education. Their main focus was on secondary graduates' adaptation to English-medium post-secondary studies and their language use both inside and outside the classroom. While Evans and Morrison's (2011a, 2011b) work reveals the problems encountered by secondary school graduates (especially those from Chinese-stream) when they had to learn content subjects through English, the findings of this study: i) capture the complexity and dynamics of post-secondary English classroom; and ii) reflect the impact of such complexity and dynamics on students' perceptions towards English learning and their learner identities. Moreover, Evans and Morrison's (2011a, 2011b) work shows that the Chinese-stream students (when compared with English-stream graduates) placed themselves at a subordinate position when they had to learn all program courses through the English language. In view of this, the researchers suggest English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses should cater for students with diverse and evolving needs throughout their post-secondary studies (e.g., Chinese-stream students had little experience of writing extended texts in English). While it is important for language educators to address students' academic needs, this study demonstrates that it is also imperative to attend to the impact of medium of instruction (Chinese- vs. English-stream) on students' positioning in relation to their peers in the English classroom. As the data shows, the participants' perception towards themselves as a Chinese- or English-stream secondary graduate greatly influenced their (non-)participation in class activities. It is therefore, necessary for language educators to take into account students' personal histories (especially the language stream in which they pursued their studies) in order to create more opportunities for students to assume a more active role in their language learning.

With regard to the participants' multiple identities, the findings also show that their perceptions towards English learner identities were informed and shaped by their participation in various types of out-of-class activities. The data shows that the participants were creating out-of-class English learning opportunities for themselves.

They were engaged in different popular cultural practices such as listening to English songs and watching television programs. Brandon's interest in watching stand-up comedy videos online is a case in point. I noticed the differences in his perception of himself as an English learner at the two different learning sites (inside and outside classroom). Brandon described himself as an active English learner with regard to his learning beyond the English classroom (vs. how he positioned himself as a passive and less competent English learner among his peers in the classroom). As the data shows, the English language classroom was not the only setting in which the participants could learn the target language. SLA researchers such as Duff (2002b, 2004) and Marsh (2005) have advocated the use of English language popular culture to motivate learners. And as Chik and Breidbach (2011) state, popular culture provides language learners an avenue for constructing identities. As can be seen in Brandon's learning experiences, the popular culture provided spaces for Brandon to take more control and responsibility for his own learning (Duff, 2012, p. 420). Thus, I concur with Pennycook (1998) that language educators should consider "English language teaching as located in the domain of popular culture as much as in the domain of applied linguistics" (p. 162). The findings also reveal that it was through their out-of-class activities that the participants could visualize themselves using English in their imagined target language communities. For example, Lindsay and Stanley imagined themselves speaking like the characters in the American television series and the native English-speaking news anchors in CNN news. Jack also talked about the possibility of attending international scout events in the future and how English would serve as the medium through which he could communicate with others (scouts from around the world). When the participants proceeded to the post-secondary level, they began to see themselves as language users rather than just language learners.

The identities that the student participants (re-)constructed also re-oriented their directions for future English learning. For example, when Gallie was in Australia, she positioned herself as "the worst" in her class because of her limited spoken English. The way how she identified herself as "the worst" among her learning peers led to her non-participation in class activities (compared with her active participation in class discussions with science-stream students in her secondary school). Gallie seemed to seek ways to resist her inferior position by investing more in her English writing. Her learning

experiences in Australia support Norton's (2000a) contention that "a learner's motivation to speak is mediated by other investments that may conflict with the desire to speak – investments that are intimately connected to the ongoing production of the learners' identities and their desires for the future" (p. 120).

6.2   Post-secondary English Learning at HKC

During their primary and secondary school years, the participants appeared to start out learning the language without any personal reasons. To them, getting better grades in the English examination was their primary concern. Although the sense of competition was still deeply instilled in some participants' minds (e.g., Maggie's perception of English learning at HKC as a short-distance race and she perceived the more proficient students as her competitors, see section 4.5.2 in Chapter 4), most of them began to relate English learning to their personal life when studying at HKC.

One overarching finding is that the participants were more concerned about the practicality of English learning. They questioned if they could use what was taught in the English course in real life situations. While studying at HKC, the participants no longer had to worry about any high-stakes examinations. This may explain why the participants began to talk more about their desire to learn English well to expand their knowledge of other cultures (e.g., Jack and Lindsay). Jack and Maggie commented that the English they had been learning was too formal. They did not have sufficient English vocabulary to talk about day-to-day topics. Their comments reflected that they no longer perceived English as a subject and they looked beyond their English classroom and considered using English in real world contexts. Their comments also demonstrate the recurring process, mentioned in Chapter 5 (see section 5.5.2), in which the participants re-interpreted their past in their present and reassessed their future plans based on their past and present.

In Chik's (2008b) work, one post-secondary student participant (Elyse) also commented that the English course at her institution was too discipline-specific and it was not able to meet her learning needs (e.g., learn more about grammar). The post-secondary institutions in Hong Kong generally provide English enhancement courses for first-year students. The English courses vary greatly in terms of format and structure. In some

institutions, the English courses are credit-bearing while in others, the courses are seen as "peripheral 'service' courses" (Evans and Green, 2007). The length of these courses also varies. Some are conducted over one semester (usually 3 months) while some throughout one academic year. The participants in this study were required to take two English courses during their first year. The first course ENG001 (in the first semester) was a generic English course that focused on improving students' general English proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and listening. The second course ENG002 (in the second semester) had an academic focus, which aimed to foster students' effective use of English in academic settings. Similar to the participants in Chik (2008b) and Evans and Morrison's (2011a, 2011b) work, the six focal participants questioned the effectiveness of their English courses. This does not mean, however, that the participants found the English courses meaningless. As the data revealed, they appreciated the abundance of opportunities to speak English during class discussions and presentations. However, what the participants wished to learn more of was practical English for everyday use. The findings of this study add to the existing literature on the design of EAP (English for academic purposes) courses in the Hong Kong post-secondary education sector. While Evans and Morrison (2011a, 2011b) suggest that EAP professionals should consider students' prior experiences of learning in English, I further recommend that EAP professionals should also attend to students' prior experiences of learning the English language (both inside and outside classroom), which directly affect their learning in English-medium institutions. I also believe that it is important for EAP professionals to help students identify their learning needs and goals so that students can find English learning more personally relevant. Moreover, it is also necessary that students are provided with the opportunity to reflect on their needs and goals throughout their learning process, as it is evident from the data that the participants attached different meanings to their English learning at different stages of their learning journeys.

With regard to the participants' learner identities at the post-secondary level, one major finding is the multiple identities that they took on within the classroom. Norton (2000a) states that language learners have a complex history and multiple desires that change over time and space. Through their L2 interactions with different groups of students (be that Chinese- or English-stream, arts or science stream, local or returnee students), the

participants constantly reconstructed their sense of self in relation to their learning peers. Furthermore, they also took on the identities associated with their out-of-class activities. While it is important for language educators to take account of students' prior English learning experiences when planning their English courses, the present study suggests that language educators need to also reflect on their own teaching practices. As shown in the data, Maggie's English teacher tended to call upon students who were well versed in English to answer questions in class. Maggie felt that she was relegated to a subordinate position among her peers and invested less in group discussions, for she knew that the English-proficient students would always be "the designated speakers" in class. As Duff (2012) suggests, "it is important for teachers and learners to understand their own stances and positioning, and how these affect their engagement with (or participation in) language education" (p. 420), as well as "how such positioning might affect the opportunities the learners have to expand their future L2 repertoires and identities" (p. 420). Otherwise, teachers may just confirm the identities the students established for themselves and perpetuate the existing divide in class (e.g., Chinese- vs. English- stream or local vs. returnee students).

6.3 Perceptions towards English Learning and Learner Identities as Changing over Time and Different Learning Sites

As revealed in the participants' English learning narratives, the participants' perceptions towards English learning and their learner identities were constantly changing over time and different learning sites. Prior to their post-secondary school years, the participants' perceptions towards English learning were largely shaped and formed by the examination-oriented education system. The same applies to the participants' conceptions of themselves as English learners who often compared themselves with one another under the highly competitive education system. It was only over time that the participants gradually perceived English learning as something beyond the English classroom, and it was through their out-of-class activities that they also began to see themselves as English users rather than simply English learners.

The findings of this study illustrate that the participants' conceptualizations of English learning and their identities were subject to change. During their primary and secondary studies, the participants' retelling of English learning experiences was quite limited to school settings. When examination results were considered as one crucial criterion for academic success, it was no wonder that the participants were learning English for examination purposes only and most of them described themselves as "passive English learners". When the participants were describing their primary and secondary English learning experiences in the first round of interviews, they indicated that English learning was "something they must do" and they had to do it well if they wanted to succeed. When I met the participants after their first year of studies at HKC, they once again talked about their learning experiences at primary and secondary school. However, this time, the participants shared with me what English learning should be like at the primary and secondary level (e.g., a more interactive English classroom with more opportunities to practise English speaking). It was evident that they re-interpreted their past in accordance with their present (e.g., the more interactive English learning at HKC). The participants were no longer under the constraints of the examination-driven education system, which already prescribed what to teach and learn in the classroom. It appeared that they came to reflect more on what English learning meant to them. The findings support Duff's (2012) claim that "learners are not simply passive or complicit participants in language and use, but can also make informed choices, exert influence, resist (e.g., remain silent, quit courses), or comply, although their social circumstances may constraint their choices" (p. 413). As we can see from the data, the participants began to seek alternative ways to improve their English through out-of-class activities. The findings suggest that, instead of being passive English learners, the participants had become "individuals with wants and needs and with multifaceted identities, who may exert themselves and their interests by making deliberate choices with respect to language learning…" (Duff, 2012, p. 414).

6.4   Educational Implications

As mentioned in Chapter 1, studies on language learning and identity construction in the Hong Kong educational context tend to explore the impact of language education policy on students' national/cultural identity development. Moreover, those studies mainly focus

on students in the secondary education sector. As for the previous work on the Hong Kong's post-secondary context, researchers focus on students' overall language use in English-medium post-secondary institutions, in particular, the difficulties encountered by students during their transition from secondary to post-secondary studies. Some researchers also evaluated the effectiveness of EAP courses for post-secondary students. Not much has been conducted on the English learning experiences and learner identities of Hong Kong post-secondary students. While documenting students' lived experiences of their transition from secondary to post-secondary institutions, the present study contributes to the understanding of secondary school students' adjustment to the English classroom at the post-secondary level, where they learn and interact with their counterparts (be they Chinese- or English-stream secondary graduates). For example, Jack and Maggie revealed in the interviews their ebbs and flows of adjustment when they first entered HKC and how they wished their English teacher would provide them with more guidance. Not only local students, but also returnee students (as Gallie's English learning experiences illustrate) may also encounter difficulties in adapting themselves to the Hong Kong learning environment upon their return. In terms of contributing to the understanding of the English language education in the Hong Kong context, the findings of the present study underscore the importance of preparing secondary graduates for the transition from their secondary to post-secondary studies, including their English learning.

Prior to their studies at HKC, it can be said that the participants had been learning English under a heavily examination-driven education system. According to the participants, much of their English learning was teacher-directed. Such social settings seemed to have imposed constraints on their agency (Toohey, 2007). The participants were not ready to take ownership of their own learning because of their prior learning experiences. As Toohey (2007) suggests, attention would need to be paid to "the material and symbolic resources and activities both teachers and learners have become

accustomed to, of the specific teaching and learning figured worlds[17] of students and teachers" (p. 241). The researcher also urges educators to ask the questions of "if and/or how specific practices, resources and identity roles for teachers and students mirror other (actual or desired) social arrangements in larger social worlds beyond the classroom" (p. 241-242). In the Hong Kong education context, proficiency in English (in recent years, also proficiency in Mandarin) serves as a major key to academic success. Moreover, Watkins (2009) states that "the emphasis on examinations led to an elitist education system in which there were relatively few winners and many losers" (p. 72). One might ask "Who are these possible winners in the Hong Kong education context?" Drawing upon the findings of the present study, as well as previous work (e.g., Chik, 2008b; Lin, 1999), it appears that students from affluent and well-educated families tended to be the "winners". These students are provided with more English capital or resources (e.g., opportunities to travel abroad and attending private tutoring) during their English learning. They have a higher chance of getting into English-medium schools and later, English-medium post-secondary institutions. The Chinese University of Hong Kong's (CUHK) (2002, 2004, 2008) longitudinal studies explore the impact of the medium of instruction policy on Hong Kong students' education advancement. The studies show that Chinese-stream graduates had lower achievements in the English subject and their chances of entering university was reduced by half when compared with their English-stream counterparts. Even if Chinese-stream graduates are able to proceed to their post-secondary studies, they may encounter difficulties, as this study and previous work (e.g., Evans & Morrison, 2011a, 2011b) illustrate, to learn English and to learn through English. While language educators are making efforts to promote learner autonomy, it is important for them to first consider the English capital or resources students bring to class. The symbolic capital of English (Bourdieu, 1991) has been unevenly distributed in

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[17] Toohey (2007) adopts Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain's (1998) notion of figured world to describe the situatedness of persons, practices and resources. According to Toohey (2007), figured world refers to "a horizon of significance, a particular frame of reference, in which persons attribute meaning to their experiences and interpret relationships between people, acts and resources" (p. 234). As Toohey (2007) states, a child English language learner (in one of her studies (2000)) might be seen as "a talented artist in the figured world of his family, but as a 'day dreamer' and time-waster in the figured world of his classroom" (p. 235).

Hong Kong. And as Lin (1997) suggests, "providing the same kind or amount of English language instruction at school" to students from different groups may just perpetuate the uneven distribution of English capital, rendering some students (e.g., Chinese-stream students) to be written off.

As mentioned in section 6.2, the participants were doubtful about the application of what was taught in the English class in their everyday life. All of them reported that the English language they had been learning was too formal and it did not meet their everyday needs (e.g., understanding English movies or songs). As I talked to the English teachers at HKC about the English curriculum, they expressed that the curriculum and the teaching materials were prepared by the course coordinator. They had been using the same set of teaching materials for almost 10 years. As Jones and Nimmo (1995) state, curriculum is what actually takes place in an educational setting rather than what is logically planned to happen. The findings point to the importance of involving students in curriculum development. In this study, the participants did not see how they could use the English language they learned in their real life. As Brandon stated, he never came across those English words (which he learned at HKC) in newspapers or on the internet. Ushioda (2007) states that language learners will not be engaged in their learning when "language does not connect with them in any personal sense. It is not part of who they are or want to be" (p. 3). Moreover, Norton (2000a) also contends that, "…unless learners believe that their investments in the target language are an integral and important part of the language curriculum, they may resist teacher's pedagogy, or possibly even remove themselves from class entirely" (p. 142) The findings suggest that language educators should conceive of English learning not only as happening in classrooms, but also in real life.

In this study, I examined the English learning experiences of Hong Kong post-secondary students, drawing on Norton's (2000a) conceptualization of identity and language learning. The findings reveal the multiple identities that the participants took on during their English learning and the impact of these identities on their English learning. Norton's (2000a) notion of investment also helps capture how and to what extent the six focal participants "created and responded to opportunities to practice English" (p. 121).

The present study contributes to the understanding of the complex relationship between learning experiences, learner identities and investment in language learning in post-colonial Hong Kong – a non-target language context. In Hong Kong, English is a colonial language and one of the two official languages (the other being Chinese). As the data reveals, the participants had been learning English under a highly competitive environment as well as the hegemonic influence of English. During their primary and secondary schooling, their investment in English could be understood with reference to their identity as an examination-taker – to gain higher grades in English and to proceed to post-secondary institutions. It was not until their later secondary school years and their studies HKC that they began to invest more in an English user identity, especially through their out-of-class activities. The findings help raise language educators' attention to explore ways to cultivate students' investments in identities as English users.

6.5   Recommendations

Norton (2010) states, "…responding to diversity in the language classroom requires an imaginative assessment of what is possible as well as a critical assessment of what is desirable" (p. 361). Apart from the recommendations mentioned in the above section, I suggest below some of the ways in which language educators can make the desirable possible in order to provide meaningful and positive learning experiences for students.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, 95% of Hong Kong's population are ethnic Chinese (Census and Statistics Department, 2011). One might expect that the English classroom in the Hong Kong context is, to a large extent, homogenous in terms of students' linguistic and cultural background. However, as the study reveals, the participants' English classroom was diverse in terms of their prior learning experiences: their English learning in Chinese- vs. English-stream; the extent of their exposure to English in arts vs. science stream; and their overseas experiences. Thus, it is important for English language educators to better understand their students' prior learning experiences. Each student is different and each brings to the classroom his or her "funds of knowledge" (e.g., González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Marshall & Toohey, 2010). González et al. (2005) stress that "people are competent, they have knowledge, and their experiences have given them that knowledge" (p.ix-x). Cummins (1996) also shares a similar view, that "our

prior experience provides the foundation for interpreting new information. No learner is a blank slate" (p.75). Teachers should not perceive students as merely English learners in the classroom and overlook the other identities they may have taken on, including identities that may not be directly related to their English learning (e.g., Jack's identity as a scout leader). Cook's (2002) work best describes the multiple identities of language learners:

> People are not just women or lawyers or parents or heterosexuals, but women and lawyers and parents and heterosexuals…and all the other parts they play every day; they are simultaneously members of many roles and simultaneously presenting relevant aspects of each; acquiring a language means creating and maintaining all these roles for ourselves within the context of situation. Looking only at the L2 parts of the L2 user is inadequate; they are complete people, some of whose parts are played in one language or the other, some in both at once. (p. 275)

What can educators do to address diversity in the English language classroom? Take HKC as an example. During my data collection, I had the chance to talk to a few English teachers regarding the course materials at HKC. I noticed that there was a worksheet prepared for the English teachers to use in the first lesson as an ice-breaking activity. The worksheet asked students about their purposes for English learning, their strengths and weaknesses in English and their English learning goals for the first school term. The teachers told me that the worksheet was developed by the course coordinator but it was up to the teacher to decide whether to use it or not in the lesson. Ms. Wong (pseudonym), one of the English teachers who had been teaching at HKC for 10 years, indicated that she did use the worksheet during the first lesson. She asked students to share their answers among themselves. However, there was not any follow-up to the worksheet after the first class. Ms. Wong claimed that the teaching schedule at HKC was very tight and she had to cover the topics in the course syllabus in just twelve weeks' time. Ms. Wong indicated that she did not have time to look into the worksheets. From what I observed at HKC, the worksheet was considered as supplementary and it was never included in the core set of teaching materials. Barcelos (2008) contends that many language learners do

not have much idea of their own learning needs. In addition, Reinders (2011) also states that students have "little knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses as language learners" (p. 177). I see how this supplementary worksheet can provide teachers with valuable information about students' English learning such as their prior English learning experiences, what type of English learners they are, and their perceptions towards English learning. Based on such information, teachers can provide educational opportunities that validate students' prior experiences, multiple identities, as well as the knowledge and skills they acquired outside class. According to Cummins (2009), "Choice is always an option" (p. 262). Language educators have choices in how they capitalize on students' prior knowledge. Cummins (2009) also suggests that "articulation of choices involve re-examination of the normalized assumptions about curriculum, assessment, and instruction…" (p. 262). With regard to the English language education in Hong Kong, educators should challenge their assumptions that a strict adherence to the prescribed curriculum will ensure students' achievement of the expected learning outcomes. Too often educators concentrate their efforts on seeking the most effective ways to help students achieve the learning outcomes as laid down in the curriculum. This is especially the case in a heavily examination-oriented education context such as in Hong Kong. Language educators should therefore constantly reflect on their teaching practice. Instead of just focusing on what and how to teach, language educators should first consider to whom they teach the target language. In other words, language educators should be aware of who their students are and what prior learning experiences and knowledge they bring into the classroom.

Due to the prevailing trend towards internationalization of higher education, it is even more important for teachers to be aware of students' backgrounds. Over the past years, the Hong Kong government has encouraged post-secondary institutions to recruit mainland Chinese students so as to "attract talent and diversify the student population for global economic competition and a knowledge-based society" (Li, & Bray, 2007, p. 798). Take the graduate programs in one local Hong Kong university as an example. As Yeung (2013) stated in the South China Morning Post, some 99% of students enrolled in the Master of Science program in one Hong Kong university were all from China. During my data collection, I also observed that there were mainland Chinese students on the HKC

campus. While talking to Ms. Wong, one of the English teachers, she told me the differences between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students' English learning. For instance, in terms of students' vocabulary use in English writing, mainland Chinese students knew many more English words than Hong Kong students, and yet the Chinese students tended to use formal words that did not really fit the context of their writings. Wang's (2011) study may help explain the situation. Wang's (2011) work examines Chinese students' adaptation to learning in the Hong Kong post-secondary context. One of the mainland Chinese student participants stated that "…although English education in China attaches high value to grammar and vocabulary learning, students seem not to have sufficient opportunities to put what they learn into practice in a Chinese environment. As a result, it is hard to improve their language proficiency" (Wang, 2011, p. 50). It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the differences in English learning between local Hong Kong and non-local students (e.g., mainland Chinese students and international students). What the data shows is that teachers should be aware of students' prior English learning experiences in order to provide the support and help that they need. As Norton (2013) puts it:

> It is only by understanding the histories and lived experiences of language learners that the language teacher can create conditions that will facilitate social interaction both in the classroom and in the wider community, and help learners claim the right to speak. (p. 179)

In order to provide positive and meaningful English learning experiences for students, language educators should acknowledge and capitalize on "learners' contribution to the curriculum – in terms of goals, interests and effort" (Cotterall, 2005, p. 118). When compared to the English teachers in the secondary education sector, the teachers at HKC (and other post-secondary institutions in Hong Kong) are not under the pressure to prepare students for the high-stakes examinations (HKCEE and HKALE). Therefore, they can be more flexible in adapting their course materials to accommodate students' diverse needs. In view of this, I see the potential for including students' out-of-class activities, especially their popular cultural practices in the English curriculum. By doing

so, the teachers also engage students' multiple identities (e.g., a fan of television series and a movie lover), which in turn, will help enhance:

> personal involvement, effort and investment from them than traditional teacher-student talk, where students are invariably positioned as language learners who are merely practicing or demonstrating knowledge of the language, rather than expressing their identities and speaking as themselves through the language. (Ushioda, 2011, p. 16).

During the last round of interviews with the participants, the participants confided to me that they appreciated the opportunity to retell their English learning narratives in this study. The retelling enabled them to reflect on their own English learning journeys. As I read through the English curriculum at HKC and the course materials, the emphasis was on enhancing students' academic writing and speaking skills. Many of the assignments and class activities focused on teaching students to write essays and give presentations according to academic conventions. The participants expressed that they never had the chance to reflect on their own English learning. I could see that the teachers at HKC had made efforts to enhance students' English proficiency. However, I also see that it is important for them to conceive of language "not only as a linguistic system, but as a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated" (Norton, 2010, p. 364). I suggest that the English teachers at HKC (and all language educators) should encourage students to write their own English learning narratives. Through the writing process, students could not only practise using the language, but they could also (re)visit their past. The reinterpretation of their past enables them to see clearer about their present -- how their past has shaped who they are today and at the same time, they can also (re)assess their future direction for English learning. This study demonstrates that during the process of constructing and reconstructing their learning narratives, the participants became more aware of what English learning meant to them, what seemed to have contributed or inhibited their English learning. Murphey, Chen and Chen's (2005) study examined the language learning histories written by Japanese and Taiwanese university students who majored in English. According to the researchers, while writing their language learning histories, many students became

more reflective and metacognitive about their learning. They were not simply reporting their experience of learning as it was subjectively and partially remembered at that point in time but constructing an understanding of it by thinking through re-reading what they were writing. (p. 97)

Murphey et al. (2005) summarize the significance of writing language learning histories:

Through writing and talking about who they have been in their different learning situations and who they are (or want to be) now in the present one, students themselves become the topic of the class…Providing space for clarifying and constructing identities when done in the target language also encourages identifying with the language as means of self-construction. (p. 99)

Teachers can better understand their students' histories and lived experiences through reading their learning narratives. Furthermore, Norton's (2010) and her research team (Kendrick, Jones, Mutonyi & Norton, 2006; Kendrick & Jones, 2008) propose the incorporation of multimodal pedagogies in the English curriculum to engage students in meaning-making. As Norton (2010) states, "multimodal pedagogies offer teachers innovative ways of validating students' literacies, experiences, and cultures, and are highly effective in supporting English language learning in the classroom" (p. 363). I suggest that English language educators can provide opportunities for students to make use of multimodal resources so that students will not see themselves as learning isolated facts and rules of the English language. For instance, students can draw upon different recourses (e.g., photographs, drawings, drama) or their out-of-class popular cultural practice (e.g., online music videos) to represent their English learning narratives. The use of multimodal resources and elements of popular culture in the classroom help connect students' English learning with their personal lives and engage them in meaning-making and identity constructions.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the participants had been learning English in either Chinese- or English-medium schools. Their learning experiences in these two language streams influenced the way how they positioned themselves in relation to their peers in the English language classroom. Previous studies (e.g., Evans, 2000; Lai &

Byram, 2003; Poon, 2004) on language education policy in Hong Kong reveal the negative labeling effect of language streaming on students' self-esteem and motivation in learning the English language (the Chinese-medium students in particular). Drawing upon the participants' English learning narratives, it can also be seen that the Chinese-medium students (e.g. Jack and Brandon) positioned themselves as inferior to their English-medium counterparts. Their learning stories point to the importance for Hong Kong language education policy makers to consider the impact of language streaming on students. Though the fine-tuning arrangements[18] introduced by the government in the academic year 2010-2011 aimed to enhance students' (in the Chinese-medium schools) English learning by allowing schools to decide on the language of instruction, the arrangements might lead to an unanticipated within-school labeling effect, with some classes using English in teaching and others using Chinese. The learning narratives of the participants reveal the lingering adverse labeling effect on students' perception towards themselves as English learners. While focusing their attention mainly on improving students' English performance during their policy making, language education policy makers should look beyond students' performance in the public examination and attend to their lived English learning experiences. That being said, more research studies should be conducted on students' English learning experiences (both in and outside the classroom).

6.6   Final Words

Carroll and Cotterall (2007) state, "all learning starts from the realization that there is something we do not know and wish to find out" (p. 164). The researchers further point out that such realization alone is not enough. It is the questioning of one's assumptions and one's learning stories that lead to new understandings. At the beginning of this study, I questioned my assumptions towards my students' and my own English learning. In this

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[18] According to the fine-tuning arrangements, a Chinese-medium school can use English in teaching if a class has 85% of its students who belong to the top 40% of their age group academically (Education Bureau, 2010, p. 8).

study, I bring the participants' and my English learning narratives into light. I invite readers to continue with the questioning. It is hoped that the narratives presented in this study will somehow connect with readers' own English learning experiences and offer readers "possibilities for reliving, for new directions and new ways to do things" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethics Approval Notice

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
FACULTY OF EDUCATION

Western Education

USE OF HUMAN SUBJECTS - ETHICS APPROVAL NOTICE

Review Number: 1109-6
Principal Investigator: Shelley Taylor
Student Name: Vickie Wai Kei Li
Title: *Learners' stories: A study of Hong Kong post-secondary students' English learning experiences and identity construction*
Expiry Date: September 30, 2013
Type: Ph. D. Thesis
Ethics Approval Date: October 27, 2011
Revision #:
Documents Reviewed &
Approved: UWO Protocol, Letters of Information & Consent, Advertisement

This is to notify you that the Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board (REB), which operates under the authority of The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects, according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the date noted above. The approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the REB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information.

During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the study or information/consent documents may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB, except for minor administrative aspects. Participants must receive a copy of the signed information/consent documentation. Investigators must promptly report to the Chair of the Faculty Sub-REB any adverse or unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected, and any new information which may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study. In the event that any changes require a change in the information/consent documentation and/or recruitment advertisement, newly revised documents must be submitted to the Sub-REB for approval.

Dr. Alan Edmunds (Chair)

2011-2012 Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board

Dr. Alan Edmunds	Faculty of Education (Chair)
Dr. John Barnett	Faculty of Education
Dr. Farahnaz Faez	Faculty of Education
Dr. Wayne Martino	Faculty of Education
Dr. George Gadanidis	Faculty of Education
Dr. Elizabeth Nowicki	Faculty of Education
Dr. Immaculate Namukasa	Faculty of Education
Dr. Kari Veblen	Faculty of Music
Dr. Ruth Wright	Faculty of Music
Dr. Kevin Watson	Faculty of Music
Dr. Jason Brown	Faculty of Education, Associate Dean, Research *(ex officio)*
Dr. Goli Rezai-Rashti	Faculty of Education, Associate Dean, Graduate Programs *(ex officio)*
Dr. Susan Rodger	Faculty of Education, UWO Non-Medical Research Ethics Board *(ex officio)*

The Faculty of Education   Karen Kueneman, Research Officer
1137 Western Rd.   Faculty of Education Building
London, ON N6G 1G7

Copy: Office of Research Ethics

Appendix 2: Letter of Information to Principal

My name is Li Wai Kei, Vickie and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada. I am currently conducting research into Hong Kong students' English learning experiences and their English learner identity construction. From your institution, I would like to invite first-year students and their respective English teachers to participate in the study.

The aim of this research is to explore and describe the impact of students' prior English learning experiences on their learning in the post-secondary English classroom. The research also aims to examine the construction of students' English learner identity during their course of English learning. The research may shed new light on developing an appropriate post-secondary English curriculum to accommodate students from different language backgrounds. To accomplish the aims of the research, I will gather information by means of questionnaires, interviews and class observations.

The expectations of first-year students who agree to participate in the study will include: i) completing a questionnaire (which takes about 25-30 minutes) intended to gather students' biographical information, language backgrounds and their prior learning experiences, ii) participating in three hour-long interviews, which will be scheduled at the beginning, the middle and the end of the academic year, and iii) three post-interview English class observations during which I will take notes of students' interactions in class. On the part of the English teachers who agree to participate, this study will involve three class observations as mentioned. Each observation will last for one class period. I will be a non-participant in the class observations and I will only take notes of students' interaction in class. I will also invite 2 students, who study in the same English class as each of the eight selected participants, to take part in class observations. I will take field notes concerning their interactions with the major student participants.

The information collected will be used for research purposes only. Neither the names nor information of the institution and the participants which could identify them will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. The institution and the participants

therein will be given pseudonyms when the results are written up. All information collected for the study will be kept under lock and key. Access to the data will be restricted to only me. All the collected data will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. At your request, I will provide you with a summary of the research results when the study is completed.

There are no known risks or discomforts to the participants in this study. Students' and teachers' participation is entirely voluntary. They may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time.

If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or students' and teachers' rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics, The University of Western Ontario at XXX or XXX. If you have any questions about this study, please contact:

Vickie Wai Kei, Li	Dr. Shelley K. Taylor
PhD candidate	Professor of Education
Faculty of Education	Faculty of Education
The University of Western Ontario	The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, N6G 1G7	London, Ontario, N6G 1G7
Email: XXX	Email: XXX
Tel: XXX	Tel: XXX

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Thank you for your help and cooperation in this study.

Yours sincerely,

_____   Date:_____

Vickie Wai Kei, Li

Appendix 3: Letter of Information to English Teachers

My name is Li Wai Kei, Vickie and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada. I am currently conducting research into Hong Kong students' English learning experiences and their English learner identity construction. I would like to invite you to participate in this research.

The aim of this research is to explore and describe the impact of students' prior English learning experiences on their learning in the post-secondary English classroom. The research also aims to examine the construction of students' English learner identity during their course of English learning. The research may shed new light on developing an appropriate post-secondary English curriculum to accommodate students from different language backgrounds. To accomplish the aims of the research, I will conduct: i) interviews with eight first-year students, and ii) observations of their respective English class. As one of the student participants is enrolled in your English class, I would like to invite you to participate in the class observations.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will sit in on your English class and take field notes concerning the student participant's interactions (both verbal and nonverbal) in your class. The main purpose of the class observation is to document this selected student participant's learning and interactions in the English classroom. I will not take notes or make comments about your instructional or organizational practices in class. There will be three class observations and they will be scheduled at the beginning, middle and end of the academic year. Each observation will last a class period.

The information collected will be used for research purposes only. Neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. You will be given a pseudonym when the results are written up. All information collected for the study will be kept under lock and key. Access to the data will be restricted to only me. All field notes will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. At your request, I will provide you with a summary of the research results when the research is completed.

There are no known risks to participating in this study. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your employment status.

If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics, The University of Western Ontario at XXX or XXX. If you have any questions about this study, please contact:

Vickie Wai Kei, Li	Dr. Shelley K. Taylor
PhD candidate	Professor of Education
Faculty of Education	Faculty of Education
The University of Western Ontario	The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, N6G 1G7	London, Ontario, N6G 1G7
Email: XXX	Email: XXX
Tel: XXX	Tel: XXX

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

_____   Date:_____

Vickie Wai Kei, Li

Appendix 4: Letter of Information to Students

My name is Li Wai Kei, Vickie and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada. I am currently conducting research into Hong Kong students' English learning experiences and their English learner identity construction. I would like to invite you to participate in this research.

The aim of this research is to explore and describe the impact of students' prior English learning experiences on their learning in the post-secondary English classroom. The research also aims to examine students' perceptions of their English learner identity during their course of English learning. The research may shed new light on developing an appropriate post-secondary English curriculum to accommodate students from different language backgrounds. Information for the research will be gathered by means of questionnaire, interviews and post-interview class observations.

If you agree to participate in the research, you will be asked to first, complete a questionnaire (which takes about 25-30 minutes), focusing on the following areas: biographical information, language backgrounds, and prior English learning experiences. You may choose to respond or not to any of the questions in the questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire, you will be asked to indicate your willingness to participate in interviews and post-interview class observations. If you are willing to participate in the interviews and class observations, I may or may not contact you upon your completion of the questionnaire. There will be three rounds of interviews and they will be scheduled at the beginning, middle and end of the academic year. Each interview lasts for approximately an hour and it will be audio-taped and transcribed. Class observations will be conducted after each interview. The main purpose of the class observation is to document your learning and interactions in the English classroom. I will sit in on your English class and take field notes concerning your interactions (both verbal and nonverbal) with your peers and the English teacher. Each observation will last for one class period. I will not overtly disclose that you are the object of my observations but you should be aware that others in the class may be able to discern who is being observed.

The information collected from the questionnaire, interviews and observation field notes will be used for research purposes only. You will be given a pseudonym and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept under lock and key. Access to the data will be restricted to only me. All written records, including the completed questionnaire, interview transcripts, observation field notes as well as the audio-recordings will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. At your request, I will provide you with a summary of the research results when the research is completed.

There are no known risks to participating in this study. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your academic status.

If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics, The University of Western Ontario at XXX or <u>XXX</u>. If you have any questions about this study, please contact:

Vickie Wai Kei, Li	Dr. Shelley K. Taylor
PhD candidate	Professor of Education
Faculty of Education	Faculty of Education
The University of Western Ontario	The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, N6G 1G7	London, Ontario, N6G 1G7
Email: XXX	Email: XXX
Tel: XXX	Tel: XXX

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

_____   Date:_____

Vickie Wai Kei, Li

Appendix 5: Letter of Information to Students (Who Participate in Classroom Observations)

My name is Li Wai Kei, Vickie and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada. I am currently conducting research into Hong Kong students' English learning experiences and their English learner identity construction. I would like to invite you to participate in this research.

The aim of this research is to explore and describe the impact of students' prior English learning experiences on their learning in the post-secondary English classroom. The research also aims to examine the construction of students' English learner identity during their course of English learning. The research may shed new light on developing an appropriate post-secondary English curriculum to accommodate students from different language backgrounds. To accomplish the aims of the research, I have selected eight first-year students for interviews and I will also conduct observations of their respective English class. As one of the selected student participants is enrolled in your English class, I would like to invite you to participate in the class observations. The main purpose of the class observation is to document this selected student participant's learning and interactions in the English classroom.

If you agree to participate in the class observation, I will sit in on your English class and take field notes concerning your interactions with this selected student. There will be three class observations and they will be scheduled at the beginning, middle and end of the academic year. Each observation will last a class period.

The information collected will be used for research purposes only. Neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. You will be given a pseudonym when the results are written up. All information collected for the study will be kept under lock and key. Access to the data will be restricted to only me. All field notes will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. At your request, I will provide you with a summary of the research results when the research is completed.

There are no known risks to participating in this study. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your academic status.

If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics, The University of Western Ontario at XXX or <u>XXX</u>. If you have any questions about this study, please contact:

Vickie Wai Kei, Li	Dr. Shelley K. Taylor
PhD candidate	Professor of Education
Faculty of Education	Faculty of Education
The University of Western Ontario	The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, N6G 1G7	London, Ontario, N6G 1G7
Email: XXX	Email: XXX
Tel: XXX	Tel: XXX

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

_____   Date:_____

Vickie Wai Kei, Li

Appendix 6: E-posting for Recruitment of Research Participants

My name is Li Wai Kei, Vickie and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada. I am currently conducting research into Hong Kong students' English learning experiences and their English learner identity construction. I would like to invite first-year students to participate in the study.

The aim of this research is to explore and describe the impact of students' prior English learning experiences on their learning in the post-secondary English classroom. The research also aims to examine the construction of students' English learner identity during their course of English learning. The research may shed new light on developing an appropriate post-secondary English curriculum to accommodate students from different language backgrounds. To accomplish the aims of the research, I will gather information by means of questionnaires, interviews and class observations.

If you:

       i)   speak Cantonese as your first language;

      ii) have been learning English as a second language;

     iii) are a first-year student in this institution;

     iv) have pursued your secondary education in Hong Kong; and

      v) have just graduated from a secondary institution in Hong Kong;

you are invited to participate in this study. Participation involves completing a background questionnaire, discussing your prior English learning experiences with the researcher and participating in English class observations.

If you are interested in participating in this study or you have questions regarding this study, please contact me at: telephone number: XXX or email: XXX.

Thank you.

Appendix 7: Consent Form

I have read the letter of information, the nature of the study has been explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 8: Questionnaire for Students

LEARNERS' STORIES: A STUDY OF HONG KONG POST-SECONDARY
STUDENTS' ENGLISH LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND IDENTITY
CONSTRUCTION

SECTION A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION
(Please tick the appropriate answer)

Name: _____   Age: _____

Gender: ☐ Female ☐ Male   Email address: _____

Program of Study: _____   Year of study: _____ (e.g. 1st/2nd)

1. What is your race?

☐ Chinese ☐ Japanese ☐ Indian ☐ Indonesian ☐ Other: _____

2. What is your place of birth?   _____

3. What is your mother-tongue (first language)? _____

4a. How many other languages or dialects, besides your first language, do you speak?

_____

4b. What are these language/dialects?

_____

5a. How many languages do you read and write? _____

5b. What are these languages?

_____

Based on the scale on the next page, answer question 6.

The scale, adapted from the self-assessment grid of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), aims to help language learners self-assess their level of proficiency in the languages that they know or they are learning.

		A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
U N D E R S T A N D I N G	**Listening**	I can recognise familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programs on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.	I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programs. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.	I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programs and films without too much effort.	I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided. I have some time to get familiar with the accent.
	Reading	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.	I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.	I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.	I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.
S P E A K I N G	**Spoken Interaction**	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).	I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.	I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skilfully to those of other speakers.	I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it.
	Spoken Production	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.	I can present a clear, smoothly-flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.

		A1	**A2**	**B1**	**B2**	**C1**	**C2**
W R I T I N G	**Writing**	I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.	I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate needs. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.	I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.	I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select style appropriate to the reader in mind.	I can write clear, smoothly-flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works.

6. Based on the scale on the previous page, please indicate in the table below your level of proficiency (i.e. from A1 to C2) in understanding, speaking, and writing the languages/dialects you listed in question 4b and 5b.

Languages / dialects	Listening	Reading	Spoken Interaction	Spoken Production	Writing
1.					
2					
3					
4					
5.					
6.					
7.					

7. Which language(s) do you use most often in your daily life?

_____

Education background:

8. Have you ever studied abroad?

☐ Yes. I went to _____ (country's name) for _____ (length of time).

And I received ☐ pre-primary ☐ primary ☐ secondary ☐ post-secondary education there.

☐ No.   I never study abroad.

Schools that I attended in Hong Kong:

Name of school	Language of instruction
Secondary school	
Primary school	
Kindergarten	

SECTION B: ENGLISH LEARNING EXPERIENCES

9. How old were you when you started learning English? _____

10. How long have you been learning English? _____ years

11. Besides learning English in school, have you ever attended any out-of-school English lessons (e.g. tutorial classes)?

    ☐ Yes, for _____ (days/months/years)

    ☐ No. I did not attend any out-of-school English lessons.

12. Have you taken part in any exchange programs to an English-speaking country?

    ☐ Yes, I took part in an exchange program to _____ (country's name).

    Please describe briefly the type of program in which you took part:

    _____

    _____

    ☐ No. I did not take part in any exchange programs before.

13. Did you encounter any difficulties during your English learning?

    ☐ Yes. Please describe briefly what do you find difficult when learning English:

    _____

    _____

    ☐ No. I did not encounter any difficulties when learning English.

14. Do you think you need to improve your English?

    ☐ Yes. I would like to improve my English.

    Which aspect of English do you think you need improvement most?

    (more than one answer allowed)
    ☐ Listening   ☐ Speaking   ☐ Writing   ☐ Reading

    ☐ No. I do not need to improve my English.

15. Did you have any opportunities to practice your English outside the English class?

    ☐ Yes. I had opportunities to practice my English outside class.

    Please describe such opportunities: _____

    _____

    ☐ No. I did not have any opportunities to practice my English outside class.

16. Do you want to have any opportunities to practice your English outside class?

   ☐   Yes. I want to have out-of-class opportunities to practice my   English.

       Please describe briefly what type of opportunities you would like to have to practice your English.

      _____

   ☐ No. I do not want any out-of-class opportunities to practice my English.

17. What do you perceive as the greatest challenge regarding your English learning at the post-secondary level?

_____

_____

18. What is your expectation of the post-secondary English classroom?

_____

_____

19. Did you prepare yourself for the English learning at the post-secondary level?

   ☐   Yes. Please describe briefly how you prepared for English learning at the post-secondary level:_____

      _____

   ☐ No. I did not have any preparation for the English learning at the post-secondary level.

20. How would you like your lecturer to help improve your English?

_____

_____

_____

_____

SECTION C: ENGLISH PERFORMANCE

21. How would you rate yourself in terms of your level of English?

Please use the scale below to describe your English proficiency. Put a tick next to the level that best describes your level of English.

This scale, which is from Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), helps you describe the level of your English proficiency.

Proficient User	___ C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	___ C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	___ B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	___ B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	___ A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	___ A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

(Adapted from http://www.coe.int/t/DG4/Portfolio/?M=/main_pages/levels.html)

22. a) How would you describe your level of English when compared with your peers in the secondary English classroom?

☐ My English was better than my peers.

☐ My level of English was similar to that of my peers.

☐ My level of English was lower than that of my peers.

22. b) How would you describe your level of English when compared with your peers in the post-secondary English classroom?

☐ My English was better than my peers.

☐ My level of English was similar to that of my peers.

☐ My level of English was lower than that of my peers.

23. How would you identify yourself as an English learner?

(more than one answer allowed)

☐ Speaker   ☐ Listener   ☐ Reader   ☐ Writer

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

You may be asked to take part in three interviews and class observations, scheduled at the beginning, middle and end of the academic year. The interviews and class observations aim to capture a fuller picture of your English learning experiences. Please indicate below if you would like to participate in the interviews and class observations.

☐ Yes, I would like to participate in the interviews and class observations.

☐ No, I do not want to participate in the interviews and class observations.

If you agree to participate in interviews and class observations, please provide the following information:

Email address: _____

Phone number: _____

Thanks again for your participation in the study.

Appendix 9: Interview Protocol

The questions below provide a guide for the interview and they may be modified or expanded during the course of the study.

Language background
1. What is your mother-tongue? What other languages/dialects do you speak?
2. How many members are there in your family? What language do you speak to them at home?
3. Do you have an English-speaking maid/helper[19] at home?
4. Did any of your family members receive their education overseas? If so, for how long and in which country? Did your family help you in any way with your English learning?
5. Do you have any friends or relatives who use English as their first language?
6. Did your friends or relatives, in any ways, help you with your English learning?
7. Have you travelled to English-speaking countries? If so, which country? For how long and for what purposes?

Prior English learning experiences
1. How old were you when you started English learning? Was it in a classroom or home setting? What was the format of teaching and learning like?

Kindergarten education
1. What was the medium of instruction in your kindergarten? What was your experience of learning English in the kindergarten? Describe a typical English class at your kindergarten (e.g. Was your English teacher a native English speaker? Were the textbooks written in English, or in both Chinese and English? What was the format of English class like?)
2. Were there any native-English speaking students in your class? How would you describe your English level at that time, as compared with your classmates?
3. What did you find easy/difficult about learning English in kindergarten?
4. Did you take part in any English related extra-curricular activities? Describe any out-of-school opportunities that you had to use English.
5. Do you have anything else you would like to share about your English learning experiences at that time?

Primary education
1. What was the medium of instruction in your primary school? What was your experience of learning English in primary school? Describe a typical English class in your primary school (e.g. Was your English teacher a native English speaker? Were

---

[19] It is common to have a Filipino or Indonesian helper in the family in Hong Kong.

the textbooks written in English, or in both Chinese and English? What was the format of English class like?)
2. Were there any native-English speaking students in your class? How would you describe your English level at that time, as compared with your classmates?
3. What did you find easy/difficult about learning English in primary school?
4. Did you take part in any English related extra-curricular activities? Describe any out-of-school opportunities that you had to use English.
5. Do you have anything else you would like to share about your English learning experiences at that time?

Secondary education
1. What was the medium of instruction in your secondary school? What was your experience of learning English in your secondary school? Describe a typical English class at the secondary school (e.g. Was your English teacher a native English speaker? Were the textbooks written in English, or in both Chinese and English? What was the format of English class like?).
2. Were there any native-English speaking students in your class? How would you describe your English level at that time, as compared with your classmates?
3. What differences did you find between English learning at the primary level and that in the secondary school? How did you prepare yourself for English learning at the secondary level?
4. What did you find easy/difficult about learning English at the secondary level?
5. Did you take part in any English related extra-curricular activities? Describe any out-of-school opportunities that you had to use English.
6. How would you describe your English performance in the public examinations?
7. Do you have anything else you would like to share about your English learning experiences at that time?

Post-secondary education
1. What program are you now enrolled in? Which English course(s) are you taking in this semester?
2. Before entering this institution, how did you perceive English learning at the post-secondary level? How did you prepare yourself for English learning at the post-secondary level?
3. How would you describe your current English learning in a post-secondary English classroom (e.g. the English lecturer, the course materials, and the teaching format)? Do you find any differences between English learning at the secondary level and that in a post-secondary institution?
4. What do you find most challenging about learning English at the post-secondary level? Can you provide an example of such a challenge and how did you deal with it?
5. How would you describe your level of English performance among other students in the class? Was there any group work in the class? If so, describe your experiences while working with other students in class. For example, how comfortable do you feel working with other classmates?

6. Which part of English (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) do you think needs improvement? Do you think your current English learning can help you in this respect? What opportunities do you hope to have to improve your English?
7. Do you have any opportunities to use English outside the classroom? If so, please elaborate/describe the situations.
8. Did you take part in any English-related extra-curricular activities? If so, do you think these activities help you with your English learning?
9. Do you have anything else you would like to share about your English learning at present?

Conclusion
1. How would you describe your overall English learning experience?
2. How would you describe yourself as an English learner?
3. Do you think you share similar or different English learning experience with other English learners in Hong Kong?

Curriculum Vitae

Name:	Vickie Wai Kei Li

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:

The University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong
1995-1998 B.A.

The University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong
1998-2001 M.Phil.

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2006-2008 M.Ed.

Honours and Awards:

Province of Ontario Graduate Scholarship
2009-2010, 2010-2011, 2012-2013

Related Work Experience

Research Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2010-2013

Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2009-2010

English Lecturer
The University of Hong Kong (School of Professional and Continuing Education)
2004-2009

Instructor /Research Assistant
The University of Hong Kong
1998 -2002

Publications:

Taylor, S. K., Despagne, C., and Li, V. W. -K. (Submitted). Beyond linguistic silo: Creating spaces for plurilingual learners' out-of-school linguistic repertoires in

the French language classroom & for French in their out-of-school lives. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*

Li, V. W. -K. (2012). Learners' stores: An exploration of students' learning experiences in a Hong Kong post-secondary English classroom. *Conference Proceedings, 2012 Hawaii International Conference on Education: 10th Annual Conference* (pp. 2808-2821). Honolulu, Hawaii: Hawaii International Conference on Education.

Li, V. W. -K. (2011). [Review of the book *Hanging out, messing around, geeking out: Living and learning with new media*.] *Writing and Pedagogy, 3*(2), 325-330.

Li, W.-k., Vickie (Principal author) with Majhanovich, S. (2010). Marching on a long road: A review of the effectiveness of the mother-tongue education policy in post-colonial Hong Kong. *Colombian Journal of Bilingual Education, Volume* 4, 10-29.

Li, V. W. -K. (2010). A look into the medium of instruction policy in post-colonial Hong Kong: Issues and challenges. *Conference Proceedings, 2nd Asian Conference on Education* (pp. 1527-1547). Osaka, Japan: The International Academic Forum (IAFOR).

Selected Conference Presentations:

Taylor, S. K., Despagne, C., and Li, V. W.-K. (2014). "ELT teachers' roles in sustaining plurilingualism for the next generation." Paper presented at TESOL International Convention, Portland, Oregon, U.S.A, 26-29 March.

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