# Phenomenological Insights into Small Talk: A Co-Cultural Analysis of Chinese Graduate Students in Canada

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*Abstract: Research shows that informal social interaction and engagement with peers and instructors play an important role in the academic success and mental well-being of international students. Small talk, a significant component of social interaction, poses a special challenge for those who use a second or additional language. Based on data from a phenomenological study which investigated challenges faced by Chinese graduate students in Canada, this paper uses co-cultural communication theory to explore the unique communicative strategies employed by three study participants who encountered ongoing problems with small talk in English. It was found that all three followed the same communicative orientation: non-assertive separation and adopted similar communicative strategies: avoiding, maintaining barriers, and leaving the situation. It is recommended that educational environments that embrace and value various communicative norms should be encouraged to support international students.*

*Keywords: Small Talk, Chinese Graduate Students in Canada, Co-Cultural Communication Theory*

As the number of international students in Canada continues to grow, policymakers and educators recognize the need to support these individuals as they adapt to new learning and living environments. Research shows that informal social interaction and engagement with peers and instructors play an important role in academic success (Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1975, 2006; Wilcox et al., 2005) and mental well-being (Sawir, et al., 2008). Small talk, a significant component of social interaction, poses special challenges for students who speak English as an additional language (Spencer-Oatey, 2018; Xu, 2022).

This paper outlines the findings of a phenomenological study conducted to investigate challenges faced by Chinese graduate students in Canada when making small talk in English. These students are the focus of this study for three reasons: (1) there were and continue to be many Chinese students in Canadian universities; in 2020, the year before I started my research, over 22% of international students in this country were from China (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2021); (2) there is a wide cultural distance between these two countries (Hofstede et al., 2010) and research shows that international students who experience a wide cultural distance between home country and host country tend to have more challenges when adjusting to their new environment (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Sawir et al., 2008); and (3) my personal experiences as a Chinese graduate student in Canada.

Co-cultural communication theory (CCT), as introduced by Orbe (1998a), is used to analyze interview transcripts from a critical-interpretive perspective. The paper begins with a review of the literature on the small talk experiences of English language learners (ELLs), followed by an exploration of the theoretical framework used for data analysis, CCT. Next, the research methods employed in the phenomenological inquiry are outlined, along with the findings. These are accompanied by discussions that illuminate the nuances of the small talk experiences for Chinese graduate students in Canada and that explore the implications of the research.

## Literature Review

### Small Talk

Malinowski (1923) was the first to introduce the concept of small talk, originally calling it "phatic communion" (p. 315). It was defined as "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by mere exchanges of words...[which] serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas" (Malinowski, 1923, pp. 315-316). According to this definition, the purpose of phatic communion is to fulfil certain social obligations, such as creating a friendly atmosphere, and not to function as a means to transmit information. This definition laid the groundwork for subsequent research, with scholars referring to phatic communion as chit-chat or schmoozing (Meltzer & Musolf, 2000), quick chatting (Yates & Major, 2015), or simply as a conversational routine (Schneider, 2012). Lyons (1968) echoed Malinowski's notion by stating that it plays a role in establishing and maintaining a feeling of social solidarity and well-being.

Laver (1975) expanded upon Malinowski's perspective, contending that phatic communion involved subtle and intricate means to establish "ties of union" (Malinowski, 1923, p. 315) rather than "mere word exchange" (Malinowski, 1923, p. 314). Laver posited three social functions of phatic communion: first, the propitiatory function which aims

to ease potential hostility arising from silence when speech is usually expected. Second, the exploratory function which seeks to achieve a "working consensus" (Goffman, 1956, as cited by Laver, 1975) among interactants. Third, the initiatory function which facilitates the smooth launch of interaction and cooperation between interactants. Additionally, Laver emphasized that small talk primarily communicated indexical facts about the speaker's identities, attributes, and attitudes, which constrain the nature of the particular interaction.

Some scholars use the terms "small talk" and "phatic communion" interchangeably to refer to casual communication (e.g., Djuric, 2021; Graham, 2013; Jones, 2016). However, there are differing perspectives on how these two terms are interrelated. Some argue that small talk encompasses a broader range of conversational exchanges (e.g., Holmes, 2000a); others (e.g., Laver, 1975) suggest that phatic communion is more pervasive in interactions, particularly during conversational transitions, and that small talk is confined to peripheral phases of communication. In this paper, small talk and phatic communion are treated as interchangeable terms.

According to Holmes (2000a), small talk in the workplace spans a continuum that encompasses phatic communion, social discussion, work-related talk, and core business communication. In this paper, drawing from Holmes (2000a) and building upon Manzo's (2014) thesis, the definition of small talk is as follows: Small talk is a discourse mechanism which extends from ritualized exchanges of greeting or departing, to social conversation about general issues, and to business or work-related communication during the transition to different topics, with a primarily phatic and relational function focused on establishing and maintaining social bonds (Xu, 2022).

The term "small talk" may suggest that it is trivial and unimportant, often associated with gossip, chit-chat, and empty talk (Coupland, 2000; Malinowski, 1923). However, scholars such as Bernstein (2013) argue that it serves as a ritualistic tool enabling individuals to connect in social contexts. Small talk functions as essential social grease to reduce potential awkwardness, avoid silence, and facilitate the flow of conversations from openings to conclusions (Coupland & Robinson, 1992; Laver, 1975; Padilla Cruz, 2013). As a major component of social interaction, small talk serves as an icebreaker in social communication (Hargie, 2011), paves the way for further interpersonal interaction and connections (Spencer-Oatey, 2018), and plays a relational function helping to establish and maintain social bonds (Xu, 2022). Its significance extends across various social, commercial, and professional domains, weaving the fabric of social interactions and reinforcing social roles (Roberts, 2015). The value of small talk lies in its ability to facilitate fundamental social exchanges, thereby fostering rapport and connection among participants in diverse contexts.

**Small Talk Experiences of ELLs**

The research on small talk within the context of international students remains relatively scarce. Immigrants and international students, two groups that are often referred to as "cross-cultural travelers" (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016, p. 785), experience a common process of adaptation (Berry & Sam, 1996). This process encompasses various challenges related to language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and social interaction. Moreover, given the prevalence of English as a lingua franca in various international business contexts, many individuals also use English as an additional language when engaging with their counterparts in social interactions. Therefore, this article incorporates literature on small talk among immigrants in English-speaking countries, as well as those utilizing English as a lingua franca in business settings. The individuals discussed in this paper all use English as a second or additional language; as such they can be classified as English language learners (ELLs).

Most literature on small talk or social interactions of immigrants is focused on the workplace (e.g., Cheng et al., 2021; Cui, 2015; Holmes, 2000b; Yates & Major, 2015). The literature on small talk in the workplace indicates that although immigrants are generally proficient in their professional domain (Holmes, 2000b) and are able to establish a professional identity (Holmes & Riddiford, 2010), they often need guidance in managing the social and interpersonal aspects of casual workplace interaction (Holmes, 2005). Literature on the social interaction of international students mainly studies the factors influencing sociocultural adaptation, such as language proficiency, cultural differences, availability of opportunities for interaction, social support, and problems making social connections with locals (Bethel et al., 2020; Briscoe et al., 2022; Elturki et al., 2019; Urban & Orbe, 2007; Xu, 2022; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). It has been found that the major challenges faced by ELLs stem from the unexpected prevalence of small talk (Holmes, 2005; Yates & Major, 2015), a lack of common ground (i.e., a lack of shared experiences, mutual interests, or cultural appreciation) (Cheng et al, 2021; Xu, 2022), and underdeveloped sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and sociopragmatic skills in English (Cheng et al, 2021; Cui, 2015; Holmes, 2000b, 2005; Yates & Major, 2015).

The first challenge is the pervasive use of small talk in the workplace. Although small talk is usually expected and even mandatory when people who work together meet for the first time during the working day in many English-speaking countries (Holmes, 2000b, 2005), this is not a universal activity. For example, Clyne (1994) notes that individuals from Eastern and Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, generally do not anticipate small talk at work, and the immigrants in the study by Yates and Major (2015) seem overwhelmed by the ongoing expectations for small talk with supervisors, co-coworkers, and customers at their Australian workplaces. This is a significant change from their cultural norms and expectations.

Second, the absence of common ground makes it difficult to find a suitable topic for sustainable conversation, which can lead ELLs to find ways to withdraw from or opt out of opportunities for social engagement. A study conducted by Cheng et al. (2021) in Canada on communication patterns and English language usage among immigrants employed in entry-level positions revealed some problems with workplace interactions. Among the primary obstacles were difficulties related to topics of discussion. For example, some participants struggled to engage in conversations about hockey due to their lack of personal experience with the sport. Likewise, the findings from Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) also indicated that Chinese international students were challenged to interact socially with British locals due to a lack of common topics for small talk. As a result, they only established social networks with other Chinese students and believed that co-national friends provided more emotional support and practical help.

Third, a variety of necessary skills for intercultural communication, such as sociocultural, sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic skills are also commonly referenced in studies on small talk in the workplace. Holmes (2000b, 2005) reveals that small talk at the workplace presented special challenges for non-native-English-speaking immigrants in terms of topics, distribution, and functions. These challenges include selecting appropriate topics, determining the appropriate level of detail, discerning when to engage in small talk and when to abstain, and the ability to identify signals regarding initiating and terminating small talk. In the same vein, Cui's (2015) study on the social interaction of immigrants in Australia identified a number of sociocultural reasons for the challenges Chinese immigrants faced when engaging with Australian colleagues at work. The most significant issues were related to differences in beliefs and values about the nature of personal identity and interpersonal relationships, as well as how relationships outside the intimate social circle should be managed. At the end of the study, the author claimed that small talk is a missing skill for Chinese immigrant professionals.

In summary, research on small talk and social interaction highlights that spontaneous social exchanges can pose significant challenges for ELLs, particularly those newly immersed in a different language and culture. Therefore, studying their experiences and communicative dynamics is crucial for providing effective support.

### Co-Cultural Communication Theory (CCT)

The analysis in this paper is theoretically informed by CCT, which was developed by Mark Orbe based on a series of phenomenological studies (Orbe, 1994, 1996, 1998a, 1998b) examining the communicative experiences of traditionally marginalized group members. Informed by both muted group theory (Kramarae, 1981) and standpoint theory (Smith, 1987), CCT is derived from five epistemological assumptions: (1) every society has a social hierarchy that privileges some groups over others; (2) the privileged groups create and maintain communicative systems that reflect, reinforce, and promote their privilege; (3) dominant communication structures obstruct the progress of non-dominant group members; (4) although different co-cultural group members have diverse experiences, their societal positions are similar; (5) to work within the constraints of the dominant communicative system, co-cultural group members must adopt certain communication strategies (Orbe, 1998a).

According to Orbe (1998a), there are six interdependent factors influencing co-cultural communication: (1) field of experience (factors that shape and influence one's life experiences and realities, such as family, friends, social groups, etc.); (2) situational context (a specific occasion or set of circumstances); (3) abilities (physical and psychological factors that influence a culture's ability to communicate); (4) perceived costs and rewards (advantages and disadvantages related to specific actions); (5) communication approach (the manner by which an individual engages in interactions); and (6) preferred outcome (the desired outcome for certain actions and behaviours).

Field of experience, situational context, ability, and perceived costs and rewards combine to determine communication approaches, which will lead to preferred outcomes. Orbe (1998a) developed nine communicative orientations based on intersections between three communication approaches (non-assertive, assertive, and aggressive) and three preferred outcomes (separation, accommodation, and assimilation). Each orientation is represented and achieved through certain communicative strategies. Orbe (1988a) originally defined 26 strategies, but other researchers have contributed to this total.

**Application of CCT**

Since its introduction in 1998, CCT has been widely used to study communication and interaction among different co-cultural groups, especially to understand how the positioning of group members is perceived and interpreted and how the six influencing factors described above influence their orientations and strategies (Camara & Orbe, 2010; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004). Although the foundational works by Mark Orbe were based on a study of African Americans, the theory has expanded and now generally refers to interactions of underrepresented members with others (both like and unlike them). For example, research on co-cultural groups has included people with disabilities (e.g., Cohen & Avanzino, 2010; Congdon, 2014), Black or African Americans (e.g., Castle Bell et al., 2015; Gates, 2003; Glenn & Johnson, 2012), Asian Americans (e.g., Jun, 2012; Jun et al., 2021), and members of the LGBTQ community (e.g., Bie & Tang, 2016; Meyer, 2019).

In educational settings, CCT has been used to examine communication among university students who experienced discrimination related to race, sex, age, sexual orientation, and disability. Studies investigated discrimination in general (e.g., Camara & Orbe, 2010) and among first-generation college students (e.g., Orbe, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004), college students with learning disabilities (e.g., Worley & Cornett-DeVito, 2007), and international students who speak English as a second language (e.g., Unyapho, 2011) or who are positioned as cultural outsiders (e.g., Urban & Orbe, 2007). Research on students from different ethnic groups, such as Hispanic college students in a Hispanic serving institute (e.g., Sanford et al., 2019), African American students in a predominantly White institute (e.g., Glenn & Johnson, 2012), and Chinese students in Canada (e.g., Chung, 2019) has also been conducted.

In Western society, international students can be positioned as a co-cultural group based on their language, physical appearance, and other characteristics (Urban & Orbe, 2007). Many international students speak English as an additional language and substandard proficiency is one likely reason to be marginalized. Differences related to physical appearance can be a salient marker of their identity, leading them to be regarded as "generalized others" (Urban & Orbe, 2007, p. 117) or "cultural outsiders" (Urban & Orbe, 2007, p. 118). Other issues such as unfamiliarity with new learning settings and differing social norms may also limit their ability to communicate effectively. As international students, the Chinese graduate students in this study can also be regarded as a unique co-cultural group and their communicative experiences can be examined through the interpretive-critical lens of CCT.

## Research Methods

A phenomenological study was conducted to examine the lived experiences of Chinese graduate students when making small talk in English as an additional language in Canada. Phenomenology, a qualitative methodology "in search of the essence of lived experience" (Patton, 2015, p.190), aims to understand "the very nature of the thing" (van Manen, 1990, p. 177) from the perspectives of those who have experienced the phenomenon. This approach is appropriate for this study because it explores the lived experiences of these students when making small talk with peers, instructors, and other individuals in Canadian communities. The focus is on how they "perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it" (Patton, 2015, p. 190).

After ethics clearance was received, a poster, written in both Chinese and English, describing the nature and purpose of the study, criteria for potential participants, and providing application and contact information was distributed in different universities in Canada using WeChat (a social media app popular among Chinese students). Ten Chinese graduate students from four Canadian universities were recruited and data were collected through semi-structured interviews via Zoom.

Prior to the interviews, an interview guide written in both Chinese and English was distributed which outlined the main topics to be addressed. Participants were advised that they could use either English or Mandarin as earlier studies have indicated that some individuals felt more comfortable sharing intimate experiences in their native language (Wang, 2016). The interview questions were developed to be open-ended, allowing the participants to relate their own experiences, as the aim of an in-depth interview is not merely to get answers but to understand the complex lived experiences of people (Seidman, 2013).

During the interview, the participants were asked about their lived experiences making small talk. They were encouraged to include stories related to successful and unsuccessful experiences, special challenges they encountered and possible causes for these challenges, strategies they used to overcome these challenges, and to provide suggestions for current and future students. Although given the option, only two of the ten participants chose to conduct the interview in Chinese.

With permission, all interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The English transcripts (including the two translated by the researcher) were verified by the participants, then imported to *NVivo* for analysis and thoroughly reviewed by the researcher who also took note of ideas that were interesting or relevant. Key words and phrases reflecting the experiences of the participants were highlighted, classified, and assigned code names. These codes were related to the literature and the theoretical frame to find connections and themes were developed based on the literature and theories. Finally, the process was repeated to search for any emergent themes.

## Findings

The analysis revealed that as newcomers, all ten participants encountered challenges when making small talk with their Canadian classmates and instructors. Four of them quickly overcame their difficulties and developed a high level of comfort and confidence with social interaction. Three indicated they were making progress but were still not very confident. The last three (P 5, P 7, and P 9) said they were struggling. These three participants were in their second, third, and fifth year in Canada; they were completing or had recently completed a master's degree program when the interviews were conducted. They all lived with their families, planned to stay in Canada after graduation, and expressed a sincere desire to integrate socially and develop a sense of belonging. However, using the critical-interpretive lens of CCT to analyse the data revealed that all three participants adopted a non-assertive separation communicative orientation when interacting with locals.

According to Orbe (1998a), individuals who adopt a non-assertive separation communicative orientation use certain communicative strategies to separate themselves from the dominant group during interactions whenever possible. The analysis found all three participants used these strategies, which include *avoiding*, *maintaining barriers* (Orbe, 1998a, Orbe & Roberts, 2012), and *leaving the situation* (Camara & Orbe, 2010), when engaging in small talk with others in their Canadian communities.

### Avoiding

Avoiding means maintaining a distance from dominant group members, refraining from activities and/or locations where interaction is likely, avoiding a person, conversation, or topic, maintaining a psychological distance when physical distance is not possible, and communicating only when necessary (Orbe, 1998a; Orbe & Roberts, 2012). When P 7 logged in to Zoom for classes, they would join right on time to avoid the possibility of small talk:

> When we had Zoom class, I didn't want to go there early, because I was afraid of these warming up interactions with people, because I did not know what to say. Every time when we have classes or any activities, I will go there right on time, just to avoid social interaction. Because it really made me very embarrassed, I don't know what to say when other people are talking around. I can only say yes, yes. I don't know, I cannot open up a topic. When they are talking about something, I don't know how to participate in their discussion, and I don't know when the appropriate time is and how to cut in the conversation. So, I always feel embarrassed. (Transcript from P 7)

This participant also refrained from taking part in other activities to avoid embarrassment if they could not find ways to engage with others: "I don't even want to participate in any extracurricular activities because of this problem, this psychological state [of feeling embarrassed]." (Transcript from P 7)

This also happened with P 9, who said that although they did not have many opportunities to interact with local people in their community, they turned down an invitation to a party where there would be both Chinese and Canadian guests:

> ...a friend who is from China invited me to her house for a party, she said some local people were also invited. I was back on my heels again, and I don't know how I should make this first step. I was thinking why go there, what will I talk about with them, and I was afraid that I did not know how to interact with them…because the Chinese host who invited me was not a close friend to me, and there would be some local people who were totally strangers to me. If the host was my close friend, I would have gone to the party. At least I would feel there was a bridge between me and other local people. (Transcript from P 9)

In this participant's view, they needed a bridge to span the separation which divided them and the local people. They only felt at ease when accompanied by a close friend from their own culture, who could understand their situation and provide support during uncomfortable or awkward moments.

**Maintaining Barriers**

When using this strategy, a psychological distance is created from dominant group members using verbal and nonverbal cues, averting eye-contact, and maintaining a closed and defensive posture (Orbe, 1998a, Orbe & Roberts, 2012). When P 5 wanted to avoid talking with classmates, they pretended to be busy with their work: "When I was in a small group, and there is time left, I prefer to pretend that I am focusing on my paper, not anyone else. In this case, no one will, at least no one will ask me directly to start small talk." (Transcript from P 5)

This participant also learned to avoid eye contact with people on the street after being twice asked for money by strangers they had greeted:

> When I first came here, and one of my friends…told me that people here were very friendly. They greet you on the street even if you are strangers. Yes, in the first couple of weeks, I was greeted by people and also greeted people on the street. But when I just get used to this greeting mode in Canada, I met two people...asking for money…I thought they wanted some small change for vending machine, so I just gave them the money and they just ran away. Two of such cases happened to me in downtown Toronto…So I do not greet strangers anymore. I don't make eye contact with strangers. (Transcript from P 5)

During the interview, P 5 also noted that their only friends were international students because "talking to local people is very, very hard". As a result, this participant confined themselves to a small circle of friends and maintained a distance from those who are not familiar.

**Leaving the Situation**

This strategy, added by Camara and Orbe (2010), means to leave a venue or area where communication may take place. For example, P 9 "ran away" from an office where two delivery people were talking with the supervisor: "Our office…had two delivery men come to help today. My supervisor was chatting with them when they were working, but I just ran away from them. I did not know what to say and felt awkward standing there when they were talking. I could not jump in their conversation, and I felt awkward standing there, so I just ran away." (Transcript from P 9)

Camara and Orbe (2010) originally defined this strategy as a method to avoid conflict; although there was no danger of physical or verbal conflict, P 9 used this strategy to escape their inner conflict caused by the inability to interact with others in English.

## Discussion

Orbe (1998a) notes that individuals adopting a non-assertive separation communicative orientation attempt to distance themselves from the dominant group. My analysis reveals that although these three participants indicated a strong desire to engage with members of their local communities, they clearly used this separation communicative orientation as a defensive mechanism to sidestep awkward or embarrassing situations. This contradiction between their desire and behaviour is similar to the findings from a commentary by Heng (2020) on studies related to the experiences of Chinese students in American universities. These results indicated that some students would exhibit contradictory behaviour, they say they would love to make friends with fellow students from the host country, but often shied away in reality. Heng also partly attributes this contradiction to "the mental strain of communicating in English" (p. 542) and an "uncertainty over socially appropriate ways to engage their American peers" (p. 542), which also applies to the three participants in this study. During the interviews, all three explicitly expressed anxiety about not being able to speak English fluently and being looked down upon because they could not socialize like locals.

However, the findings show that the choice of communicative orientation and strategies for these participants is not necessarily consistent with some other studies on international students. For example, in a study which investigated the communicative behaviour of Hispanic students when engaging with White institutional members in a Hispanic serving institution in the US, Sanford et al. (2019) found assimilation was the most prominent communication orientation and these students adopted strategies such as emphasizing commonalities, developing positive face, rationalization, and mirroring. The findings indicated that these Hispanic students felt compelled to behave in ways that were in line with "White norms" (p. 158), even though they represented the majority of the student population.

In this study, the three participants similarly believed in a dominant or standard way of making small talk in Canada, and not knowing the "Canadian way" put them at a self-imposed disadvantage. They felt the need to follow certain communicative norms, but the absence of explicit rules added complications and increased stress. When they were uncertain how to interact in this dominant way, they felt "embarrassed" and "awkward", which drove them to separate themselves from dominant group members to avoid unfavourable situations.

These findings reinforce the suggestion by Sanford et al., (2019) that there is a need to "explicitly decenter and denaturalize" (p. 173) dominant norms in the educational field. Only when students feel comfortable enough to interact with others in their own way and can develop the capacity to accommodate other methods of social communication, will they really embrace an inclusive and diverse academic and social atmosphere, and feel they are part of their new learning environment.

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