

Chinese students' experience of student-instructor relationships  
at the University of Ottawa

M.A. Thesis

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### **Abstract**

Research shows that there is an increasing number of international students studying in universities and colleges in Canada, with China a top source country of international students. However, Chinese students' experience studying in Canada has been rarely researched. Taking University of Ottawa as a case, this study explores the experience of Chinese students in terms of their relationships with instructors through a relational communication lens. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with Chinese first year students studying at the University of Ottawa to explore their experience of student-instructor relationships, to understand their overall experience of the student-instructor relationship, to identify the contributors and hindrances to the development of positive student-instructor relationships, and to explore the impact of such relationship on the students. Findings indicate that Chinese students experience different education and acculturation which influences their overall experience of student-instructor relationships. Teacher immediacy, rapport and classroom justice are factors that affect the development of such relationships, whose impact include both academic and social outcomes.

*Keywords:* Interpersonal Relationship; Teacher Immediacy; Rapport; Phenomenology; Qualitative interviews; Instructional Communication

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

The student-instructor relationship, as a form of interpersonal relationship, is the result of dialogue and interaction between students and instructors both inside and outside of class (Sher, 2009). The student-instructor relationship can be a complex one as the instructor may be involved in a variety of roles including teacher, advisor, mentor and counselor. Some of the communication behaviors that build the student-instructor relationship include asking and responding to questions, providing and receiving personalized feedback, and communicating one-on-one about course content (Bogo, 1994; Sher, 2009; Stearns, 2001).

### **Background**

The student-instructor relationship is important for both students and instructors. For students, the relationship will impact both their academic and their emotional experience (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frymier, 2007; Sher, 2009; Waugh, Godfrey, Evans, & Graig, 1995); for instructors, the relationship can influence the civility of the classroom environment and the quality of teaching experience (Bogo, 1994; Frymier, 2007; Nuthall, 2004; Zhang, 2007).

A positive relationship between student and instructor is “characterized by mutual acceptance, understanding, agreement, warmth, closeness, trust, respect, care and cooperation” (Leitão & Waugh, 2007, p. 3). Students feel included and respected in class when they perceive a positive relationship and this can contribute to an effective learning environment (Frisby & Martin, 2010). A positive student-instructor relationship has been shown to enhance student retention (Frymier, 2007; Sher, 2009; Waugh, Godfrey, Evans, & Craig, 1995), improve student engagement (Frisby & Martin, 2010, Frymier, 2007; Sher, 2009), facilitate the learning process (Sher, 2009), contribute to academic achievement (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) and build student feelings of confidence and self-directedness (Frymier, 2007; Sher, 2009; Stearns, 2001;

Zhang, 2007). The student- instructor relationship can also help build a cooperative and collaborative learning environment (Frymier, 2007; Nuthall, 2004), help instructors to better understand students' problems (Wurst, Smarkola, & Gaffney, 2008), and help instructors adapt to the diverse needs of their students (Zhang, 2007). In terms of academic integrity, there are also many existing studies indicating that a healthy and positive student-instructor relationship will likely reduce incidents of academic dishonesty (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Sher, 2009).

The connection in a positive relationship is conceptualized as *rapport* (Davis, 1998), which means "an overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting and prosocial bond" (Frisby & Martin, 2010, p. 147) According to Jorgenson (1992), the term *rapport* is truly relational "in the sense of capturing what is shared or jointly experienced in interpersonal relationships" (p. 148) because it describes the experience of a relationship, and she argues that teaching is a "rapport-intensive" (p. 154) field, which means that in the education environment, *rapport* building is quite important.

On the other hand, the lack of student-instructor *rapport*, or a negative student-instructor relationship, is an unhealthy relationship where both students and instructors cannot understand each other and fail to communicate effectively (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Sher, 2009). It results from students' lack of engagement, instructors' misbehaviors such as arrogance, prejudice, and arbitrary (Zhang, 2007), and a lack of communication between students and instructors (Frymier, 2007; Sher, 2009; Zhang, 2007), and will lead to many negative consequences and serious problems for both parties (Kearney, Plax, & Burroughs, 1991; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Zhang, 2007). Such a negative relationship can result in students' resistance and lack of motivation and engagement, as well as impacting their academic progress in a negative

way (Kearney, 1991; Kearney, Plax, Hayes, & Ivey, 1991; McPherson et al., 2006).

While student-instructor relationships can be difficult to forge, they may be even more challenging in today's classroom, given the increasingly internationalized nature of both teachers and students (Frankel, Swanson, & Sagan, 2006). As globalization has had a huge impact on many aspects of society, such as politics, economics and culture, it fosters rapid and widespread population mobility, and "this ongoing migration brings to the forefront the issue of interaction between people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds" (Gu & Tong, 2012, p. 501). An example of this is the increasing number of multicultural students who appear in classes in North America all the way from primary schools to universities. Our classrooms are becoming increasingly internationalized and, as a result, a cross-cultural global perspective is needed (Bang & Montgomery, 2013; Hu & Fan, 2011; Kim, 2001; Novinger, 2001). According to a study by Davis (2003), a growing number of international students have been enrolled in American universities and colleges since 1950, and the number will keep increasing. By the year 2025, it is estimated that 8 million students will study outside their home country and thus, will be regarded as international students (Maslen, 2012). In Canada, figures show that from year 1995 to 2014, numbers of international students who hold a valid study permit rose from 83,577 to 336,497 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2014), and the number is expected to increase in coming years. In Canada, international students come from 194 different countries (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2015). However, the top five countries of origin – China, India, Korea, Saudi Arabia and France – represent over half of the international student enrolment in Canada (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2015, p. 5).

While the student body in Canadian post-secondary institutions reflects the cultural diversity of these international students, this diversity may not be seen in university faculty

members. Furthermore, the teaching materials and curriculum selected by professors tend to reflect the dominant Eurocentric and North American culture (Leite, 2014), which might influence the international students' experience as well as the effectiveness of study (Kim, 2001). According to Barnhardt (1981), "the four dimensions of any educational programs are 1) the goals or function, 2) the content, 3) the structure, 4) the methods used" (para. 2). The four dimensions must be functionally integrated in order to be effective. Nowadays, there is an overwhelming movement toward assimilation into mainstream cultural patterns. In some educational programs, there is modification and adaptation applied in the content of the curriculum in order to accommodate the multicultural studies. However, Barnhardt (1981) argues that "the structure, method and processes through which the content is organized and transmitted are usually reflective of mainstream patterns" (para. 6), thus reflecting the structure and social organization of the dominant society.

Given a growing interest in questions around the impact of education on culture, the notion of multi-cultural education has been raised. Multicultural education "relates to the education and instruction designed for the cultures of several different races in an educational system" (Wilson, 1997, para 1). Therefore, it requires the instructors and students to respect the diverse and multicultural background, as well as the challenges and opportunities it brings about. Gorski (2009) has argued, in fact, that multicultural education could be part of a larger societal transformation where we criticize oppressive foundations such as white supremacy, global socioeconomic conditions, and exploitation. However, in practice this change is more likely to take the form of a shift in curriculum where, for example, the instructors add new and diverse materials and multicultural perspectives to the existing program (Gorski, 2009).

To achieve the kind of multicultural education that Gorski (2009) proposed, Gorski (n.d.) adapted several models of curriculum transformation and proposed a five-stage multicultural curriculum transformation process in his EdChange Project. The first stage, Curriculum of Mainstream refers to the existing Eurocentric and male-centric focus of education, which should be transformed because it privileges Eurocentric and male-centric education, while at the same time the voices of non-dominant individuals and groups are not heard, their input and practice are also overlooked (Gorski, n. d.). Under this mainstream curriculum, both students who identify with dominant culture and those who are from non-dominant groups are negatively affected (Banks, 1993; Gorski, n.d.). Such dominance could be a concern in the long run. For students from the dominant culture, it “reinforces their false sense of superiority” (Banks, 1993, p. 195), while for students of the non-dominant culture, it stands in the way of their integration and identification, for their views and prospect are neglected. Gorski’s second stage of multicultural curriculum transformation is called Heroes and Holidays. In this stage, instructors collect and integrate information about famous people from outside of the dominant culture into the mainstream curriculum in order to, as Gorski puts it, celebrates these non-dominant cultures. Gorski argues that this approach trivializes the experience of non-dominant groups and presents them as the “other”. Gorski’s third stage, Integration, is where more substantial materials about the non-dominant groups are added to the curriculum; Structural Reform, is where Gorski propose that the curriculum be actually re-structured as materials and voices are added and woven into a complete new curriculum; and finally, the fifth stage, Social Action, and Awareness, is where Gorski (1981) proposes that “topics excluded from the structural reform, such as racism, sexism, and economic injustice, be addressed explicitly” (para. 10).

Differences both in language and cultural identity have been found to be the most important barriers hindering the development of the relationship between international students and local instructors (Frankel, Swanson, & Sagan, 2005; McCroskey, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2006; Zhang, 2007). The university or college classroom is a like an organization where instructors and students work together to achieve one learning goal within the structure of higher education as well as the agreement by both sides (Chen, 2000). However, if the both parties have obvious differences or disagreements, the communication, needless to say, will not go smoothly. In a multi-cultural university classroom setting, where instructors and students belong to different cultures, they may have different faiths, values, communication styles, life experiences, preferences and attitudes, as well as speaking different languages.

Culture is difficult to define, but it continually impinges on our interpersonal lives. As Geertz (1973) explains, culture is a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [humans] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (p. 89). According to Zhang (2007), cultural values and patterns “have a profound impact on people’s communication style, preferences and underlying psychological processes” (p. 212). Therefore, in the development and evaluation of instructor-student relationship, cultural values and patterns play a critical part. Bennett (1998) points out that “difference is an indication of potential miscommunication” (p. 3). However, in intercultural communication, difference is the foundation for learning. That is, people from different cultural backgrounds with different languages come together and, as a consequence, learn from each other’s behaviors and values (Keranen & Bayyurt, 2006). For example, in the educational context in Chinese cultures, which is under the enormous influence of Confucianism, instructors are usually regarded as authorities

to transmit knowledge and are treated with great respect from students, parents and other classes of the society (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). As a result, students are not used to interaction in class and treat the teacher with silence and deference as a way to show respect. However, in Eurocentric and North American culture, interaction is important in the classroom, because instructors, coming from a more Socratic approach, do not solely base their teaching on the lecture. Rather, they ask questions, ask students to share their views, welcoming the challenging of ideas, and encourage students to debate with each other in order to find answers. According to Zhang (2007), Eurocentric and North American-based education is a “more inquiry-based and interaction-oriented way of learning” (p. 212).

For international students, the experience of living abroad is “inherently challenging, especially when it comes to adjustment to the host culture” (Yang, Webster, & Prosser, 2012, p. 70). When there are significant cultural differences between the host and home cultures, this can intensify the difficulties of adaptation. As a result of the difficulties they experience, both in terms of language and cultural differences, international students may find it hard to engage in class (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Chen, 1996; Lin & Yi, 1997; Mori, 2000).

### **Case: University of Ottawa**

The University of Ottawa is a member of U15, a group of research-intensive institutes in Canada, as well as the biggest English-French bilingual university of the world. Every year an increasing number of international students come to the University of Ottawa from every corner of the world. As Institutional Research and Planning at the University of Ottawa (2015) reports, the number of international students rose from 2,059 in 2005 to 4,717 students in 2014 (statistics last revised January, 2015).

China is the top country of origin of total international student enrolment in Canada

(Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2014), as well as at the University of Ottawa. Many Chinese students choose the University of Ottawa because of its various programs, diversity and excellent professors. However, when they arrive in the classroom, they may find it hard to adapt and integrate because of linguistic and cultural differences, thus hindering their academic experience and performance. Therefore, it is important to explore how these differences might influence the relationship between students and instructors. The goal of the thesis is to understand the experience of Chinese international students of the student-instructor relationship between themselves and Canadian instructors, and explore the factors hindering and contributing to relationship building.

### **Theoretical Context**

Relational Communication Theory, and more specifically the student-instructor relationship, is the main theoretical standpoint of the study. According to Relational Communication theory, communication is regarded as a social process through which we interrelate with others, create and keep social ties, as well as form relationships (Rogers, 2008). Research on the student-instructor relationship, as a specific type of relational communication, focuses on the interrelations between students and instructors through the verbal and non-verbal behaviors of both students and instructors during the process. Moreover, extensive research has revealed that the nature of the student-instructor relationship is important to effective learning outcomes, including academic achievement (Goodenow, 1993; Rosenfeld & Richman, 1999), engagement (Brewster & Bowen, 2004), affective learning (Ellis, 2004), cognitive learning (Rodriguez, Plax, & Kearney, 1996) and social and cognitive development (Davis, 2003; Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel, 1999).

Teacher immediacy is one of the variables of instructor communication that has been

studied extensively and found to have a very profound effect on the development of the student-instructor relationship. It is the term used to “describe communication behaviors that reduce the perceived distance between instructors and students” (Andersen & Andersen, 2008, para. 1). The immediacy principle refers to basic behavior patterns people exhibit in communication interactions (Mehrabian, 1968). In the classroom context, non-verbal immediacy behaviors include smiling at students, making eye-contact, using gestures while talking to students and exhibiting relaxed body language (Rocca, 2007); verbal immediacy behaviors include calling students by name, being humorous, addressing the class as “we”, generating relaxed conversation before or after class, and referring to the relationship between the students and instructor (Rocca, 2007). Teacher immediacy is positively correlated with student affect and affective learning (Gorham, 1988; Pogue & Ahyun, 2006), student cognitive learning (Gorham, 1988; Christophel, 1990), positive student evaluations (Moore, Masterson, Christophel, & Shea, 1996), and out-of-class communication between instructors and students (Jaasma & Koper, 1999). To explore teacher immediacy, this thesis adapts Gorham’s (1988) measure of verbal immediacy and McCroskey et al.’s (1995) measure of nonverbal immediacy in a cross-cultural environment.

Student-instructor rapport is a dimension of the student-instructor relationship. Rapport is defined as “an overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond” (Frisby & Martin, 2010, p. 147). According to previous studies, student-instructor rapport is an important component of the perception of an effective instructor (Catt, Miller, & Schallenkamp, 2007; Perkins, Schenk, Stephan, Vrungos, & Wynants, 1995). Moreover, it is reported to have positive impact on students’ participation, motivation, cognitive learning and affective learning, as well as social interaction and ties (Coupland, 2003; Gremler &

Gwinner, 2000). In terms of measuring rapport in the classroom, Gremler and Gwinner (2000) developed a scale to measure customer-employee rapport and it was adapted by Frisby and Myers (1998) and Frisby and Martin (2000) for use in an educational setting. This thesis further adapts the scale for use in the cross-cultural class environment.

### **Research Questions**

The following are the study's central and additional research questions as developed in conjunction with the outlined theoretical perspectives and arguments:

RQ.1. What is the overall experience of Chinese students on student-instructor relationships at the University of Ottawa?

RQ.2. What are the main factors that contribute to and hinder the development of positive student-instructor relationships?

RQ.3. What impact do student-instructor relationships have on Chinese international students at the University of Ottawa?

### **Methodology**

To answer the research questions, this thesis uses phenomenology as the main approach. Semi-structured in-depth interviews will be conducted to understand the experience of Chinese students of the student-instructor relationship at the University of Ottawa. The interviewees were recruited from first-year students from a list of Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Social Science students at the University of Ottawa. The interviews were conducted one-on-one, and were audio-taped, then transcribed and translated by the researcher. All the interviews are semi-structured following an interview guide made up of questions adapted from Gremler & Gwinner's (2000) customer-employee rapport research.

Phenomenology is appropriate to be used in this study as it explores “the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 56). In this study the aim is to understand people’s experiences and their perceptions concerning these experiences. Compared with quantitative research methods like surveys or experiments, qualitative research can enhance the interaction between researcher and interviewees, thus the interviewees are inspired to talk more about certain subjects, and richer results can be gathered in order to understand the problem. In this study, the interviews help make more sense of the phenomenon, and better understand the experience of Chinese students.

### **Thesis Structure**

The thesis contains six chapters. Chapter One introduces the issue, research background, and research questions. Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature on interpersonal communication, instructor-student relationship, rapport building and the experience of students studying abroad. Chapter Three details the research methodology and the theoretical location used to design the research, gather and analyze data. Chapter Four presents an analysis of the collected data, result of the interviews, as well as the findings of the research. Chapter Five comprises a summary of findings, and discusses the implications of the research. Chapter Six is a conclusion of the whole thesis.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Interpersonal Communication**

During the four decades of research on interpersonal communication many different perspectives and themes of study have emerged. It is most widely believed that interpersonal communication should be studied as an interaction process in its essence (Gottman & Bakeman, 1979; Knapp & Daly, 2011). A focus on verbal and non-verbal behaviors that occur in interpersonal communication is also a perspective that was taken by many researchers (Goffman, 1955; Mehrabian, 1968).

As Edmondson (2015) has suggested, “interpersonal communication is not just about what is actually said – the language we use – but also how it is said and the non-verbal messages sent through tone of voice, facial expression, gestures and body language” (para. 5). Hartley (1999) argues that there are three main characteristics of interpersonal communication: 1) “Interpersonal communication happens between one individual and another” (p. 20). It is not only the exchange of messages, it also involves the creation and exchange of meaning between individuals. 2) “Interpersonal communication takes the form of face-to-face interaction” (p. 20). 3) “Both the form and content of interpersonal communication reflect the personal characteristics of the individuals as well as their social roles and relationships” (p. 20). According to Ferguson and Terrion (2014), interpersonal communication involves two people in varying roles and relationship to one another and is a two way transaction.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Relational Communication Theory, specifically as it relates to the student-instructor relationship, is the main theoretical standpoint of the study. Relational communication theory grew out of the increasing trend of applying communication theories to the study of human

relationships because of the “intrinsic, intimate tie between communication and relationship” (Rogers, 2008, p. 335). According to Rogers (2008), communication is regarded as a social process through which we interrelate with others, create and keep social ties and form relationships.

In the instructional communication field, researchers have applied relational communication theory to study how communication between students and instructors can influence the relationships between these parties. Young, Horan, and Frisby (2013), for example, conducted a study of how “relational teaching messages like rapport, confirmation and affinity-seeking” (p. 335) can influence teaching effectiveness, especially in terms of justice and fairness. Moreover, Mottet, Richmond, and McCroskey (2006) argued that effective teaching is both a relational and a rhetorical process. Grissom, Erchul, and Sheridan (2003) also adopted a relational communication framework to measure verbal interactions between teachers, students and parents and the impact of these relationships on outcomes. These authors concluded that a better understanding of the intricacies of the parent-teacher relationship is critical.

Minuchin and Shapiro (1983) and Weinstein (1983) conducted literature reviews on the social contexts of education in which they examined the nature and impact of student-instructor relationships. Minuchin and Shapiro (1983) concluded that because students spend a large proportion of their waking hours with their instructors and peers at school, these relationships have a significant impact on their social behaviors and other relationships. Weinstein (1983) reviewed the literature on perceptions of schooling and of teachers and found that students rated an effective teacher as a warm, friendly, and supportive person, while motivating and disciplining the students effectively. These could be seen as the very early research studies of the student-instructor relationship.

The student-instructor relationship is created through dialogue and interaction between students and instructors both inside and outside class (Sher, 2009). A *positive student-instructor relationship* refers to the fostering of closeness between instructor and student (Sher, 2009). In the positive student-instructor relationship, instructors are caring, friendly, helpful, understanding and dependable (Powell & Powell, 2010). Many researchers have demonstrated why a positive student-instructor is important. Thompson (2010), for example, noted that a positive student-instructor relationship is indispensable in fostering a favorable learning climate. Waters, Marzano, and McBulty (2003) proposed that a positive student-instructor relationship will lead to students' disciplinary actions while Zehm and Kottler (1993) linked the positive student-instructor relationship with students' trust and respect to the instructors.

The student-instructor relationship is an interpersonal relationship in essence and thus Frymier and Houser (2000) noted that both instructors and students have goals and objectives to achieve and that their ability to communicate and negotiate influences whether they can achieve their goals. In sum, a positive student-instructor relationship is achieved when both instructor and student achieve their communication goals, and this "depends on the teacher and student's ability to negotiate with one another and resolve conflict" (p. 208).

### **Perspectives on the student-instructor relationship**

Davis (2003) suggests that three primary perspectives have been used to study the impact of the student-instructor relationship on academic and social performance: *attachment theory*; *motivation perspective* and *socio-cultural perspective*. Attachment theory was originally developed by John Bowlby. "Attachment is characterized by specific behaviors in children, such as seeking proximity with the attachment figure when upset or threatened" (McLeod, 2009, para. 2). According to Powell and Powell (2010), "an attachment perspective considers that the

instructor-student relationship is the extension of the parent-child relationship” (p. 150). It is agreed that the attachment perspective on student-instructor relationship is on the basis that students have developed their values and expectations about relationships, including the student-instructor relationship, and meanwhile have brought them into the classroom. (Bowlby, 1988; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Davis, 2003). According to the literature on this subject, it is believed that such classroom relational models can shape the students’ interpretations of a teacher’s classroom behaviors as well as influence how students respond to their teachers (Brophy & Good, 1970; Hall et al., 2001). Findings from this attachment perspective suggest that the “students’ beliefs about adults, teachers, themselves, and the nature of adult-child interaction” (Davis, 2003, p. 208) often have an impact on the quality of student-instructor relationship.

According to the motivation perspective (Davis, 2003), the quality of the student-instructor relationship plays an important part in stimulating students’ motivation to learn. Motivational studies examine the communication skills and instructional strategies of instructors and their ability to motivate students’ autonomy and self-directed study. Autonomy and self-directedness have been shown by Davis (2003) that this is more effective than those who engage in power struggles and who are prone to control students. One of the biggest differences between the attachment perspective and motivation perspective is that, although they both consider mutual effects of teachers and students on the student-instructor relationship, the motivation perspective focuses more on how teachers “drive the quality of the relationship” (Davis, 2003, p. 208). Research also shows that motivation is impacted by the socio-emotional connections between instructors and students (Powell & Powell, 2010). Christophel (1990), for example, found that instructors who hold positive attitudes towards teaching material will increase the sense of

belonging in students, and Brophy (1981) also stated that instructors who hold a positive attitude and exhibit positive affect toward students will improve self-efficacy of the students.

The third perspective proposed by Davis (2003) is the socio-cultural perspective, which includes ecological and social constructivist views. This perspective aims to “examine our constructions of the nature of children’s interpersonal relationships at each stage of their development and impact of these beliefs on our ability to connect with students” (Davis, 2003, p. 217). The ecological view focuses on the physical nature of the class size and setup. There is a considerable research on the impact of classroom size on students’ academic achievement (e.g. Lee & Loeb, 2000; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). According to the ecological view, the size of class has an impact on the development of the student-instructor relationship. For example, the bigger the class size becomes, the more difficult it is for the students to develop the student-instructor relationship (Powell & Powell, 2010). The social constructive view, on the other hand, posits that “knowledge in classrooms is co-constructed within the student-instructor relationship” (Davis, 2003, p. 219). In this perspective, learning is seen as a social activity and students must engage in both cognitive learning activities as well as social activities (Davis, 2003).

The previous discussion conceptualized the role and value of developing a positive student-instructor relationship from different theoretical perspectives. A positive student-instructor relationship has been found to have many benefits for both students and instructors, and there is a vast literature discussing the positive impact of developing of a positive student-instructor relationship. In sum, students’ perception about the class and even school is closely related to how the student-instructor relationships they have built (Powell & Powell, 2010). A study by Bogo (1994) reports that a positive student-instructor relationship can enhance student

retention and learning ability. Croninger and Lee (2001) state that a positive instructor-student relationship is a form of social capital that prevents at-risk students from academic failure.

Similarly, in terms of academic engagement, a study by Brewster and Bowen (2004) found that a positive instructor-student relationship will improve the academic engagement of those students who were at risk for school failure.

Moreover, research shows that a good relationship can reduce incidents of academic dishonesty (McCabe & Bowers, 1994; Stearns, 2001). According to a study conducted by Waugh, Godfrey, Evans, & Craig (1995), students from Germany, the United States, Austria and Costa Rica tended to agree that "Cheating is more likely to occur in classes where the teacher is unfriendly to students" (p. 575). Some other experiments, and the academic integrity literature (Genereux & Mcleod, 1995; Graham, Monday, O'Brien, & Steffen, 1994; Johnston, 1996), also suggest that "student evaluative perceptions of instructor behaviors may have broader reaching effects than the traditionally examined learning outcomes and may actually influence academic integrity decisions" (Stearns, 2001, p. 278). Similarly, Marzano, Marzano and Pickering (2003) concluded that "students will resist rules and procedures along with the consequent disciplinary actions if the foundation of a good relationship is lacking" (p. 41). In terms of mutual trust between instructors and students, Zehm and Kottler (1993) pointed out that students will only start to trust and be honest to the instructors when they sense that they are valued and respected by the instructors. In terms of socio-emotional development, many existing studies have recognized the significant role of the student-instructor relationship, as a form of social interaction, in students' cognitive and social development. Goodenow (1993), for example, conducted a study about students' sense of belonging and support in the classroom and found that a positive instructor-student relationship is crucial to develop a sense of belonging and

support, which is important in fostering motivation and achievement. Zhang (2007) points out in her study of misbehaviors in the classroom that a positive student-instructor can create a more relaxing and free learning environment, thus relieving the pressure students may feel in and outside class. Dwyer (2004) found in her study of the impact of study abroad that a healthy student-instructor relationship can help improve the students' feelings of confidence and self-directedness, thus increasing the possibility of achieving academic success.

While there are clearly many benefits to students of the positive student-instructor relationship, such a healthy relationship is also beneficial to instructors. According to Stearns (2001), teachers who develop a positive instructor-student relationship can enjoy a better mentorship experience, which helps them communicate with students, get to know their students' needs more specifically and, as a result, tailor their teaching approach more effectively. Thompson (2010) says "the most powerful weapon for teachers who want to foster a favourable learning climate is to develop a positive relationship with students." (p. 6). Gettinger and Stoiber (1999) reviewed literature on teaching excellence and stated that a positive instructor-student relationship can contribute to students' self-efficacy and intrinsic interest in learning, thus helping the teachers to foster a learning community.

There are many behaviors that can contribute to the development of a positive student-instructor relationship. According to Bergom, Dersheimer, Zhu, and Samson (2011), using a rapid feedback cycle is crucial as it can give the student the perception of being cared for and attended to by the instructor. Sher (2009) found in one study that a quick response to questions and personalized feedback can leave the impression of a responsive instructor for the students. Dobransky and Frymier (2004) found that communicating with students outside of class as an addition to in-class communication can help build the bond between students and instructors,

thus deepening the relationship. Moreover, a cooperative and collaborative environment that the instructor creates in the class is also of crucial importance (Wurst et al., 2008). Hamre and Pianta (2006) found in a study that instructors can learn specific strategies to help form the more supportive relationships. The strategies include: “Engaging in frequent social conversation with students, being available to students who are having a hard time, displaying regard for students’ perspectives and ideas and using behavior management strategies that clearly communicate expectations and caring” (p. 54-55). Myers (2006) demonstrated his findings in positive closeness and drew the conclusion that it helps to develop a positive relationship for the instructors to understand the problems, concerns, and needs of students.

### *Summary*

Relational communication theory is the main theoretical framework of this study, in which communication is regarded as a relational social process where people interrelate with each other, and build and maintain social ties. The theory has been applied to many previous studies in the instructional communication field, as it looks into how communication can influence how the relationship between students and instructors develops, and specifically, as it is related to outcomes of positive student-instructor relationships. A positive student-instructor relationship is built through behaviors like quick response, personal feedback, social conversation, being accessible, etc. and it has been shown to have many benefits for both students and instructors. For students, a positive student-instructor relationship improves engagement and motivation, facilitates the learning process, contributes to academic achievement, as well as increasing confidence. For instructors, a positive student-instructor relationship helps to build a cooperative and collaborative learning environment.

**Teacher immediacy.** Teacher immediacy has been shown to have a profound effect on the development of the student-instructor relationship. According to Richmond, Lane and McCroskey (2006), in the last 30 years, a substantial progress of scholar research in teacher immediacy has been achieved in the field of instructional communication. Broadly speaking, immediacy is the achievement of intimacy and closeness in means of communication behaviors. (Mehrabian, 1969). According to Rocca (2007), *teacher immediacy* is behavior that “brings the instructor and the students closer together in terms of perceived distance” (para. 1). Teacher immediacy consists of nonverbal and verbal behaviors that reduce psychological distance. Examples of nonverbal immediacy include smiling, gesturing, and eye contact. Verbal immediacy behaviors include generating conversations with students, addressing students by name, using appropriate humour, and address the class as “we” or “us” (Powell & Powell, 2010). Anderson (1979) identified teacher immediacy as an interpersonal variable that is positively related to learning and has contributed to the dynamic student-teacher relationship. In the context of instructional communication, she argued that nonverbal behaviors can enhance the closeness between students and instructors, which brings about beneficial results for learning. Richmond (2002) found that “the primary function of teachers’ nonverbal behavior in the classroom is to improve affect or liking for the subject matter, teacher and class, and to increase the desire to learn more” (p. 70). In short, teacher immediacy seems to enhance feelings of closeness between students and instructor and these feelings can translate into learning, motivation and engagement.

In her exploration of verbal immediacy in the classroom, Gorham (1998) attempted to identify a set of verbal teacher immediacy behaviors, and she found that these behaviors relate to increased student learning. Gorham (1998) created a scale of 20-items to measure verbal

behavior, and the total verbal immediacy score was calculated by summing the frequency scores across all verbal items.

A consistent finding is that teacher immediacy promotes affective learning, the feeling that students have about the instructor and course content. In McCrosky's (1994) work on assessment of affect toward communication and affect toward instruction in communication, affective learning is defined as the positive affect students have toward the course content as well as the classes in the context. Gorham (1988) stated that students feel more comfortable and relaxed when the distance between the teacher and themselves are shortened. is and Pogue and AhYun (2006) found that teacher immediacy stimulates the students' motivation to listen to the instructor, follow the instructions, as well as communicate with the instructor when there's a need, such as asking questions or seeking for help.

While teacher immediacy has been clearly linked to several outcomes, its role in cognitive learning is a bit inconsistent in the literature. Cognitive learning refers to "recall or recognition of knowledge and the development of intellectual abilities and skills" (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956, p. 7). Rodriguez, Plax and Kearney (1996) claimed that teacher immediacy is positively related to students' affective and cognitive learning. Anderson (1979) proposed that immediacy directly influences learning while Comstock, Rowell, and Bowers (1995) found that there is a curvilinear relationship between immediacy and cognitive learning. Meanwhile, Hess and Smythe (2011) contended that there were several flaws in the studies testing the relationship between teacher immediacy and cognitive learning. They argued that immediacy played a critical role in affective learning, meaning how students develop affect toward the teacher, course content and class context. However, they argued that it had little to do with cognitive learning,

which means how students performed on their tests. Witt, Wheelless, and Allen (2004) also stated that there is no direct link between academic engagement and teacher immediacy.

In terms of the impact of class size, Messman and Jones-Corley (2001) conducted a study at a large university where they studied the relationship among teacher immediacy and learning outcomes in two class formats, one of which is a mixed-size class with large-lecture and break-out sessions, while another is a self-contained class. 1515 students were enrolled in the pre-test measures at the first day of class, and 991 students completed the post-test measures (Messman & Jones-Corley, 2001). The result indicated that in the mixed-size class in the test, students have better cognitive learning outcomes, and that when students perceive the teacher as approachable and immediate, no significant difference was found in affective learning due to the class size (Messman & Jones-Corley, 2001).. Moreover, affective learning decreased from the first day of class, and it decreased slightly for students in the mixed class (Messman & Jones-Corley, 2001). The relationship between learning outcomes and immediacy has also been studied in terms of heavy workload. Mottet, Parker-Raley, Cunningham, Beebe, and Raffeld (2006) conducted surveys among 379 students who were taking an introductory communication course at a comprehensive university to investigate the impact of teacher immediacy on students' interpretations of the instructor and the workload demands. The results of the experiments indicated that teacher immediacy tempered instructor course workload demands that violated student expectations in a way that preserved student affect for the instructor, and that instructor course workload demands "negatively impacted students' willingness to comply with instructors' requests" (p. 152).

Besides learning, immediacy has been shown to engender students' state motivation, according to Christophel's (1990) and Richmond's (2006) adaption of the motivation model.

They found that teacher immediacy will influence students' perception of a particular class and its instructor, as well as the level of motivation and participation.

Frymier and Houser (2000) also found that immediacy was positively correlated with two communication skills: referential skill, which is defined as "the ability to convey information clearly and unambiguously" (Burlison & Samter, 1990, p. 166); and ego support, which is "the ability to make another feel good about himself or herself" (Frymier & Houser, 2000, p. 208). Powell and Harville (1990) have consistent findings that teacher immediacy is related to teacher clarity, which is the ability to use communication strategies for teachers to enhance understanding of instructional material.

### ***Summary***

Teacher immediacy is the achievement of intimacy and closeness in communication between students and instructors, and it consists of verbal and nonverbal behaviors that reduce perceived distance in and out of class. Nonverbal behaviors include smiling, eye contact, body language etc, and verbal behaviors include addressing the class as "we", addressing the students with names, etc. Teacher immediacy has been important in instructional communication scholarship, and many existing studies show the benefits as well as the profound effect on the development of student-instructor relationship of this variable. Teacher immediacy has been shown to improve students' motivation, participation, and affective learning, and it is positively correlated with instructors' communication skills.

***Student-instructor rapport.*** As one of the dimensions of a positive relationship, rapport is characterized as "an overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond" (Frisby and Martin, 2000, p. 147). Scholars from many disciplines have investigated rapport. In education, many researchers have studied rapport in high school teachers

(Bernieri, 1998) and college instructor and students (LaFrance and Boradbent, 1976; LaFrance, 1979; Perkins et al., 1995). Bernieri (1988) conducted a study of high school teachers and students and measured rapport by examining various characteristics of their relationship, including enjoyment, liking of each other, satisfaction, friendliness, and interest, and whether their interaction seemed to be easygoing, cooperative and humorous. As in his definition, rapport is the interaction characterized as harmonious, smooth, “in tune with,” and “on the same wave length” (p. 121). Bernieri concluded that there is a strong correlation between rapport and coordination or behaviors, or mirroring, and suggested that this is indicative of a connection between students and instructor.

In another experimental study conducted by Perkins, Schenk, Stephan, Vrungos, and Wynants (1995) of college instructors and students, rapport was monitored and found to influence students' impression and perception of the instructors. According to Perkins et al. (1995), rapport was defined as the instructor's expression of personal interest in students' feelings and behaviors and the encouragement of student-instructor interaction. Perkins et al. (1995) followed Lowman's (1985) model of teaching effectiveness, which includes two dimensions, intellectual excitement (clear and organized lecture presentation, personal enthusiasm, and ability to stimulate interest) and favourable rapport (“warm, friendly atmosphere, a sense of caring about students as individuals, and encouragement of students' questions and viewpoints” (p. 1)). Perkins et al. (1995) added a third dimension, learning in the classroom, which is an outcome variable. With the three dimensions, Perkins et al. (1995) assessed how students perceive the two process dimensions of teaching that are related to the outcome dimension of student learning. Specifically, these authors found that students' perception and rating of instructors are correlated with instructors' rapport, excitement, and learning in the

classroom, with rapport and excitement having a greater impact than that of learning. The authors also inferred that in large classes rapport can be constructed as well. They stated that “large numbers of students may observe the instructor interacting with a single student in a very friendly and positive manner, and thus the effect will in turn generalize to the entire class” (p. 633). However, Perkins et al. (1995) also stated that this hypothesis would need to be confirmed by research.

Rapport has been examined in other diverse contexts as well, including roommate relationships (Carey, Hamilton, & Shanklin, 1986; Carey, Stanley, & Biggers, 1988; Saidia, 1990); interviewing (Berg, 1989; Aburatani, 1990); psychotherapy (Gfeller, Lynn, & Pribble, 1987); general interactions (Bernieri et al., 1994; Gillis, Bernieri, & Wooten, 1995; Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1987); sales relationships (Brook, 1989; Dell, 1991; LaBahn, 1996) and service settings (Berry, 1995; Ford & Etienne, 1994). In the research context, Berg (1989) found that establishing rapport is critical to successful qualitative interviews. In sales relationships, Brook (1989) looked into salesperson-customer interactions and concluded that rapport is crucial in the sales relationship as customers might be unsatisfied with the service experience or even decided not to purchase a product simply because no rapport was built between themselves and the salesperson. Similarly, Dell (1991) concluded in her study of vendor-industrial customer interactions that customers assume that the most important factor to affect their buying decision is the relationship they have built with the vendors.

Gremler and Gwinner (2000), in their research into customer-employee rapport, operationalized this construct using the following two dimensions: a personal connection and enjoyable interaction. These authors designed a scale to measure customer-employee rapport in the marketing environment. Eleven items for the two dimensions of rapport were included in the study (*enjoy interaction* (6 items) and *personal connection* (5 items)). These items were

“generated from several sources: in-depth interviews with service customers, and other similar relational constructs in previous studies, and a review of rapport literature” (p.94).

According to Gremler and Gwinner (2000), much literature in marketing research has discussed “the impact of personal relationships on the evaluation of goods and services” (p. 1). For example, Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987) found that the events and behaviors that determine the favorableness of an encounter may depend on the buyer-seller relationship. A survey-based study of service satisfaction conducted by Crosby and Stephens (1987) also suggests that customers' relationship with their contact service provider largely influences their overall satisfaction. Moreover, Turnbull and Wilson (1989) suggest that building and managing the customer-sales relationship significantly helps to gain a strategic advantage in the marketplace, and the only way to achieve superior profits is to build loyalty between customers and employees (Reichheld, 1994). Crosby, Evans, and Cowles (1990) stated that it is particularly true for services where the customer-employee relationship is critical.

However, as Gremler and Gwinner (2000) reviewed the construct from a variety of literatures, they found that despite the discussions on customer-employee relationships, little was concerning the identification of which dimension of the customer-employee relationship has the strongest impact on outcomes. In order to fill the gap and identify the components of rapport, as well as of which is of the most importance in a service context, they conducted in-depth interviews with 41 participants, including both customers and employees. Their findings suggest that two rapport dimensions “*enjoyable interaction*” and “*personal connection*” are particularly salient in the service relationship. *Enjoyable interaction* is described as a feeling of care and friendliness (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000, p. 91), while the *personal connection* “represents a strong affiliation with other person based on some tie” (p. 91). According to Gremler and

Gwinner (2000), rapport is the feeling of having an enjoyable interaction and meanwhile building a personal connection between the communication parties. They then examine the findings in two empirical studies and investigate how they relate to several other dimensions important to service firms like satisfaction, loyalty, and face to face communication.

Frisby and Myers (2008) used an adapted version of Gremler and Gwinner's (2000) 11-item scale in an educational context to measure the relationships of student-instructor rapport with students' participation, affective learning, state motivation, and satisfaction. In Frisby and Myers (2008), 134 males and 147 females who were taking an introductory communication courses at a mid-size university were invited to participate in the study. Students completed several instruments in reference to the instructor they had immediately prior to attending the communication course. Five scales were used to measure the five themes respectively.

Rapport was measured by the 11-item scale developed by Gremler and Gwinnter (2000) to examine employee-customer rapport across two dimensions. Frisby and Myers (2008) modified the items to address an instructor instead of an employee. For example, instead of addressing the employee, one of the six items to measure enjoyable interaction is "*In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoy interacting with this instructor*". It's important to note that in the second dimension "*personal connection*", Frisby and Myers (2008) used only two of the five scales suggested by Gremler and Gwinner (2000). The two items they used were "*This instructor has taken a personal interest in me*" and "*I have a close relationship with this instructor*". According to these authors, the remaining three items "cross loaded on both factors, which resulted in their deletion from the personal connection factor and subsequent lack of use in data analysis" (p. 31).

Aside from *rapport*, *participation* was measured using a participation scale that was modified developed by Fassinger (1995). *Affective learning* was measured using Anderson's (1979) affective learning scales, with some of the items removed. *State motivation* was measured by Christophel's (1990) scale on student state motivation. Student satisfaction was measure using Frymier's (2005) 3-item, 7-point bipolar scale of satisfaction.

The findings show that "students' frequency of classroom participation was correlated positively with both enjoyable interaction and personal connection" (Frisby & Myers, 2008, p. 30). The positive relationship among instructor *rapport* and students' affective learning, state motivation and satisfaction is also found in results of the study. Moreover, the results suggested that there is no significant difference for enjoyable interaction among class size but did reveal a significant personal connection.

Frisby and Martin (2010) adapted Gremler and Gwinner's (2000) student-instructor *rapport* and student-student *rapport* in class, and their relationship with classroom connectedness and students' participation, affective learning and cognitive learning. The students' perception of *student-instructor rapport* was measured by the same 11-item scale and the researchers only modified to address an instructor as the target rather than an employee. The *student-student rapport* was measured using the same scale but the items were "modified to address their fellow classmates" (Frisby & Martin, 2000, p. 152), rather than employee. *Classroom connectedness* was measured using Dwyer et al.'s (2004) Connected Classroom Climate Inventory. *Participation* was measured in a participation scale developed by Goodboy and Myers' (2008). Student affective learning was measured in Anderson's (1979) affective learning scales, with some of the original items removed, and cognitive learning was measured using Frisby and

Martin's (2010) newly created scale including the measurement of knowledge, recall, understanding, development of skills and so on.

The results of Frisby and Martin's (2010) study indicate that "perceived rapport with instructors and classmates is related to perceptions of classroom connectedness" (p. 1). The results also indicate that student-instructor rapport, student-student rapport, and classroom connectedness can raise student participation. Furthermore, student-instructor rapport envisions students' participation, affective learning, and cognitive learning.

### ***Summary***

As an important dimension interpersonal relationships, rapport is conceptualized as the mutual, trusting and prosocial bond between two people. Rapport has been studied in much previous research, covering various fields including roommate rapport, sales relationships, interviews, hospital staff, service settings, etc. Rapport in the education setting has also been researched by previous scholars, and studies show that student-instructor rapport is found to improve students' affective learning, resulting in higher motivation and engagement. In the current study, interview questions are adapted from Gremler and Gwinner's (2000) research on customer-employee rapport in sales relationship, which consists of a 11-item scale to measure enjoyable interaction and personal connection.

### **Experience of studying abroad**

***Background of international students studying abroad.*** In Canada, international students include "students in Canada on a visa or refugees, neither of which have a permanent residency status in Canada" (Statistics Canada, n.d., para.1) As globalization becomes pervasive, an increasing number of students tends to study abroad for better education, different life experience,

field study, career development, high employment opportunities and so on (Abelmann & Kang, 2014; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

Frequent discussions have revealed the benefit of studying abroad for both students and the society (e.g., Hoffa, 1998; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Study abroad helps students to raise global awareness, better understand the diverse and multicultural world, thus and thus it is beneficial for international security as the students can forge a better sense of humanity. Studying abroad also enhances students' academic learning, helps to develop their multiple skills, and even advances students' careers (Hoffa, 1998). Furthermore, students also experience "personal growth and have the opportunity to learn different languages" (Domville-Roach, 2007, p. 28).

While study abroad can be very enriching, it is also a challenging experience. Besides academic performance, students also need to take care of their social network, career development and the ability to live independently. International students also suffer from a lot of pressure during the process, especially during the period when they first arrive at the host country. For some people, it takes a long time to integrate into the new environment. Existing studies have reached a general consensus on the main problems and sources of acculturative stress experienced by international students, which includes language difficulties, academic pressure, cultural conflicts, financial problem, social connections building, interpersonal problems and homesickness (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Leong & Chou, 1996; Lin & Yi, 1997; Mori, 2000).

***Difficulties international students face.*** Language problems seem to be the greatest challenge encountered by international students (Andrade, 2006; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). Language proficiency influences the overall experience, including whether one can live well in

the host society, and according to Wu et al. (2015), it is the source of most other problems international students are faced with including academic problems, social networking and cultural integration. With non-English as the mother language, international students generally have lower English proficiency. Studies show that international students in North America whose English is better can improve their experience and integrate faster than others who are not as proficient in English (Chen, 1996). Usually international students need to take TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and receive a certain score in order to be admitted in North America universities. This confirms the importance of English in terms of academic success, which is obvious as language ability plays such a basic and significant part in learning. Meanwhile, a lack of language proficiency also limits a student's social performance, which is especially true even if a student has passed the language proficiency test with a high score but lacks the abilities of oral comprehension and communication (Mori, 2000). This is actually quite common among international students when they are trying to communicate with a local who speaks quickly, mumbles, or uses idioms and slang. In general, a lack of language skills can have negative effects on the students' experience of studying abroad and even their self-efficacy regarding their ability to integrate and succeed in the new environment (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

Academic pressure is another challenge that international students face. International students go abroad for a common goal, which is to do further study or pursue a higher degree. Many international students face a new education system which is very different from the one in their home country, and the education culture is also different for them (Mori, 2000; Singaravelu & Pope, 2007). This is especially true for international students from eastern Asian countries, like China, Korea and Japan, because of the influence of Confucianism, students are taught to

listen to their teachers and follow the instructions given to them. From their perspective, instructors are responsible for transmitting the knowledge and education, and students are responsible for receiving. They are not used to challenging or questioning their instructor, nor expressing themselves or giving any feedback about the instructor or the class. While power distance is valued in their home country, the relatively open and interaction-based instead of lecture-based education system in North America is unfamiliar for them, and it often takes quite a while to become accustomed to it (Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 2001; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Moreover, the contents covered in class for many international students are new and unfamiliar as well. For example, a study conducted by Currie (2007) shows that Chinese students find it difficult and dissatisfied with the teaching style in MBA courses, which are deeply rooted with Anglo-American norms and values. Some international students also find it hard to follow the instructors in class or communicate with them outside class as they bear a strong accent or speak with a lot of idioms and slang which is difficult to understand.

In terms of cultural problem international students are faced with, these could be divided into two parts: the adjustment to different cultural and social norms, and the experience of cultural and racial discrimination. Obviously, international students who travel and study in another country will experience cultural differences to some degree. These differences include a wide variety of elements, from as straight-forward as language, name, food, clothes, artifacts and festivals to implicit differences such as social norms, assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions and values which we cannot see but also represent individuals' basic knowledge of what others do and think that they should do (Kim, 2001).

Existing studies have shown that international students are still experiencing ethnic and racial prejudice and discrimination to some degree (Hodson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2002; Rankin

& Reason, 2005). Among all the international students body, European students report less experience of discrimination than students from other parts of the world, including Asia and Africa (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). The feeling of being discriminated against includes but is not limited to alienation, depression, not being understood, offended, a lack of self-esteem and being separated from the mainstream culture. As a result of perceptions of discrimination, international students may fail to integrate themselves into their new society and further deepen the feeling of loneliness, homesickness and anxiety.

Problems concerning interpersonal relationships and social connections are also part of the major concern for many international students. Existing studies have reported that the level of enjoyment in the interpersonal relationship can largely impact the experience of international students (Perrucci & Hu, 1995; Schram & Lauver, 1998; Mori, 2000). This is reasonable due to the fact that one feature of the lives of international students is that they live far away from their home and experience the isolation from their loved ones. Compared with domestic students, they have fewer chances to visit their family and at the same time get social support from them. Thus, for many international students, developing a good interpersonal relationship with local people can be a big relief. Building a bicultural network which comprises local students and professors is absolutely beneficial one as some studies have found and reported (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Through such relationships, international students can learn social norms, improve language skills and achieve academic goals.

On the other hand, international students who have developed less contact with domestic students and professors will experience a more difficult integration process, a more isolated and alienated feeling and in general less pleasant practice. However, such a relationship with domestic students and professors is not as simply developed. Language is the biggest concern

and barrier to communication. According to some studies, a higher level of English proficiency will increase the confidence and chance of interacting with domestic students and professors. Otherwise international students will hesitate to interact with domestic students and professors because of fear of miscommunication (Kang, 1972; Ying, 2002; Ying & Liese, 1990, 1994). Apart from the language barrier, other factors such as cultural differences, personality, and the number of domestic students accessible on campus, the attitudes and behaviors of domestic students can also contribute to the situation (Ho, 1989; Kim, Atkinson, & Umemoto, 2001; Ward, 2001; Brebner, 2008).

Financial problems are another source of stress and difficulty for many international students. Many studies have discussed this issue (Lin & Yi, 1997; Poyrazli & Kotteler, 2007) and have shown that international tuition fees are two to three times higher than those of domestic students. Moreover, there are fewer employment chances for international students compared to domestic students because of language, demand, social background and other objective reasons. In addition, much of the financial support offered at school is limited to domestic students. For example, international students are not qualified for many federal scholarship and other financial aid. For students from developing countries like China and India (which are actually the largest source of international students in North America), the high currency exchange rate and living expenses in the host country will give them more concern and pressure to their financial status. As a result, many students accelerate their studies in order to graduate as quickly as possible, which will help relieve their financial difficulties (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

The difficulties experienced by international students vary from person to person, but also depend on how different it is between their home and host countries (Sheehan & Pearson, 1995).

According to existing studies, among the international student body of North America (U.S. & Canada), students from Asian Countries might feel a more intense stress of cultural than European countries because of a bigger cultural gap between their home country and host country (Yang & Clum, 1994). Asian countries share a more collectivistic culture while North American countries share a more individualistic culture and this may also cause difficulties when they are developing personal relationship with the local people as well as adjusting to the new society (Olaniran, 1996; Izumi, 2010). As well, because of their different skin color and appearance, students from Asian countries are more likely to experience discrimination and acculturative stress than students from Europe, Central or South America (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005).

### ***Summary***

With the trend of globalization and international integration, an increasing number of students go abroad for further study nowadays. The motivation of studying abroad includes higher education, different life experience, more career development, etc. Previous studies have shown the benefit of studying abroad: for society an increase in global awareness can help build a secure and diverse world, while for students the experience of studying abroad can lead to better academic performance and language skills. International students are faced with great difficulties as well. Challenges vary from language problems, academic pressure to cultural adaptation, discrimination experience, as well as social connections and financial problems. Moreover, due to difference between the home country and host country, international students are faced with different levels of challenges. For Chinese students studying in Canada, whose home country is very different from host country in various ways, they tend to feel more intense stress.

*Chinese international students.* China, as the top source country of international students, provides around 750,000 students applying to overseas higher education institutions (Wang, Taplin, & Brown, 2011). In the 1990s, the majority of Chinese who study abroad were adults with families. However, since the year 2000, the population of going abroad has shifted to include more students (Wang, Taplin, & Brown, 2011). China's booming economy has made an increasing number of parents afford to send their children to study abroad. This mobility is largely driven by rapidly increasing wealth in China, which funds foreign travel and study. According to Cheek and Hogan (1983), the drives from Chinese students to study abroad include experiencing a new cultural and language environment, receiving higher-quality education, as well as developing a more promising career prospect.

At the same time, although there has been a wide range of literature concerning the situation of Chinese students studying abroad, most of the research focuses on the motivation of Chinese students. Wang and Walker (2010), for example, proposes that the top two motivations for Chinese students to travel abroad for further education are "learning and escape from personal-social and physical pressure" (p. 284). Yang, Noels, and Saumure (2006) found that Chinese students reported studying abroad for higher education, foreign country experience and more job opportunities. Schneider (2013) suggests that studying abroad for an international student not only stands for the opportunities to receive a higher quality education, but also represents a life beyond the re of the university.

There are few articles concerning the difficulties especially for Chinese students in adapting to the life abroad. Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) point out that students face acculturation and adaptation stresses, as well as from interacting with non-Chinese peers. As well, they found that striving for academic success also created stress for Chinese students.

However, problems concerning learning and education, including communication with instructors and being able to follow them in class, is seldom mentioned in the literature. Given the large and growing number of Chinese students in Canadian universities and the lack of evidence about their experience, this thesis aims to fill some of the gaps in this field.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

#### **Research design**

This chapter covers the research design, data collection and analysis. The research study embraces a phenomenological approach, which is applying qualitative research methods to understand the essence of a human, lived experience (Creswell, 2009). According to Van Manen (1990), phenomenology “allows the researcher to examine how space, time, body and the lived human relation affect the experience” (p. 184). Specifically, in this thesis the student-instructor relationship was explored through the experience of Chinese international students at the University of Ottawa.

#### **Data Collection**

In phenomenology, the primary source of data comes from in-depth interviews. A sample size of 5-25 participants is recommended and multiple interviews with each participant can be conducted as part of the research (Creswell, 2009). In this research, qualitative research with semi-structured, in-depth interviews was the main form of data collection. Interviews with twelve Chinese international undergraduate students studying at the University of Ottawa were conducted to hear their experience of the student-instructor relationship. A qualitative research method is useful in understanding perspectives of respondents through the analysis of key phrases which sum up attitudes or experiences of the respondents (Vinten, 1994). Compared to survey and other forms of quantitative research methods, which are characterized by fixed pre-built questionnaires distributed to each respondent, qualitative interviews use open-ended questions to generate richer data that allow the researcher to develop a deeper understanding through the ideas that are conveyed through their words and stories (Murray & Sixsmith, 1998). In this study, compared to questionnaire-based quantitative method, open-ended questions posed by the researcher served to inspire the interviewee to narrate, describe and tell the story, which

helped the researcher to generate more data in order to analyze the phenomenon in a broader perspective, and enhance the understanding of what Chinese students are experiencing the student-instructor rapport at the University of Ottawa.

In-depth interviewing is one of the most appropriate ways of gathering data on phenomena that are not directly observable (McCracken, 1988; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990; Patton, 1990). It is an unstructured and direct way of obtaining information (Malhotra & Dash, 2011). One of the primary use of in-depth interviews is exploring the understanding for complicated behavior (Malhotra & Dash, 2011). This allows the participants to express their opinions directly in their words, which leads to gives more accurate results than using the pre-set answers designed by the researcher, at the same time this allows richer data as well.

In addition, semi-structured, instead of structured interviews, were specifically used in this research. While the pre-set questions designed by the researcher in a structured interview might restrict the thoughts and opinions of the participants, a semi-structured interview is open, which allowing new ideas to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says. Moreover, Morse (2002) noted that structured interviews are suitable when there are already a considerable understanding, knowledge and research on the topic. Although studying abroad is not a new phenomenon, little exploration of the experience of international students in terms of the student-instructor relationship has been conducted. Therefore, a semi-structured interview can better serve this study, and to help the researcher to answer the central research question, as it allows the interviewee to express their opinions freely. Usually in the semi-structured interview, the researcher generally has a framework of themes to be explored or an interview guide to refer to, but it is not fixed and it is not used to confine the interview. In this study, the researcher prepared an interview guide to refer to when meeting each interviewee and

the guide was used to ensure every important aspect was covered, as well as guide the interviewee. The interviewees were encouraged to reveal details and descriptions of their experience related to the question posted by the researcher.

### **Sample recruitment**

After receiving approval from the University of Ottawa's ethics review board, the researcher posted the recruitment text on the online Chinese community at the University of Ottawa. It included a brief description of the study, the requirements of participation, and contact information of the researcher. Students who were interested in participating in the study were invited to contact the researcher by email.

According to Keyton (2006), a positive sampling is the selection of cases that are typical of the population of interest, which means researcher is responsible to select participants that are most relevant to the study. As described in the previous chapters, this study aims to explore the experience of Chinese international students at the University of Ottawa. Thus, the participants of this study had to be of Chinese nationality. The participants must not have had any long-term experience of study abroad, as any previous experience of study abroad for a long term could prepare the students with adaptation and integration strategies, thus affecting the results of the interviews. The students had to be enrolled at the time of the interview at the University of Ottawa. The researcher planned to select from participants from the Faculty of Arts, Telfer School of Management, or the Faculty of Social Sciences. This criteria of sample recruitment is based on an assumption that, compared to liberal arts students, science students can benefit from labs and tutorials where they can have more opportunity to meet and communicate with the instructors regularly in a small group. As a consequence, it might be easier for them to build a student-instructor relationship.

Moreover, the researcher only selected students in their first year of study, as it is early in an international student's period of adaptation and integration. Kift et al. (2010) concluded that the students' developing positive relationships with university staff in their first year will facilitate supportive networks, and thus enhance adaptation and integration. For Chinese international students, the first year of university is also the most challenging and different from what they have experienced before.

After posting the recruitment text, a total of sixteen students contacted the researcher within one week. Two of these did not fulfill the requirement of the sampling criteria, and another one decided to withdraw due to a conflict of schedule and change of mind. Thirteen students participated in the interview. The sample included one male and twelve female participants, three from the Faculty of Arts, four from the Telfer School of Management, and six from the Faculty of Social Sciences.

### **Data analysis and interpretation**

Phenomenology as a research method seeks to uncover the essence of a phenomenon through the shared experiences of those who have lived it, and it "developed as a philosophical method for unpacking the essence of lived experience" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 237). It can also be used for analyzing social routines or for interpreting constructs of communicative experience. From a data analysis and interpretation perspective, this means that the researcher must identify the shared elements across participants' experiences to establish meanings and themes (Moustakas, 1994).

In the interviews, participants were asked questions about their experience of the student-instructor relationship at the University of Ottawa and the interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. The researcher gave participants the choice to be interviewed in

Chinese or English, and all of them chose to use Chinese. Thus the audio files were transcribed and translated from Chinese to English by the researcher. In order to keep the original meaning as much as possible, the researcher was paying much attention to the usage of words and expression in translation.

Boyatzis (1998) proposes that thematic analysis is an effective technique to identify themes and even subthemes and patterns that emerge from the transcribed text. Creswell (2009) also points out that in qualitative research “the researcher collects qualitative data, analyzes it for themes or perspectives, and reports 4-5 themes” (p. 184). Then Creswell recommends that the researcher read through all the data that was collected, thus obtaining a general sense of the information. According to Creswell, the researcher should ask herself, “What general ideas are participants expressing? What is the tone of the ideas? What is the impression of the overall depth, credibility, and use of the information?” (p. 185). Rice and Ezzy (1999) state that in the data-coding process, the researcher should read through the data carefully and take notes through the process, in order to be familiarized with the data. Next comes the actual coding process. Rossman and Rallis (1998) defined coding as “the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information” (p. 171). In this phase, the researcher should draw conclusions among the data and conclude them into different categories, then these categories should be labelled by a name or term, which is a theme, which is defined as “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). For the purpose of this thesis, the researcher categorized and labelled the themes with names and then listed the codes under each theme and gave operational definition for each theme. In this way, the researcher was able to rearrange the codes, analyze them, and make use of the codes to answer the research questions.

Specifically, in this study, the researcher first familiarized herself with the data by reading through the interview transcripts of the 13 participants and taking notes, drawing out the similar statements and marking up the coherent units of data along the way. The researcher then identified the significant statements in the data and grouped them into themes. After the preliminary coding, eight themes and forty codes emerged. After working to focus around the research questions, simplify the themes and keep these codes from overlapping or repeating, five themes were rearranged and named, and the essence of each theme was identified. The next step was interpretation of the data, and the development of textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon. Interpretation involved the “translation of an object of analysis from one frame of meaning into another” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 232). Using Van Maanen’s (1979) two-order interpretation method, the interpretation of this study began with the in-depth understanding of first-order concepts, which were “the situationally, historically, and biographically mediated interpretations used to account for a given descriptive property (p. 540). Then the researcher constructed symbolic links that related the first-order meaning to the second-order concepts, which were “notions used by the researcher to explain the patterning of first-order data” (p. 541). This process added the value and richness of data, and finally came to the last step, which was the development and presentation of the essence of the phenomenon.

### **Qualitative Validity and Reliability**

In Creswell’s (2014) work on Research Design, he concluded Gibbs’s (2007) definition of qualitative validity and reliability. In his words, qualitative validity means that “the researcher needs to check for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures, while qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher’s approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects” (p. 201). Following Gibbs (2007)’s suggested procedure to

check reliability, transcripts in this study were double checked to ensure that they did not contain any mistakes, variation of meaning, or drift in the definition of codes, by “constantly comparing data with the codes and by writing memos about codes and their definitions” (Creswell, 2009, p. 190).

As this study takes a qualitative approach, the interviews are the most important source of data with audiotaped recordings, transcripts, and field notes as key components of information-gathering. It is very important to maintain accuracy when presenting the views and perspectives of the interviewees. However, when the interviews are conducted in one language while the ideas should be expressed in another, it is quite challenging. Two challenges are that the translation process is enclosed in the social cultural context (Halai, 2007), and especially when there is no equivalent in the target language to express the same ideas, concepts or feelings from the source language.

This challenge of translation has always been a concern for the researcher. In the study of previous research on translation of qualitative data, Emmel (1998) states that the most effective way to ensure accuracy in the translation process is to have more than one researcher take responsibility for the task. Emmel points out that having different researchers go over and check the interview transcripts is the most effective way to achieve accuracy in the translation of qualitative data. Brislin's (1970) model of translation also suggests recruiting two bilingual people, one translating from source language to target language, and the other one from target language to source language. This is called forward-translate and backward-translate. According to Brislin (1970), both translation versions will then be compared, and any discrepancies will be negotiated.

However, due to the limited resources of this study, the researcher could only undertake

the translation process on her own. In order to ensure the accuracy in the best possible way, the entire transcripts were translated, instead of only translating the key themes. Pauses, emotional expressions, and annotations were also translated. When words and expressions did not exist in the target language, equivalences were obtained, with explanation and notes are put beside the translation. Moreover, in order to further ensure the accuracy and originality of the interview data, the researcher followed the recommended validity strategies proposed by Creswell (2009) and invited a friend who is also Chinese-English bilingual to listen to some random pieces of the audio file and check the translation accordingly.

### **Role of Researcher**

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), in qualitative research, which is also interpretative research, the researcher is often involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants of the study. Thus, the researcher should be aware of the identification of his or her “biases, values, and personal background, such as gender, history, culture, and socioeconomic status” (Creswell, 2009, p. 177), which might shape the interpretations formed in the study and influence the participants’ view. This is especially true when the researcher introduces the background of the study, the setting of the study, the researcher’s interpretation of the phenomenon, and comments that connect the researcher and the participant.

As a Chinese international student herself, the researcher is familiar with the language and cultural background of the participants, which will make it easier to gain the understanding, support and trust from them. However, at the same time, it is also easy for the researcher to make assumptions about the participants. Moreover, because the researcher is knowledgeable about the situation of Chinese international students in general, as well as familiar with their specific experience at the University of Ottawa, she might leave out some themes. As noted by Kanuha

(2002), the researcher might quit further probing when the information is familiar, thus leaving out some important themes and sub-themes of the study. However, the researcher tried hard to avoid this by thinking out of the box, following the interview guide strictly when probing, and using direct transcript and translation for analysis of data, which is the coding and interpretation of codes.

## **Chapter Four: Results and Analysis**

This chapter describes the themes that emerged from the 13 semi-structured in-depth interviews and discusses their significance in terms of the literature. A total of five themes emerged from the data, each was linked to the concepts and theory presented in the previous chapters. The following sections will provide a brief definition of each theme and then, under each theme, several indicators or sub-themes will be presented. Finally, direct quotes from participants will be presented after each themes and sub-themes, as highlight to the themes. For confidentiality and anonymity purposes, the names used in the following paragraph after each quote are pseudonyms of the participants.

### **Theme 1. Overall experience: Despite the differences, I'm actually pretty happy with the relationship**

Participants were asked about their overall experience of student-instructor relationships, both in quantity and quality. The researcher asked the participants whether they have had a lot of interaction and communication with the instructors, and then probed if the experience of interaction or communication with the instructors was enjoyable. Results showed that in terms of quantity, five out of thirteen responded that they had a lot of interactions with the instructors, while the rest (eight out of thirteen) gave a negative response, meaning that they did not take an active part in interacting or communicating with the instructors. In terms of quality, all of the participants gave positive response and said that they enjoyed the experience of the student-instructor relationship and some of them (four out of thirteen) mentioned that they needed to increase the chances of interacting and communicating with the instructors. The researcher then probed about the reason of the lack of interaction and communication with instructors, and thus the subthemes of “difference of education” and “acculturation” emerged under this theme.

**Sub-theme 1: Harmonious but different.** This theme points to the finding that Chinese international students experience difference in education from their home country, which takes time to adapt to, and thus prevents them from having more interaction and communication with instructors. Several aspects of this difference will be discussed.

***Instructor identity and authority.*** The most obvious difference in education that the students were faced with related to instructor identity and authority in education. Instructor authority is defined the degree of control that the instructor has on students, as well as the reception of students' content within a learning environment (Oyler, 1996). According to Metz (1979), teacher authority is one the most important factors that forms an effective learning circumstance. Li (2012) conducted a study on the comparison of American and Chinese college students' perception of instructors' authority, and the results indicate that students from both countries similarly rely highly on instructors' position and its formal authority, rather than the informal authority, which is based on the characteristics and personal features of the instructor. Thus, Chinese students are not used to interacting or communicating with instructors very often, especially in the class, when there are other students in the classroom. As an example, Queena, a participant from the Faculty of Social Sciences, said,

*Chinese students are often very reserved in communicating with instructors, especially in class. As the different in education system, we are not encouraged to speak in class or challenge the instructor from kindergarten, because instructors are the authority of knowledge.*

Another participant Bu, who attended a China-Canada joint high school in China, also experienced the difference of perceptions of instructor authority,

*I'm not used to too much interaction with instructors in class yet. Although I went to a high school in China which is a joint school with British Columbia, most of the instructors are from Canada, and we use the textbooks and course system in British Columbia, but the instructors didn't have so much interaction with students as they do here. In ordinary high school, there might be even less interaction with instructors in class. Basically the students*

*listen to the instructors and follow their instructions.*

**Class size.** The second difference in education is the difference in class size. According to Ehrenberg, Brewer, Gamoran, and Willms (2001), class size refers to the actual number of students the instructor teaches at a particular time. Myers (2006) suggested that student-instructor relationships may be particularly difficult to develop in large class, due to the lack of information flow as the proximity decreases and anonymity increases. Shaw, Kominko, and Terrion (2015) also noted that large classes present barriers to the development of positive student-instructor relationships. In China, students in high school usually have a small size around 50 students, and it is easy to build a positive student-instructor relationship within a small size of class. However, at the University of Ottawa, the courses at 1000 level for the students who just entered to the university are always quite large, sometimes as many as 250 students. With such a big class, it is difficult to forge a student-instructor relationship. Most participants mentioned that class size is a critical barrier enabling them to develop a positive student-instructor relationship. For example, Laurence, a student from the Faculty of Social Sciences said,

*Actually most of the courses I have taken have a big size, with at least 80-90 students, so I don't have a lot of interactions with the professors. I communicate with them only at times when I have a technical problem. For example, last semester I couldn't submit my paper on Blackboard, so I asked the professor to check the system and he unlocked it for me. That was the only time when I emailed the professor throughout the semester. In terms of study, I can always solve the problems by myself. I think I'm not a very outgoing person and am not used to communicating with professors a lot.*

Another participant, Sarah a student from Telfer School of Management, said that,

*If it's a small class, I would like to participate more. But for large size class, it's even harder for me to interact with the instructor in class.*

Some participants also noted that when the size of class becomes smaller, the interaction and communication with the instructor improved. For example, Laurence also said,

*However, in small size classes like ESL, in which there are often about 10-20 students, I*

*have more interaction with instructors.*

Another participant, Kristen, a student from the Faculty of Arts, said,

*I think the size of class can influence the communication with the instructor. When I was taking History of Arts (Part 1) last semester, there were about 100 students, I seldom communicate with the instructor. However, in this semester, there were only 40 students left in the course for Part 2, and I definitely have more interaction and communication with the instructor than I had last semester.*

**Perception of education.** The third difference in education is the perception of education.

Ye (2006) identified four systems in China's education. Small system refers to personal trait, middle systems refers to the environment of family and school, external system is the organizational environment, including examination system etc., and big system refers to the social culture and value orientation. Ye argues that Chinese college students' inadequate creativity and critical thinking skills as the comprehensive result of the systems. Therefore, higher education in China has become an instrumental behavior in which the instructors transform the students by constant lecturing, discipline, and instrumental educational, which ignores the development of critical thinking and creativity. Meanwhile, North America places a greater emphasis on creativity in education (Lee, Lee, Makara, Fishman, & Hong, 2015). According to Lee et al. (2015), this is due to the different economic foundation. With an economy based on innovation, it is very necessary to continue increasing the emphasis on creativity in order to ensure economic growth.

Because of such a difference, Chinese students may lack creativity and instead focus too much on reciting and repeating the textbook. However, in classes at the University of Ottawa, the questions posed by the instructors or other students are often flexible and require critical thinking. Thus, many participants reported not being able to participate in the interaction and communication with instructors, especially in the class. For example, Ho, a participant from

Faculty of Arts said,

*Sometimes I really want to participate in the class, but I just can't get involved in their discussion, some local students and the instructor have started thinking about a new question but I haven't understood the lecture yet.*

Laurence, a participant from Faculty of Social Sciences, had the same opinion:

*Most of the times when I don't put my hands up or interact with the professor in class, it's because I don't understand and cannot get involved in their discussion.*

**Sub-theme 2: Acculturation.** The second sub-theme under the first main theme is Acculturation. Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936) defined acculturation as, “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both group” (p. 149). Walker (2014) conducted a study on exploring acculturation and intercultural identity building of international students at the University of Mississippi. In the study she identified the following five factors that affect international students' acculturation: Placement options, length of stay, socialization and support group, education system, and language proficiency. De Araujo (2011) also conducted a study on acculturation of international students enrolled in US higher education and also identified five factors that affect the acculturation of students: English language proficiency, social support, length of stay, perceived discrimination or prejudice, establishing social relationships with Americans and homesickness. The two out of three repeating factors: language proficiency and length of stay are also applicable to this study.

**English language proficiency.** Language, as one of the most important ways to represent culture, is an important factor in acculturation. Students who have greater language proficiency integrate faster and experience less acculturative stress (De Araujo, 2011). In our study, participants' English proficiency and apprehension about speaking English affects their

acculturation. Language acquisition is important in how students acculturate and integrate into society. The thirteen participants came from different cities of China and have different language levels. Participants who do not have a good language skill reported more difficulty in student-instructor relationship. For example, Queena, a participant from the Faculty of Social Sciences, said,

*Language is the first barrier for me. This is my first year here at the University of Ottawa, also my first year studying abroad using the second language, it's very difficult for me to integrate at first. When I talked to the professor, I used the words which are not very accurate, thus making some trouble for us. Our mindset is also different, as we come from totally different cultural background. Moreover, sometimes professors don't have that much time to make everything clear to you.*

Another participant, Yvonne, a student also studying at the Faculty of Social Sciences, also have difficulty in language,

*I barely interact with the instructor in class because I always have the mindset that as international students our English is not as good, so I'm afraid that I can't express myself fluently and clearly. So I prefer to talk to them individually. But it's not the problem of culture, personality or something, it's just I'm not very confident with my English.*

However, participants who reported better language skills also reported more interaction with instructors and less communication problems. For example, Chloe, a participant from the Faculty of Social Sciences, said,

*I went to a China-Canada joint high school and took grade 11 and 12 courses the same as students in Canada. So language is not a problem for me in student-instructor relationship. I can communicate with the instructor and express what I want to say clearly. I generally have quite a lot of interactions with instructors.*

Another participant, Jacob, a student from the Faculty of Social Sciences, also expressed that language was not a problem:

*I actually never think language is a problem when I communicate with the instructors! If you don't speak very fluently, you can write it down, and the instructor is always willing to help you figure it out, he or she will understand what you want to express. If you want to communicate with the instructors, you can always find a way to achieve it. Meanwhile, the instructors here at the University of Ottawa, they understand that we are international*

*students, and that English is not first language, they don't need us to speak perfect English, and they treat us equally regardless of our language proficiency and cultural background.*

**Length of stay.** The second factor that affects acculturation and student-instructor relationship is length of stay. Studies show that there is a relation between the length of stay in a country and the acculturation issues one experience (De Araujo, 2011; Walker, 2014). De Araujo (2011) noted that according to the international students studying in the United States that he studied, the longer they have been in the country, the greater they have adjusted and integrated, and the less acculturation stress they feel. Walker (2014) also found in her study that the students report most of the acculturation issues during the first couple of semesters. After the short period of adaptation, they feel less acculturation stress and experience fewer acculturation issues.

In this study, the participants were all selected from first year students and thus they are still adjusting to the university life in a new country, new education system, and new way to communicate with the instructors. However, some participants said they have improved a lot more in terms of interacting with instructors compared to their first semester in university. For example, Victoria, a participant from Telfer School of Management, said,

*I started to proactively communicate with the instructors and interact with them in class in this semester, last semester I was busy adapting to the new life here, sorting out things one by one, and getting used to the new learning experience, I don't really have extra energy to interactive with instructors on top of the heavy workload.*

Similarly, Laurence, the participant from the Faculty of Social Sciences, also noted that she got more used to the student-instructor relationship by the second semester of university,

*Last semester I didn't have any experience and I registered for 5 courses, which was a little too much for me, especially as a first year student. I had to spend almost all my time taking courses and studying, I felt so exhausted and messed up. However, before this semester started I went to talk to the academic advisor and discussed my courses registration with her, resulted in a more organized and high efficient schedule. Moreover, I communicated with some of the instructors for my courses on a regular basis, and they really helped me a lot.*

## **Theme 2. Teacher immediacy: Feeling the closeness and intimacy**

Immediacy was defined as the achievement of intimacy and closeness as a result of communication behavior. (Mehrabian, 1969). Applied to education, teacher immediacy is an important teacher communication behavior that brings instructor and students closer together in terms of perceived distance, which also means the presence of psychological availability (Anderson, 1979).

As teacher immediacy is culture laden, Zhang and Oetzel (2006a) conducted another study on Chinese conceptualization of teacher immediacy, and created the 15-item Chinese Teacher Immediacy Scale. In their study, the three dimensions that constituted the teacher immediacy were instructional immediacy, relational immediacy, and personal immediacy, which were in line with the sub-themes on teacher immediacy that were elicited from the interviews in this study. Therefore, the results are presented using these three dimensions.

**Sub-theme 1: Instructional immediacy.** Instructional immediacy is defined as “the use of communication behaviors associated with classroom instruction and teaching to enhance the closeness between instructors and students” (Zhang and Oetzel, 2006a, p. 228). It emphasizes the instructional perspective of teacher immediacy, which is one of the most important responsibility of instructors in class. As immediacy items focus specifically on professor behavior, examples of instructional immediacy that arose from the interviews include:

*Nonverbal.* Being patient with students, having a lively teaching style, wearing professional but casual dress, looking very little at board or notes while talking to the class, avoiding monotone when talking to class. For example,

*Sometimes when I asked the instructor a question, I didn't organize my language well and express myself clearly, but he listened to my “broken” English (at that time when I was very nervous) patiently and could make sense of what I said. He usually understood in a*

*right way and answered my questions perfectly. (Alexie)*

**Verbal.** Using personal examples to explain contents in the lecture, asking questions and promoting class interaction, asking questions that solicit viewpoints, calling on students to answer questions when they indicate that they want to talk, answering questions earnestly. For example,

*The professor was trying hard to promote discussion and made everyone involved in the class. He asked us questions relating to the class material, but without a specific or correct answer, in case that we can't answer it. Instead, he liked to ask us questions that make us think, and he always encouraged to us to have our own opinions. (Victoria)*

In contrast, an examples of non-immediacy included:

*The instructor always called students' names form the name list and asked to answer questions, one by one. Sometimes the questions she asked was not easy and made me feel so embarrassed in front of other classmates because I couldn't answer. At this moment it was always dead quiet. (Laurence)*

**Sub-theme 2: Relational immediacy.** Relational immediacy is “the use of communication behaviors associated with the instructor-student relationship to enhance the closeness between instructors and students” (Zhang & Oetzel, 2006a, 229). It starts from instructional behaviors, is oriented in student-instructor relationship, and serves the purpose of achieving teacher immediacy, which is reducing the distance between two parties. The essence of relational immediacy is relationships, which means relational immediacy behaviors contribute to the development of a positive relationship between students and instructors, by showing understanding, care, respect and trust. Examples of relational immediacy include:

**Nonverbal.** Moving around the classroom while lecturing, having eye contact with students, using gestures, smiling, looking at the class while talking, relax body position. For example,

*I also want to add that the reactions of the instructor while we are talking to each other face to face is very important to me. If he or she is smiling, nodding, and listening, this will encourage me to talk more and more. But if the instructor doesn't have any expression, look rigid, or doesn't pay attention, I will soon be discouraged and nervous. (Alexie)*

*The instructor had a lot of eye contact with us, and he was always smiling. Moreover, he didn't just stand in the platform and lectured, instead he walked around the class and came into the students sometimes, which made us feel closer to him both physically and mentally. (Yvonne)*

An example of non-immediacy would be,

*The instructor just sat in the podium and read the slides or asked us to do the exercises, and when class was over he just left immediately. There was no eye contact, no smile, no gesture, just lecture! (Ho)*

**Verbal.** Praising students' work, addressing students by name, allowing students to call him or her by name, referring to the class by "we" or "us" instead of "I" or "me", using humor in class, getting into conversations with students before or after class, providing feedback on student's individual work, inviting students to meet with him or her outside of class. For example,

*He responds to students' questions and problems very fast, and he commented on every student's homework very attentively. For example, we normally handed in our paper and other homework to the blackboard, he would read very carefully and put detailed comments on the blackboard. Moreover, he would offer to talk to us face to face before or between classes, usually one by one, to make sure that we know how to correct our mistakes. (Grace)*

*Greeting is indispensable every week. Sometimes she would also talk to us about other social topics, too. I remember the last class before reading week last semester was her class, and she asked us our plans in reading week, or any vacation plans for Christmas. (Bu)*

*I think the instructor was more of a friend than a professor for me. He asked me to call his first name directly instead of using Mr.XX, he greeted to me before class every time. After class he was very open to conversations on any topic, and he would always respond to you very well. He was also very good at names. In the first class he asked us to write our names on a piece of paper, as a name tag, and he called everyone to answer questions in class until he remembered all. He would offer to chat with you before or after class, and the conversation would always end in us asking him questions. In this way we have built a close and good relationship with him I think. (Alexie)*

Examples of non-immediacy would be,

*I didn't get a good grade in the last assignment of that course, so I was worried if I got something wrong, so I emailed her and wanted to meet her in the office hour. But she refused and asked me to email with any questions. I replied that I wanted to talk about the grade, and she said she could do nothing about it. I asked if she could give me some*

*suggestions on preparing for the final exam, but she said it should be my responsibility from the beginning of the semester, not until now when it was only one week from the final exam. Then I asked a specific question about writing, but she didn't give any valuable answer, not to mention any other suggestions. She was the kind of person who looked nice but wasn't sincere to help you. (Yvonne)*

*I don't think he was able to remember any student's name. In my opinion, he is like giving a speech every time. He just came and lectured to a bunch of people, and he couldn't remember the faces either. Every new semester he knows that he is lecturing to a new bunch of people, and that's it. (Meng)*

**Sub-theme 3: Personal immediacy.** Personal immediacy was identified as “the use of communication behaviors associated with instructors’ personal attributes and characteristics to enhance the closeness with students” (Zhang & Oetzel, 2006a, p. 229). As mentioned before, teacher immediacy is culture laden and students from different countries might have different views and perceptions concerning teaching immediacy. For Chinese international students, personal immediacy is of great significance as the personal attributes and characteristics including personality, morality, scholarship, and approachableness can contribute to the authority of instructors. That is crucial because in Chinese culture, instructors are the authority whom the students should always follow, also they are role models of students, and act as the role of student’ parents at school. It is easier to build a student-instructor relationship in China due to such closeness. Therefore, the emotional closeness created by personal immediacy also facilitates reducing the physical distance between two parties and developing a positive student-instructor relationship. Examples from the interviews are listed as follows,

*The instructor was very thin, looked very reserved and introvert, but once you got familiar with him, he would start to talk a lot, you would soon find his amicable and easy-going personality. I like communicating with such an instructor! (Victoria)*

*The instructor was very charming in nature. She looked beautiful and she was always very calm and elegant. Even when she was lecturing about a boring English grammar as it was an ESL course, it felt like a beautiful life lesson. (Bu)*

*The instructor was very knowledgeable and educated, but on the other hand he was so easy*

*to approach in nature. That makes me really enjoy his class as well as talking to him individually. He knew I was from China, and he even told me some funny in Chinese history that I didn't even know! (Chloe)*

*Well first of all, I think he was a bit weird in the personality. He looked really kind, and he would respond to students' questions and problems nicely. He also tried hard to use different ways to lecture in order to stimulate students' interest. But the reason I said he was weird to me was that I could never resonate with him. We were never in the same tone. I couldn't understand why he burst out into laughter, and became angry all of a sudden. Moreover, I have been to his office hour and asked some questions, but he was very serious and looked rigid all the time without any reasons, which made me, nervous, stressed and intimidating to talk to him anymore. (Alexie)*

### **Theme 3. Building rapport: A mutual bond**

The third theme represents rapport, which is an important dimension of student-instructor relationship. According to Frisby and Martin (2010), the definition of rapport is “an overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond” (p. 147). Student-instructor rapport has impact on classroom environment (Coupland, 2003), encourage social interaction (Jorgenson, 1992), motivation (Dwyer et al., 2004), and helps to shape an effective teacher (Catt et al., 2007). Thus, rapport is an important indicator and is crucial in forging positive student-instructor relationships.

In this study, student-instructor rapport is operationalized following Gremler and Gwinner's (2010) model of measuring rapport in two dimensions, enjoyable interaction and personal connection. Using case studies, the researcher invited the participants to talk about their positive and poor experience of student-instructor relationship, and behaviors that contribute and hinder the development of student-instructor rapport emerged in the interviews.

**Sub-theme 1: Enjoyable interaction.** Gupta (1983) defined enjoyable interaction as a favourable association with the relationship, and the feelings of liking and positivity in the relationship. In this study, the evaluation of enjoyableness specifically relates to the student-instructor interaction. Several contributors of the enjoyable interaction emerged.

**Interesting.** Through interviews, many participants mentioned that the instructor being interesting is an important contributor to a positive student-instructor relationship. Being interesting and humorous, as well as teaching in an interesting style make the students feel relaxed and thus make it easy to develop a positive student-instructor relationship. The following are some examples:

*The instructor took attendance, she had a lot of preparation, created nice, organized slides, and tried to make the class interesting. She herself is an interesting person and was always very humorous. (Bu)*

*The instructor is probably in his 50s, and he is very thin. He had an interesting teaching style, which is to record video of the lecture so that we could go over and review. Every week he set aside a whole class to answer students' questions about the video last week. The class atmosphere is very good, we all enjoyed it. He is also very humorous. I think he has a very good and attractive personality, and he is quite humorous. He often did something that made us laugh. I don't feel any stress talking to him. (Yvonne)*

In the interviews, participants also talked about their poor experience of student-instructor relationships, and lack of interesting, unattractive and unorganized teaching style was one of the most mentioned hindrance. For example, Grace, a participant from Telfer School of Management, said,

*The course was related to a management class, which covered the language points in that management class. It should be an important course and I hoped it would help that course. However, it turned out to be very boring and unhelpful. The instructor didn't lecture at all. Through the semester it was presentation after presentation, and the instructor always just sat there and didn't say anything or give any comment.*

**Encouraging.** Being encouraging is another important contributor to student-instructor rapport. Especially in this case, international students are still adapting and find their way at the University of Ottawa. Many participants mention the character of being encouraging:

*He is very good at guiding students, and is very patient to students. As we are all learning our third or fourth language, we make many mistakes, but he is always trying to encourage us and explain the problems that we have. Thus, I like communicating with him because it made me feel relax and confident. (Grace)*

*I think he tried very hard to help us go through the exam and he encouraged us a lot. For example, when we had the oral test, I think I did very good in the prepared part, but in the unprepared part, I made some mistakes and was very nervous at the beginning, but he encouraged me a lot and helped me finish the conversation. He said these expressions are all covered in the lectures, he asked to relax and recall it. He also said that I have used some expressions in my presentation as well, so I should be able to use it properly. Those words were very encouraging and made me not feel intimidated anymore. (Meng)*

**Concern for students.** International students departed from their family and home country and come to a new country for education. In China, students are very reliable to instructors' care and concern. Instructors always come and check how the students are doing. For Chinese international students, they hope to be cared and paid attention here at the University of Ottawa as well. Therefore, if the instructors show concern for the students, and demonstrate caring for students, the students tend to feel respected and thus making the first step to build a student-instructor rapport. Here are some examples,

*I have a professor who was very wise and charming, which always made me think of Sheldon in the Big Bang Theory, that kind of figure, haha. Meanwhile he was very patient to students, and he always showed concern for us. Although he looked serious sometimes, but when I went to talk to him, he was very kind. Meanwhile the instructor was very attentive to students' needs, he kept checking if we were all following him in class, and when I went to ask him questions, he must make sure that he had make himself clear. (Alexie)*

*The instructor cared about whether the students understood the lecture by asking "Do you have any concerns, or questions?" When students asked him questions, he answered very attentively, too. Although the class by its nature was not very interesting, I still enjoyed it because of such a good professor, and I was motivated to learn it well due to his care and attention. I couldn't let him down. (Victoria)*

**Promoting class climate.** Student-instructor relationship is reported to be related to class climate (Donohue, Perry, & Weinstein, 2003; Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001). Enhancing individual student-instructor relationships and a vibrant and interactive class climate have beneficial and cumulative effects for each other. Throughout the interviews, probing questions on class climate were asked when students described their positive or poor student-instructor

relationships experience, and the findings support those of previous studies. Instructors who are good at promoting class discussion and creating a vibrant class climate are more likely to develop a good student-instructor relationship. In contrast, instructors in a flat or negative climate without any class discussion often fail in building a positive student-instructor relationship. For example,

*The class where I experienced the most enjoyable student-instructor rapport was an ESL class, the size is quite small compared with the classes that I have taken before. I like the class because the class climate was very dynamic, there was a lot of in class discussion and interaction and we generally have built very good and close relationship with the instructor of the class. Me and my friends always sat together and listened to the lecture very carefully, as well as interacted with the instructor in class and outside class very actively. (Alexie)*

*This instructor is not inspiring at all, and I'm not confident with my English and afraid that I can't express what I want to say. The class was dead, the instructor couldn't make herself clear, so I really don't know how to answer the question, So it could be embarrassing to give a wrong answer. When you see that no one is responding, you don't want to try, either. In a word, there was no class discussion or interaction. (Ho)*

**Accessible.** Being accessible means being someone reliable to whom students can reach for help when necessary. In our study, being accessible is of great significance as it is very different from the situation in China. Chinese international students graduated from high school in China where instructors are always accessible for students. In high school, the instructors almost have the same working hours as students, and they are always accessible physically which means students can always find them in office or in class. However, study participants reported that when they came to a new environment where instructors are not always available, it takes time for them to get used to it. At the University of Ottawa, instructors are accessible through several ways, such as in lecture in class, through email communication, during office hours or by appointment. Being accessible improves the chance of communication with students and can facilitate in development of student-instructor rapport. For example,

*The instructor replied to our emails super fast, and if he could not answer the question in emails, he would book an appointment with us so that we could have a further discussion on the topic. (Victoria)*

**Open-mindedness.** Open-mindedness is an important trait of instructors for creating an inclusive class. A culturally inclusive classroom is one where all students and instructors recognize and appreciate on diversity so as to enrich the overall learning experience (Woods & Barker, 2004). For instructors, having cultural awareness and integrating contents from diverse cultural background was reported by participants as facilitating the development of student-instructor rapport. For example,

*Another example would be that he is very interested in the same thing expressed in different culture and he is willing to talk and learn about cultural differences. For example, there was one time when he mentioned about showing numbers with fingers, he then told the class that he knew there were different gestures to indicate the numbers. Another day when he talked about greeting, he showed us briefly how Nigerians greeted to each other. (Alexie)*

*There was a chapter about listening in a communication course, and the professor used Chinese traditional characters as an example. She explained the formation of Chinese traditional characters and it was all right as far as I'm concerned. I was impressed as it was really complicated and even some Chinese don't know it. (Ho)*

**Sub-theme 2: Personal Connection.** Personal connection “represents a strong affiliation with another person based on some tie” (Frisby & Myers, 2008, p. 91). In the student-instructor relationship, a personal connection is the perception of a bond between student and instructor in the dyad, which is a strong affiliation with the other person based on some mutual caring or close identification between the student and instructor. The personal connection dimension contributes to one's sense of self-definition (Sheaves & Barnes, 1996), and thus facilitates the development of relationships. Self-definition is “the way individuals think of themselves is largely driven by the type of people with whom they interact” (Gremier and Gwinner, 2010, p. 92). Degnen and Rosenthal's (1990) study also described “mutual attentiveness” component of rapport, which was

defined as “the feeling of intense mutual interest in what the other is saying or doing”. In this study, the personal connection dimension of rapport was also found to be a big part of the student-instructor relationship. Students seek understanding, care and value from the instructor and the reinforcement can in turn facilitate the relationship. Through the interviews, students mentioned “bond,” “personal interest,” and “personal attentiveness” when asked to talk about their experience of positive student-instructor relationship.

**Bond.** One of the dimensions of personal connection is the sense of an interpersonal bond forming between the two sides. The stronger the bond is, the closer will the two sides feel, and this will facilitate the development and maintenance of rapport. For example,

*The instructor of that course is Chinese, actually I don't know if his nationality is still Chinese, but he was originally from China and Chinese Mandarin is his first language. I feel there's a bond between us, especially when I went to talk to him after class, and we always communicated in Chinese mandarin, which made me feel very close to him. (Sarah)*

*The instructor talked about her personal experience sometimes in class, once she lectured about history of arts in Europe, she talked about her trip to Europe several years ago, and she told us some funny things during the trip. She also mentioned she had been to the Palace Museum in China, and she highly appreciated some articles there. After listening to her personal experience, I start to feel there was a link or bond between us. (Kristen)*

**Personal interest.** Previous studies showed that displaying a personal interest in students is necessary as it is good for student-instructor relationships as well as for real learning (Silvia & Hom, 1996). Research in neuroscience and physiology demonstrates the link between emotion and cognition, and a personal interest from the instructors will engender the positive emotions, as well as engagement, motivation and interest for students (Zull, 2002). In this study, participants reported that instructors who take a personal interest in international students while respecting personal boundaries of both parties was a good way build rapport and create a supportive class environment. For example,

*The instructor of the ESL course is very open-minded and interested in different cultures in*

*each student's background, as most of the student body in that course was international students. The instructor asked me several times about Chinese culture, and we often talked about it after class. I'm proud of my culture and glad that people here are interested in it, too. (Jacob)*

**Personal attentiveness.** Attentiveness is one of the most essential components of rapport (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1987). It creates a focused and cohesive interaction. Personal attentiveness between students and instructors creates a close relationship and enhances the tie between two parties, as well as mutual respect and trust. Conversations about personal experiences, communication out of class, and extra care and concern would contribute to the cultivation of personal attentiveness:

*I have built a very good relationship with him. But he no longer taught in the university anymore. We met on the bus after the first class very coincidentally, and we talked a lot about many different stuff in both school and life on the bus, after that he remembered for me. He showed attentiveness to me and would always ask if I was doing well or have any questions concerning his lecture. We talked and chatted a lot between or after class. (Victoria)*

*The instructor I was referring to was very attentive to me, I told him the course was a little bit difficult for at the beginning, and after that he always asked what I thought about this chapter, or that lecture. During our meet in his office hour, he also gave me a lot extra resources for studying the course. Now we still keep in touch although he didn't teach me anymore. He still emailed me with some good references or material in my field, he also introduced some seniors of our program to me. I'm so thankful and appreciative about what he has done! (Sarah)*

#### **Theme 4. Classroom Justice: Perception of fairness**

Classroom justice refers to perceptions of fairness regarding outcomes or processes that occur in the instructional context (Chory-Assad, 2002, p. 2). Classroom justice has been a growing concern as it is closely related to students' expectation of fair treatment (Colquitt, 2001), students' evaluations of instructors (Cooper, Stewart, & Gudykunst, 1982), and the creation of an equitable educational experience (Chory-Assad, 2002).

Research on classroom justice used to relate only to the outcome of student evaluation of

instructors, and scholars found that both fair grades and fair grading procedures were associated with how the students perceived and evaluated of instructors (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). Further, Tyler and Caine (1991) found that student perceptions of fairness regarding the grading procedures weigh higher than the grades they receive in the outcome of evaluation of instructors. More recent research on classroom justice started to find it related to other outcomes such as student affective learning (Chory-Assad, 2002) and motivation (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004). Moreover, scholars indicated that except for fairness of outcomes and process, whether the individuals are treated fairly is also a dimension of classroom justice (Colquitt, 2001).

Chory-Assad and Paulsel (2004a) considered classroom justice in three dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice. The three types focus on the different predictors of justice and serve as the way to measure classroom justice in the instructional setting as a whole. Similar results have been discovered in this study as well, so the results are presented in the three dimensions of classroom justice.

**Sub-theme 1: Distributive justice.** Distributive justice is defined as “the fair distribution of the conditions and goods which affect individual well-being” (Deutsch, 1975, p. 137), which could be psychologically, physiologically, economically, and socially. Later Deutsch (1975) further noted that in the educational context, distributive justice arose in connection with teacher’s attention and grades. Chory-Assad and Paulsel (2004a) also found in their study that students might compare the grades with their peers or had expectations about the grades they were expecting to achieve.

In Chory-Assad’s (2002) study on the relationship between classroom justice and student learning outcomes, distributive justice was assessed by the report of participants’ feelings toward the grades they had received or expected to receive using four self-report items regarding the

expectation on grades. Later in another study on student aggression and resistance as reactions to perceived unfairness, Chory-Assad and Paulsel (2004b) used Chory-Assad's (2002) distributive justice scale, adding items concerning the comparison of the grade the participants received and their expectation, based on the conceptualizations and operationalization of distributive justice (Deutsch, 1975).

Similarly, in this study, participants were asked to talk about both positive and poor experiences of student-instructor relationship and getting a good grade was mentioned by every participant when asked about what made them enjoy the class and the interaction with the instructor. For example,

*The class was not very difficult, and as long as you have spent time and made the effort, you would get a good grade. I did get a good grade and it improved my CGPA a lot, but I also spent a lot of time on it, so I think I deserved it. (Ho)*

*The instructor gave everyone an extra 3 points for the final grade, he said it was to encourage us and appreciate the hard working and effort throughout the semester. He did give me a good grade without the extra points already, so I was very happy. But that course was the one that I have spent most of my time and energy that semester, so I was not surprised, your effort paid off I guess. (Yvonne)*

Results from the interviews also show that failure in classroom distributive justice contributes to a poor student-instructor relationship. For example,

*The instructor had a weird grading standard, she gave our group a very low score after she praised a lot about our presentation. And we were not the only group that was treated like that. But I thought we did a good job, and we deserve a higher grade. (Grace)*

*I still really don't get why I didn't get a good grade in the course, especially for the final exam, I made so much effort, I paid attention to every word and expression, I even wrote a draft first, it took me the whole three hours! (Yvonne)*

**Sub-theme 2: Procedural justice.** The second dimension of classroom justice is procedural justice. Homans (1961) first proposed the notion of procedural justice in social behavior. Byrne and Cropanzano (2001) referred to procedural justice in the study of

organizational justice and defined it as the perceptions of the fairness of the processes in which to achieve the outcomes. In Chory-Assad and Paulsel's (2004a) study of predictors of student aggression, procedural justice was defined as perceptions "about how the instructor determines student outcomes such as grades, praise, and attention" (p. 101-102), which includes grading processes, policies for student behavior, and decisions about how assignments are evaluated.

In Chory-Assad and Paulsel's (2004b) study on student aggression and resistance as reactions to perceived unfairness, classroom procedural justice was measured by a 15-item scale regarding the fairness of the instructor's grading process, attendance policy and other behaviors on decisions. In this study, procedural justice was frequently mentioned in the interviews, in both positive and negative ways. For example,

*At the beginning of the class, I couldn't figure out how to use the Lecture Tools interaction and thus I lost some grade, I went to ask her for help and she showed me how to use it, then she asked me to submit the answers again so that she could give me the grade. I was really appreciative! (Meng)*

*I don't know what the grading scale is for the course, but it's not very convincing for me. The proportion of a student giving presentation and asking questions to another presentation is the same. Moreover, whether you can get the grade for the questions depend on your questions. This is hard to believe. (Grace)*

**Sub-theme 3: Interactional justice.** The third dimension of classroom justice is interactional justice. According to Bies and Moag (1986), interactional justice is the perception of fairness concerning interpersonal treatment from the instructor when classroom policies are implemented. It focuses on the way the instructor communicates with students individually, and is most related to the interpersonal relationship between students and instructor. Interactional justice has been least studied in instructional communication research and in classroom justice (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a). However, it is of great significance in determining the student-instructor communication because it demonstrates politeness, equity and respect in the

communication process.

Conveying information clearly and unambiguously, and treating the other party fairly, with dignity and respect are the two factors comprising interactional justice (Brockner & Siegel, 1996). Accordingly, in the instructional setting, the two factors would be getting education message across clearly, and treating students fairly, unbiasedly, sensitively and respectfully.

Interactional classroom justice has been reported to be positively related to attraction and teacher affect (Paulsel & Chory-Assad, 2004b). In contrast, instructors who fail to practice interactional classroom justice resulted from treating students differently, being disrespectful and biased were more likely to be resisted by students (Colquitt, 2001). In this study, interactional justice codes have been mentioned several times by participants, in both positive and negative ways. For example,

*The instructor treated us fairly and with respect, regardless of our gender, race, or cultural background. When he was talking to students, you could see the sincere and politeness from his words and expression. I really feel comfortable talking to him. (Alexie)*

*The instructor really liked the two Chinese boys in our class, she liked to interact with them in class, and actually she only knew their names. But to the rest of us, she didn't care too much. (Grace)*

### **Theme 5. Impact on student experience: It does make a difference**

There is substantial research on the impact of student-instructor relationship (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Murray & Malmgren, 2005). When a positive student-instructor relationship occurs, a supportive learning environment is provided for students as a secure base where they can engage in academically and socially productive ways (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Similarly, Baker, Grant, and Morlock (2008) found that a positive student-instructor relationship enables students to feel safe in their learning environment. A positive student-instructor relationship is also found to improve students' important social and academic skills. In contrast, a poor student-instructor

relationship will result in the lack of engagement and motivation, as well as low self-efficacy and low self-confidence, found by previous studies (Murry & Malmgren, 2005; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012).

In this study, participants were invited to talk about the impact of both positive and poor experience of student-instructor relationship on their overall experience studying at the University of Ottawa. Unsurprisingly, both academic and social outcomes were associated with the relationship and respective codes on academic and social impact will be presented in the following paragraphs.

**Sub-theme 1: Academic outcomes.** As the main task of students studying at the university is to study, many researchers have explored the impact the student-instructor relationship on academic outcomes (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). Wentzel (1999) found that a positive student-instructor help improve students' motivation, and increase students' engagement, thus helping them to get a good grade and achieve a good academic performance.

Motivation has been reported to play a key role in how student-instructor relationship influences the academic outcome by many researchers (Fan & William, 2010). According to Muller, Katz, and Dance (1999), motivation is also related to students' perception of teacher expectations. Students who perceive a high expectation from their instructors feel the sense of responsibility to study well, and thus are more likely to try harder to meet their expectations.

Student engagement refers to "the degree of attention, interest, and passion that students demonstrate when they are learning or being taught" (Student engagement, 2014). It is widely believed that learning improves when students are interested in and inspired by what they are learning (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Therefore, improving student engagement is a common instructional goal for instructors. Also studies show

that a positive student-instructor relationship can create strong student engagement and thus facilitate students' academic performance and achievement (Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011). In contrast, a poor student-instructor relationship decreases students' perceptions of warmth, care, and closeness from the instructors and student engagement tends to suffer. A lack of engagement results in being bored, dispassionate or disaffected, which is negatively related to academic achievement.

In this study, academic outcome was mentioned by almost every participant when asked about the impact of student-instructor relationship. When referred to as a positive experience, participants expressed that because of such a positive relationship, they were more motivated, engaged, and achieved a good score. In the case of a poor experience, participant became bored, lacked motivation, found it hard to concentrate and received unsatisfactory grades. For example,

*I'm very motivated to learn this course well, and I can't let my instructor down before I think he had a high expectation on me and he cared about my study so much. The course was not easy actually, but because I had a positive relationship with the instructor, I don't feel shy or intimidating or nervous to talk to him or ask any questions, which I did bother him a lot to answer my questions, but I benefited from our discussion every time and got great progress! (Victoria)*

*At first I didn't like my program, I found it too difficult and abstract, and I didn't have any motivation to take the courses offered by our program, all I thought about was to transfer to another program! However, after taking the course of this instructor, I started to understand a lot more than before and started to discover the beauty of it. I am now doing well in my program. I'm really appreciative! (Kristen)*

Examples of negative impact on academic outcome would be,

*A good instructor means a higher attendance in class, a higher efficiency and effective study. Whereas if you have an instructor that was not very inspiring, you feel like it's better to study alone, but it's so hard. That's what I did last semester, I preferred to study by myself, but some questions that I had couldn't be solved alone. At last I didn't get a very good grade. (Bu)*

*I felt like I have learnt nothing very valuable from the course. I was not motivated to go to class and I didn't feel the urge to learn well, which was what I did in that course at last, unfortunately. (Laurence)*

**Sub-theme 2: Social outcomes.** Studies show that notable social outcomes are related with student-instructor relationship as well (Dika & Singh, 2002; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). In Muller's (2001) study on the role of caring in the student-instructor relationship for at-risk students, it was noted that instructors were an important source of social capital for students, which was defined as "a relationship that facilitates action" (p. 241). Muller concluded that, a caring student-instructor relationship where students feel that they are both cared for and expected to succeed, and contribute to academic success, particularly for at-risk students.

Student-instructor relationships have also been found to have an impact on the self-esteem and self-confidence of students (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012; Ryan et al., 1994; Schneider, 2013; Wentzel, 1999). Previous studies show that students with high self-esteem are more likely to develop better relationships with peers, and it also helps students to form healthy mental well-being by reducing stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Orth et al., 2012). Orth et al. (2012) also noted in their study that the social outcomes brought by the positive student-instructor relationship have impacts during the education period as well as in a future occupational environment, since self-esteem is not only related to schooling, but also leads to future job satisfaction and occupational status.

Moreover, scholars have found that the student-instructor relationships also impact how other peers perceive and accept students (Hughes et al., 2001). Specifically, the interactions between students and instructors convey messages which affect other students' perception and acceptance of a certain student. The more positive the student-instructor relationship is, the more likely the student is accepted and involved in the interaction with his or her students.

In this thesis, participants were asked about the impact of the student-instructor relationship on their overall experience at the University of Ottawa, and their answers reflect the

social outcomes:

*I feel so confident in myself, I believe and keep telling myself that since I can have such a positive student-instructor relationship with this instructor, there's no reason why I can't succeed with others. I don't feel intimidated or nervous anymore. (Bu)*

*I knew no one and had no friends at all at the beginning, I felt so alone. I thought I should talk to someone at least, so I started to communicate with the instructor more and more, and I got more out-going along the way. Surprisingly, I started to make friends in the class too, I felt really good about it! (Alexie)*

In sum, five main themes and a total of twelve sub-themes were presented in the fourth chapter. The main purpose of this thesis was to explore Chinese students' experience on student-instructor relationship at the University of Ottawa. To conclude this chapter, the three research questions will be discussed.

**RQ.1. What is the overall experience of Chinese students in terms of the student-instructor relationship at the University of Ottawa?**

Chinese students come a long way from their home to pursue a degree at the University of Ottawa as international students. During the process, they have all kinds of new experiences regarding student-instructor relationship. The interview findings reveal that most of the participants enjoy the positive student-instructor relationships they have experienced. However, most reported a lack of regular or frequent interaction and communication with their instructors for two main reasons: their different experience in education, and their experience of acculturation adaptation.

There are many significant differences in education between China and Canada, including the education system, curriculum settings, way of instructing, etc. Therefore, there is no doubt that Chinese international students will find it hard to adapt when they first arrive. Among all the differences, there are three factors that really impact the interaction and communication between students and instructors, which are the difference in instructor identity and authority, class size,

and the perception of education. These factors play a key role in influencing the class flow, class atmosphere and climate, as well as the development of student-instructor relationship.

As discussed above, instructor identity relates to how instructors are perceived in education and what role they are supposed to take and is defined as the degree of control that the instructor has over students (Oyler, 1996). In China, instructors are regarded as transmitters of knowledge, while students are mainly responsible to receive what they have been taught by the instructors. In class, students are acting more the role of receiver than participant. Moreover, in China, instructors enjoy a high degree of respect from students. Students are taught to obey the rules, learn from the instructors, and memorize the knowledge that they have received. This is partly due to the influence of the Confucius tradition, which its emphasis on recognition, respect and obedience for instructors and which has been the mainstream value for thousands of years in Chinese history. Therefore, for Chinese students there is the expectation of distance from instructors and they are not used to interacting or communicating with instructors a lot.

Class size is another difference that Chinese students are faced with in terms of differences in education. Class size is referred to as the actual number of students the instructor teaches at a particular time (Ehrenberg, Brewer, Gamoran, & Willms, 2001). Class size has been reported to play a key role in student-instructor relationships (Myers, 2006; Shaw et al., 2015). For Chinese students, it is indeed a new learning environment that takes time to get adapted to. In China, class size in high school ranges from 40 to 60 students. The smaller the class size is, the easier it is to encourage class interaction and develop positive student-instructor relationships. However, at the University of Ottawa, class sizes are often large for first year students, with most of them ranging from 100-200 students. Therefore, it is even harder for Chinese students to build a close

relationship, as it is not easy to be recognized among so many students, also the large class size often prevents them from interacting with instructors in class.

A different perception of education is also a factor that influences Chinese students' experience of the student-instructor relationship. Perception of education refers to how education is perceived in society, including the core of education, and what role it is enacting. For Chinese society, because of a requirement to boost the economy, the public education system has placed priority on subjects like mathematics and science, and it has largely ignored students' development of critical thinking, creativity, and imagination. In contrast, at the University of Ottawa, the skills of critical thinking, creativity and flexibility are important for students. The focus on memorizing class materials which is familiar for Chinese students, does not always work in the Canadian educational context. Therefore, due to the lack of analysis and independent thinking, which is a valued characteristic for instructors, Chinese students fail to interact or communicate with instructors on a regular basis, and this can prevent them from developing close student-instructor relationships.

Aside from the different educational expectations, acculturation adaptation is another factor influencing participants' experience of the student-instructor relationship. Acculturation is "the result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both group" (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149). Acculturation is such a wide topic that this study cannot cover all the aspects of it. However, two factors affecting acculturation are applicable here as to elaborate the experience of student-instructor relationships for Chinese first-year international students. The two factors are: language proficiency and length of stay.

The role of language proficiency in the experience of student-instructor relationships is

significant and obvious. The student-instructor relationship is a dimension of relational communication and, specifically, interpersonal communication. Many researchers have investigated language and its communicational functions (e.g. De Araujo, 2011; Walker, 2014). As an ultimate communication tool for human beings, language is the most complex form of communication and it allows the sharing of ideas, concepts, and, ultimately, of culture. Students with a greater language proficiency are reported to experience less acculturation stress (De Araujo, 2011). Students with good language skills are also believed to integrate to the new learning environment better and faster. Moreover, language proficiency influences the flow and smoothness of communication between persons and it is also applicable to the communication between students and instructors. For Chinese international students studying at the University of Ottawa, English is their second or third language, which results in having language difficulties to some degree. In this study, it was seen that, students who reported having better language proficiency benefitted from this skill and were able to develop a positive student-instructor relationship more easily. In contrast, students who suffer from lack of language skills reported experiencing more difficulty in cultivating such relationships.

Length of stay is another factor influencing the experience of acculturation adaptation and thus having an impact on Chinese students' experience at the University of Ottawa. The relation between length of stay and acculturation has been studied by many researchers, and it is found that the longer one stays in the new country, the better he/she will integrate, and the less acculturation stress he/she will experience (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; De Araujo, 2011; Walker, 2014). In this study, the research participants, all first year Chinese students, had been in this country for less than one year. As a result, they all referred to integration issues as they try to adapt to the new learning environment and these influenced their relationship with instructors.

However, as the interviews of this study took place in the second semester of the first year, many participants expressed that their situation, including integration, mental well-being, adaptation to the new environment, interaction, and communication with instructors had improved in the second semester, compared to the first few months of their arrival. More regular and frequent interaction with instructors was reported, and more positive student-instructor relationships had been built.

**RQ.2. What are the main factors that contribute to and hinder the development of positive student-instructor relationships?**

The second research question focuses on the factors that affect the development of positive student-instructor relationships. In light of the interview findings, teacher immediacy, student-instructor rapport, and classroom justice are the most outstanding factors contributing to the development of positive student-instructor relationship, and lack of immediacy, rapport, and justice hinder the development of such positive student-instructor relationship.

Teacher immediacy is defined as the use of communication behaviors to enhance closeness between students and instructors (Gorham, 1988; Mehrabian, 1966). As an important dimension and contributor of positive student-instructor relationships, teacher immediacy has been reported to have positive impact on students' affective learning, cognitive learning, class climate, academic integrity, classroom justice, students' motivation, engagement, and participation, etc. (Gorham, 1988; Chesebro & McCrosky, 2001; Christophel, 1990; Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998). In this study, teacher immediacy was investigated in three dimensions: instructional immediacy, relational immediacy, and personal immediacy. The three types of teacher immediacy comprise students' experience on the whole experience of teacher immediacy, and contribute to their experience of positive student-instructor relationship.

Instructional immediacy is associated with class instruction and teaching in order to enhance the closeness between the communicators, also known as students and instructors (Zhang & Oetzel, 2006a). It focuses how instructors use verbal and nonverbal behaviors to teach in class and to communicate with students on class-related matters. As instruction is the most important responsibility of instructors, and plays a key role in how they are perceived by the students, instructional immediacy makes a significant contribution to the development of student-instructor relationship. Behaviors that show instructional immediacy include being patient, having a lively teaching style, referring to slides or notes rarely in lectures, avoid monotone, encouraging class discussion, etc. Instructional immediacy draws students' attention to class and helps them participate in the class, which is important in the forming of a positive student-instructor relationship.

Relational immediacy is associated with the relationship to enhance the closeness between instructors and students (Zhang & Oetzel, 2006a). Relational immediacy behaviors is relationship-centered, and demonstrates understanding, respect, care, and trust between students and instructors, which are indispensable elements in the cultivation of a positive student-instructor relationship. Relational immediacy includes moving around the classroom while lecturing, having eye contact, address students by name, etc.

Interpersonal immediacy is associated with instructors' personal attributes and characteristics to enhance the closeness with students (Zhang & Oetzel, 2006a). The instructor's personality, morality, scholarship and affect the emotional closeness between students and instructors, especially for Chinese students where the instructor holds the role of authority. Interpersonal immediacy helps instructors to enhance closeness with students and thus developing the positive student-instructor relationships.

Rapport, which is defined as “the overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond” (Frisby & Martin, 2010, p. 147), is another important contributor in forging positive student-instructor relationship. Student-instructor rapport is reported to be correlated positively with a lively class environment, student motivation, the shaping of an effective instructor, and favourable social interaction (Catt et al., 2007; Coupland, 2003; Dwyer et al., 2004; Jorgenson, 1992). In this study, student-instructor rapport was measured in two dimensions: enjoyable interaction and personal connection (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000).

As early as in 1983, Gupta defined enjoyable interaction as the favourable association with the relationship, and the feeling of liking and positivity in the relationship. In the educational setting, the enjoyable interaction between students and instructors in or outside class is the most basic component of a positive student-instructor relationship. The qualities of instructors that contribute to enjoyable interaction in student-instructor rapport include: being interesting, encouraging, showing concern for students, promoting class discussion, and being accessible and open-minded. These qualities make the instructors more approachable to students so that students can enjoy the interaction with them, thus facilitating the development of positive student-instructor relationships.

Personal connection, on the other hand, is evidenced by strong affiliation and mutual feelings within the relationship (Frisby & Myers, 2008). In the educational setting, personal connection is a bond and a strong affiliation between students and instructors, based on mutual caring, identification, or simply emotional closeness. The personal connection in student-instructor rapport helps build mutual attentiveness, which makes students feel closer to instructors, thus developing a positive relationship (Frisby & Myers, 2008). Interview findings

show that students seek personal connection with instructors and are trying to be closer to them, which is demonstrated from the elements of bond, personal interest, and personal attentiveness. The interpersonal bond is often based on mutual understanding and identification, personal interest displayed in communication often engenders emotion and cognition, and personal attentiveness enhances the tie between the two communicators. Therefore, these elements build a strong personal connection and thus foster the development of positive student-instructor relationships.

The last but not least contributor to positive student-instructor relationships is classroom justice. It refers to the perception of fairness regarding outcomes or processes that occur in the instructional context (Chory-Assad, 2002, p. 2). In this study, the three dimensions of classroom injustice proposed by Chory-Assad and Pulsel (2004a) are investigated: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice.

Distributive justice means “the fair distribution of conditions and good which affect individual well-being” (Deutsch, 1975, p. 137). In the instructional context, distributive justice is associated with grades students get and how they perceive the grades they get, compared with their expectation (Leventhal, 1976). Distributive justice is closely related to student-instructor relationship as it is reported by the students’ feeling toward the grade they receive, and it influences how they perceive, access, and evaluate the instructors (Chory-Assad, 2002). In the interview findings, distributive justice resulted in good student-instructor relationship in that good grades make students feel more willing and motivated to communicate with the instructors. Thus, the practice of distributive justice contributes to the development of positive student-instructor relationships.

Procedural justice is referred to as the perceptions of fairness of the processes used to arrive at outcomes (Homans, 1961). In the instructional context, procedural justice is associated with the process in which instructors determine the outcomes of students, which includes grading process, classroom policies, assignment evaluation, etc. (Leventhal, 1980) Procedural justice influences the class climate, and has great significance in building authority and trust for instructors as it is related to how student outcomes are determined, classroom policies are implemented and other procedural matters are enacted (Chory-Assad, 2002). In this study, participants pointed to the importance of procedural justice in making instructors more convincing, enhancing the sense of authority, as well as building mutual trust between students and instructors. All of these outcomes contribute to the development of positive student-instructor relationships.

The third dimension, interactional justice, is focused on the interpersonal level. It is defined as the perception of fairness concerning interpersonal treatment from the instructor when classroom policies are implemented (Bies & Moag, 1986). Interactional justice requires the instructors to convey information in a clear and unambiguous way, as well as treat students fairly, unbiasedly, and respectfully (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a). Any behaviors of disrespect, different treatment, biased or discrimination are regarded as violation of interactional justice (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a). Participants in this study reported that the reception of biased treatment or discrimination had a very negative impact on their whole experience. Instructors who practice interactional justice are more likely to gain respect and recognition from students, decrease the distance with students, and in turn enhance the development of positive student-instructor relationships.

To conclude, teacher immediacy, student-instructor rapport, as well as classroom justice contribute to the development of positive student-instructor relationships. While non-immediacy behaviors, lack of rapport, and classroom injustice hinder the cultivation of such relationships. Positive student-instructor relationships can have positive impact on students in many ways, and should be a goal to achieve for instructors.

**RQ.3. What impact do student-instructor relationships have on Chinese international students at the University of Ottawa?**

The third and last research question tackles the impact of student-instructor relationships on study participants. Studies show a significant impact of the student-instructor relationship on students' experience (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Murray & Malmgren, 2005). The impact consists of two parts, academic outcomes and social outcomes. Both positive and poor experience of student-instructor relationship influence students from these two perspectives.

When a student experiences positive student-instructor relationship, the student has more motivation to study, he/she will be more likely to engage in study, and will enjoy better academic performance. Students' motivation is closely related to the student-instructor relationship in that perceptions of the relationship with instructors influence the drive students have and the degree of effort they make in the pursuit of a better academic result. Participants in this study reported that, in many cases, they felt cared for, were treated attentively, and perceived high expectations from their instructors. Thus these participants reported feeling more motivated, fulfilled the expectations of the instructor and, overall, to did well in their studies.

Student engagement is also a topic that has been extensively studied by previous researchers (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012; Roorda et al., 2011). It refers to the attention, interest, and passion of students when learning, and it is believed that these elements contribute to

academic success. Moreover, a positive student-instructor relationship is crucial in encouraging student engagement and thus facilitating the achievement of academic goals. Roorda et al. (2011) investigated the associations and connections between teacher-student relationships and students' learning engagement and achievement. Their results show that the link is strong, and that it is even more influential for students entering their late adolescence. Participants in this study reported that, when they enjoyed a positive student-instructor relationship, they were more stimulated in their studies, felt more engaged and were committed to academic performance.

In contrast, a poor experience of student-instructor relationship decreased motivation and engagement of students, leaving them perceiving a lack of care, attention, and expectations from their instructors. According to participants, the insecure learning environment resulted in demotivation, a lack of engagement, and failure in achieving successful academic outcomes.

Aside from academic outcomes, social outcomes are also part of the impact of student-instructor relationships. Positive student-instructor relationships are reported to have significant social impact to students and are important sources of social capital for students (Dika & Singh, 2002; Henry et al., 2012; Muller, 2001). The social impact of student-instructor relationships is mainly seen in three aspects, the improvement in self-esteem, increase in self-confidence, and the perception of peers.

Entering a new learning environment in their second or third language, the participants in this study reported experiencing low-esteem in their first year of school. However, they pointed to positive relationships with instructors as being crucial in building higher levels of self-esteem, as they enjoyed care and recognition from their instructors. Students with high self-esteem are more likely to form positive relationships with peers and other adults as well, which is good for

social development. It is also important in cultivating a positive sense of self, which will lead to future positive outcomes (Orth et al., 2012).

Self-confidence is another significant component of positive sense of self, which is of special importance for students in educational setting. Study participants reported experiencing all kinds of integration, adaptation, and acculturation stress. It is very likely for them to feel lost and to lose their self-confidence. A lack of self-confidence can lead to discouragement, dispassion, and has negative impact for social development (Frymier, 2007; Sher, 2009; Stearns, 2001; Zhang, 2007). Our participants reported that positive student-instructor relationships encouraged interaction and communication with instructors, which answered their questions and helped them perform better academically. They also reported gains in self-confidence and this in turn helped their social development.

In light of the interview findings, positive student-instructor relationships can also help students obtain recognition and acceptance from peers. Student-instructor relationships affect how students are perceived by peers, and how they interact with each other (Hughes et al., 2001). For study participants, it was important for them to seek recognition and social acceptance from their peers, but it is also difficult as newcomers. However, they reported that a positive student-instructor relationship influences the attitude of peers, which help the students to gain the trust and acceptance of peers, and peer acceptance in turn leads to positive social outcomes for students.

In closing, this results and analysis chapter looked at the experiences of student-instructor relationships of Chinese international students at the University of Ottawa, from perspectives of overall experience, teacher immediacy, rapport, classroom justice, and academic and social influence of such experience on the students. By showing some data from the interview to proof

the findings and further exploring the phenomenon, the research answers the research questions posted at the beginning. The following chapter will conclude this study and consider its limitations as well as future research implications.

### **Specific to Chinese students: A summary**

Student-instructor relationship is a general topic in instructional communication. However, since this study is specifically looking into the experience of Chinese students of student-instructor relationship, this thesis emphasized Chinese students from several perspectives.

Thanks to the economic development, an increasing number of Chinese households can afford to send their children abroad for further study. The motivation of Chinese students studying abroad includes pursuing higher education, escaping from social pressure, gaining foreign country experience and expanding more career opportunities. However, Chinese students are also faced with a lot of challenges studying abroad, among which language proficiency and cultural adaptation are the greatest. Lack of excellent language skills prevents Chinese students from communicating fluently with instructors as well as local students, while significant differences from the domestic culture adds to the difficulty in understanding and communication between parties.

The findings of the study also point to the Chinese students in terms of their difference from non-Chinese students, which reveals part of the reason why Chinese students are having a hard time engaging themselves more in communicating and interacting with instructors. In Chinese culture, which is under significant influence of Confucius and bearing strong power-distance, Chinese students regard instructors as authority, and thus are not encouraged or used to interacting with instructors or expressing their own opinions in class, not to mention challenging instructors' ideas. However, in Canada where there is moderate power distance and where

communication and interaction with instructors is strongly recommended, Chinese students need some time to adapt. Moreover, different phases or economic development result in different educational system. While reciting and memorizing is still a big part of learning in China, creativity and critical thinking skills are valued in Canadian schools. Consequentially, it takes time for Chinese students to adapt from a class with constant lecturing to a class where participation and feedback is needed.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

### Significance of study

China is the top source country of international students in Canada. Every year, more than 100,000 students come to Canada from China to study. However, little is known about their situation. This study attempts to fill this gap and uses University of Ottawa as a case to investigate the experience of Chinese international students, specifically their experience of student-instructor relationships.

This study is a good practice in applying relational communication theories in the context of instructional communication, and enhancing our understanding of student-instructor relationship. The findings of this study echo the findings of the much research in the field of instructional communication, especially in the areas of teacher immediacy and rapport.

To conclude, this study tried to understand the overall experience of the student-instructor relationship for study participants, all first-year Chinese students studying at the University of Ottawa, to identify the contributors and hindrances to the development of positive student-instructor relationships, and to explore the impact of the student-instructor relationship on students. Findings from this study show that the experience of different education and acculturation influenced participants overall experience of the student-instructor relationship. Specifically, the difference lies in instructor identity and authority, class size, and perceptions of instructors. The acculturation experience is due to the language proficiency and the length of stay in the new learning environment.

Findings of this study also demonstrate that teacher immediacy, student-instructor rapport, and classroom justice are the main factors that affect the development of positive student-instructor relationships. Teaching immediacy is measured in instructional immediacy, relational

immediacy and personal immediacy. Student-instructor rapport includes two different dimensions: enjoyable interaction and personal connection. Classroom justice is represented by distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice. Finally, it was found that student-instructor relationships have impacts on academic and social outcomes, which include student motivation, engagement, self-esteem, self-confidence, and peer acceptance.

### **Limitations and delimitations**

One limitation of this study is that the lecturing and teaching styles of different instructors differ from each other and at the same time students respond to and perceive them in different ways. Because of this, the results cannot be generalized to all student-instructor relationships. A second limitation was that the sample of participants was limited in size due to time and resource constraints on the part of researcher, which may have failed to capture different perspectives on the issues. Another limitation, according to Creswell (2009), is the problem of bias, where “indirect information as filtered through the views of the interviewees, the presence of the researcher which could create bias, and the fact that all people are not equally articulate which could be true of an immigrant sample population who does not speak English as their first language” (p. 179). In this study, the researcher strived to avoid bias by attempting to bracket her past experiences with the phenomenon and confirming the interpretations of the significant statements by discussing them with a peer. Confirming the meanings of statements with a peer reduces the risk of researcher bias and it allows the researcher to ensure that she is describing the phenomenon accurately. The researcher also tried to ensure that the results of the research were accurately recorded to avoid reporting bias.

As for delimitations, the study only focused on Chinese international students, not all international students at the University. Also, the study centered on the student-instructor

relationship building in the educational setting and thus other intercultural problems were not specially addressed here.

### **Future research implications**

This research could inspire future research on Chinese students' experience studying abroad as international students. The experience could focus on study, integration, cultural adaptation, emotional and realistic ties with the motherland, social development, and future employment. Moreover, future research could also expand the sample population and sample criteria, and there could be more research on the international students' experience and situation studying abroad.

Specifically, in communication, future research could look into the essence, the process, or factors that contribute or hinder communication in instructional settings. Aside from student-instructor rapport, student-student rapport also needs to be further studied. Future research could also explore the combination using more in-depth cultural perspective by focusing different cultural population groups. Cross-cultural perspective could also be provided for the comparison of different cultures.

The goal of this thesis was to understand the experience of Chinese international students of the student-instructor relationship between themselves and Canadian instructors, and explore the factors hindering and contributing to relationship building. Given the great number of students coming from China to study in Canada, it is important to understand their experience to ensure that teaching approaches take into account their perceptions, needs and orientations to learning in order to foster positive student-instructor relationships and enhance their academic and social experience as international students. This thesis has shed light on these issues and

shown that, despite the challenges they face, Chinese international students are able to integrate and enjoy positive relationships with their instructors.

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## Appendix A

### Online Recruitment Text

Hello everyone,

I'm a second-year MA student in Department of Communication at the University of Ottawa. I'm conducting research for my thesis and the topic is "Chinese students' experience of student-instructor relationship at the University of Ottawa". If you are currently a first year undergraduate student at the University of Ottawa and if your major is in either the Faculty of Social Science or the Faculty of Arts, I would like to invite you to participate in a one-hour interview about your student experience. The goal of this research project is to explore the relationships of Chinese students with professors here at the University of Ottawa, as well as the factors that might hinder the development of a healthy student-instructor relationship. Ethical clearance for this research study has been received from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board.

I do hope you will agree to participate in this study. Please note that the selection of participants will be made on a first come, first served basis. If you are willing to participate in the interview, please contact me through email or phone at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Danyan Chen

## Appendix B

### Participant Consent Form

#### Consent Form – For Participation in Communication Research

**Title of the Study:** Chinese students' experience of student-instructor relationships at the University of Ottawa

**Researchers:** Danyan Chen, Master of Arts (Communication) Candidate, University of Ottawa, supervised by Professor Jenepher Lennox Terrion, Department of Communication, University of Ottawa.

**Contact information:**

**Jenepher Lennox Terrion, Ph.D.**  
Department of Communication  
University of Ottawa

**Danyan Chen**  
Department of Communication  
University of Ottawa

**Invitation to Participate:**

I am invited to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by Danyan Chen as part of a Master's thesis, under the supervision of Professor Jenepher Lennox Terrion.

**Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of the study is to examine the relationships between international students, especially Chinese students and their instructors, as well as their experience of such relationships in the University of Ottawa. Using in depth interview data guided by Gremler and Gwinner's Customer-Employee rapport measures in 2000, the research will explore what is the overall experience of Chinese students of student-instructor relationships, and the factors which hinder the development of this positive relationship.

**Participation:**

My participation will consist of an interview lasting about an hour. The interview will be scheduled for a time and place convenient to me as the participant. I understand that interviews will be audio-recorded for research purposes. I will be afforded the opportunity to provide clarification to my answers and participation in the days following the interview if I feel it necessary.

**Risks:**

My participation in this study will entail that I will disclose some personal information –cultural background, major, grade, contact information and some of the information of my professors. However, I understand that anonymity will be guaranteed and I have the right to use preferred name or pseudonyms of me and my professor. The publication of this research study will not release the real name of me and my professor.

**Benefits:**

My participation in this study will help improve the understanding of Chinese students' experience and situation on student-instructor relationship at University of Ottawa. It can also explore some common factors that hinder the development of a more positive relationship. It is the goal of this study, and through my participation in it, that the findings will be useful to better understand the situation of Chinese students study abroad and try to advance their experience with the student- instructor relationship by avoiding the hindering factors they are faced with.

**Confidentiality:**

I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will only be used for this research and that anonymity will be guaranteed, only my pseudonym, cultural background, major, grade and some information related to my professors will be published within the research. I have received assurance from the researcher that any contact information will be kept private and be secured on the researcher's password protected computer to which only he has access.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected (i.e. interview recordings and transcripts) will be kept in a secure manner on a password-protected computer in a secure file and access to data will not be shared with anyone other than the research supervisor.

**Compensation:** I understand compensation is not available for this study. The researcher has assured me that I will not be asked to spend any money to participate in the study.

**Voluntary Participation:** I understand that if I choose to withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, neither my professor nor I will not suffer any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be deleted and disposed of to my satisfaction.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Danyan Chen of the Communication Department, Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa and Dr. Jenepher Lennox-Terrion (thesis supervisor).

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research,  
University of Ottawa,  
Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154,  
Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5  
Tel.: (613) 562-5387  
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature:

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Date:

## Appendix C

### General Interview Guide

**Project title:** Chinese students' experience of student-instructor relationships at the University of Ottawa

**Researcher:** Danyan Chen, Master of Arts (Communication) Candidate, University of Ottawa, supervised by Professor Jenepher Lennox Terrion, Department of Communication, University of Ottawa

#### General information:

1. May I ask how old you are?
2. What's your program?
3. In which year are you?

#### Overall experience on student-instructor relationship:

4. Generally speaking, do you have a lot of interactions with professors at the University of Ottawa? If so, in what ways do you interact with each other, if not, why not?
5. Overall, do you enjoy interacting with professors at the University of Ottawa? If so, what aspect do you enjoy most? If not, why not?

#### Contributors:

Think of a professor whose class you enjoy most:

6. Can you describe what the class is like? (Using five words or expressions/examples)
7. Can you describe what the professor is like? (Using five words or expressions/examples)
8. Can you describe his/her interaction with students (with you)? (Using five words and expressions/examples)
9. In what way are the professor and the class attractive to you?
10. What does the professor do that makes you think he is trying to develop a student-instructor relationship?
11. In terms of cultural communication, does the professor respect your culture? Can he/she recognize you from other Chinese students? What makes you think so, can you give me an example? While lecturing, do you understand his/her humour if it is culture related?
12. In what ways do you benefit from your relationship with the instructor?

#### Hindrance:

Think of a professor whose class you enjoy least:

12. Can you describe what the class is like? (Using five words or expressions/examples)
13. Can you describe what the professor is like? (Using five words or expressions/examples)
14. Can you describe his/her interaction with students (with you)? (Using five words or expressions/examples)
15. In what ways do you think the professor and the class are the least enjoyable for you?
16. Do you think the professor fails to develop a good relationship with the students? If so what gives you this impression?
17. Does the professor respect cultural difference? Does he/she take cultural difference into consideration when communicating with students? Can you give me some examples?

18. Does the professor know your name? Can he/she recognize you from other Chinese students? What gives you that impression?

19. Can you describe the impact of the relationship you have with this professor on your academic and social development?

**Others**

20. Is there anything else that you want to add?

## Appendix D

Demographic Information of Participants ( $N=13$ )

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Victoria</b>	<b>Jacob</b>	<b>Alexie</b>	<b>Chloe</b>	<b>Sarah</b>	<b>Ho</b>	<b>Yvonne</b>	<b>Kristen</b>
<b>Age</b>	19	22	18	18	19	20	20	19
<b>Sex</b>	Female	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
<b>Faculty**</b>	Telfer	FSS	Telfer	FSS	Telfer	Arts	FSS	Arts
<b>Name*</b>	<b>Laurence</b>	<b>Grace</b>	<b>Queena</b>	<b>Meng</b>	<b>Bu</b>			
<b>Age</b>	20	18	19	19	20			
<b>Sex</b>	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female			
<b>Faculty</b>	FSS	Telfer	FSS	Arts	FSS			

*\*Names have been changed to ensure the anonymity of the participants*

*\*\* Names of the faculties are shortened*

*Telfer: Telfer School of Management*

*FSS: Faculty of Social Sciences*

*Arts: Faculty of Arts*