Learning experiences of international students in online course:
mixed methods study

Gulnara Sadykova
*University at Albany, State University of New York, gsadykova@yahoo.com*

The University at Albany community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd](https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd)

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Technology Commons, and the Higher Education Commons

**Recommended Citation**

[https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd/755](https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd/755)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Legacy Theses & Dissertations (2009 - 2024) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. Please see Terms of Use. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.
LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN
ONLINE COURSES: MIXED METHODS STUDY

by

Gulnara V. Sadykova

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education
Department of Educational Theory and Practice
2012
Abstract

This study explored the learning experiences of international students in fully online courses offered through a US university. Employing a sociocultural framework, particularly ideas put forward by Russian psychologists L. Vygotsky and American scholars R. Scollon and S. W. Scollon, the study examined the interplay of host and native cultures in an online learning environment and studied its effect on international students’ learning experiences, specifically on the learning experiences of one focal student from China.

The research was designed as a two-stage, mixed methods study. Initially a survey was administered to international students who took online courses at a large research university situated in the northeast of the US. Five of the 12 survey participants then completed follow-up online interviews. Cathy, a female graduate student from Shanghai, China who completed the survey and follow-up interviews, was then recruited for an in-depth case study. At the second stage of the study, data related to Cathy’s case was collected from several sources – her online American peers, online instructor, and her own observations and reflections. Case study data were gathered from online and face-to-face interviews, reflective journals, and archived online course logs. The cumulative data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively, with qualitative data collection and analysis methods having come to take primacy over quantitative methods.

During the course of the study it became evident that international students' experiences in US online courses could be concisely described as requiring effort at balancing membership in cross-cutting discourses of the host and native academic
cultures. The Scollon and Scollon’s concept of multiple discourses enabled this research to suggest that international students’ behavior in the classroom is guided by the necessity of balancing multiple discourses; i.e., to follow the expectations and requirements of two or more discourse systems. This necessity affects students’ interaction with peers and instructors and manifests itself in communication strategies and linguistic choices. The research findings suggest that learner-centered teaching practices that place emphasis on peer-to-peer learning, as well as course designers' conscious effort to provide space for students’ cultures, may help an international student to balance multiple discourses and successfully complete the course.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deep gratitude and appreciation to Dr. Carla Meskill, my research advisor, my Teacher, I dare to say my friend. Thank you for raising my self-esteem, for showing ways of overcoming cultural, geographical, and personal obstacles on my path to the doctoral degree, for enthusiastically accepting my raw ideas and patiently explaining how to clarify, structure, and present them to the scholarly world.

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Dr. Jennie Dautermann and Dr. Jane Agee for their careful reading and insightful comments on my dissertation. Their help was invaluable for making my work more coherent, comprehensible and readable.

I would also like to thank my US friends who opened up their hearts and their homes for me when I most needed it. Thank you Natasha, Volodya, Nina, Paul, Olga, Richard, Max, Sasha, Slava, Lucine, and Veronique. I will always remember your hospitality and cherish your friendship.

Most of all I would like to thank my family – my parents, my husband Oleg, and my little daughter Renata. Without their constant presence in my life I might have completed my dissertation earlier, but it would have been a meaningless and uninspiring job that I should not have even conceived.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. ii  
Acknowledgments .................................................................................................. iv  
Table of Contents .................................................................................................. v  
List of Tables ......................................................................................................... xi  
List of Figures ........................................................................................................ xii  

**Chapter One: Introduction** ............................................................................... 1  
  
  Background of the Problem .................................................................................. 1  
  Statement of the Problem ..................................................................................... 2  
  Purpose of the Study and Research Questions ..................................................... 4  
  Definition of Terms ............................................................................................... 6  
  Theoretical Framework ......................................................................................... 7  
  Significance of the Study ...................................................................................... 9  
  Limitations ........................................................................................................... 12  
  Summary ............................................................................................................. 14  

**Chapter Two: Review of the Literature** ............................................................ 16  
  
  Theoretical Perspective ......................................................................................... 16  
  Defining culture .................................................................................................... 17  
  Dimensions of culture in nationally-driven constructs ....................................... 19  
  Sociocultural framework: Vygotskian ideas......................................................... 23  
  A discourse approach to intercultural communication: Scollon and Scollon's theoretical framework ......................................................... 29  
  Theoretical foundations revisited ........................................................................ 36
Culture in the Online Classroom: Review of Relevant Literature

Online classroom discourse

Manifestation of culture in communication
  Communication in a non-native language
  Rules of communication in class discussions
  Team work
  Culturally embedded topics and references
  Student-instructor interaction

International Students’ Culture vs. Cyberculture of US Classroom:
  Mediating Role of the Technology
  Culture of technology
  Computer-mediated communication
  Culturally-sensitive web design

Gaps in Research

Chapter Summary

Chapter Three: Method

Restatement of the Research Questions

Overview of the Research Design

Settings and Participants

Survey and follow-up interviews
  Amanda
  CJ
  HS
  Moi

Case study
  Settings
  Cathy, the key informant
  Cathy’s American peers
  Cathy’s online instructor

Recruitment and selection of study participants
Chapter Four: Findings

I. Peers as Knowledge Mediators

The value of learning from/with peers

Survey and follow-ups

Cathy's case

Group work as the best format for learning
Cathy’s online instructor’s reflections
On-campus interaction with peers

Personal relationship as a key to learning

Cathy’s online experience

Cathy’s on-campus experience

Peers as cultural entity
II. Instructor as a Knowledge Mediator ........................................... 134

The role of the instructor in the US ........................................... 135
  Cathy’s online instructor ................................................. 135
  Online instructors of other international students .......... 142
  Comparing instructors in online and face-to-face courses ................................................. 149

The role of the instructor in China ........................................... 152

Comparison of instructional epistemologies and approaches:
  Socratic and Confucian discourses ................................................. 157

Section summary ................................................................. 161

III. Language as a Mediating Tool ............................................. 162

Survey and focus group results .............................................. 163
  Self-reported language proficiency ................................................. 163
  Language in online and face-to-face communication .......... 166

Language in Cathy’s online course ........................................... 171
  Comparison of word frequency between Cathy’s texts and that of her American classmates 171
  Strategies of involvement and independence in Cathy’s posts ................................................. 174
  Other communication strategies employed by Cathy ................ 178

Section summary ................................................................. 182

IV. Balancing Multiple Discourses ............................................ 183

International students’ culture in the US classroom ............. 184

Learning in the midst of cross-cutting discourses: Cathy’s case 190
  Ideology ................................................................. 190
  Socialization ............................................................ 195
  Forms of discourse ......................................................... 199
  Face systems ............................................................. 201
New vision of teaching and learning................................. 204
Role of a student......................................................... 204
An instructor’s role....................................................... 206
Role of technology in teaching and learning.................... 207

Chapter Summary.......................................................... 211

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Implications............................ 213

Summary of the Study..................................................... 213

Summary of Findings...................................................... 214

Host academic discourse............................................... 215
  Individualistic, low power distance and low context culture................................. 215
  Learner-centered pedagogical practices......................................................... 216
  Mainstream-centric but open to multicultural content...................................... 218

Native academic discourse (Cathy’s case).......................... 219
  Collectivistic, high power distance and high context culture.......................... 219
  Teacher-centered pedagogical practices......................................................... 221

Learner........................................................................... 222
  Experiencing conflicts of identity.................................................. 222
  Gaining membership in a new discourse....................................................... 223
  Acquiring new content knowledge, skills and psychological tools.................... 223
  Learning in a non-native language......................................................... 225
  Learning online and on campus......................................................... 226

Shifting epistemologies.................................................. 227

Implications for Theory and Practice.................................. 228

Chapter Summary.......................................................... 233

References...................................................................... 235

Appendices..................................................................... 264

Appendix A: Survey.......................................................... 264
Appendix B. Matching Survey Items to Factors and Categories…….. 268

Appendix C: Interview Questions for Amanda…………………… 270

Appendix D: Online Interview Questions for Cathy (Second Round)… 271

Appendix E: Interview Questions for Cathy's Online Instructor…….. 273

Appendix F: Guiding Questions for the Face-to-Face Interview with Cathy………………………………………………………………………………… 274
List of Tables

Table 1  The Total Number of International Students and a Number of Students Who Took Online Courses in the Period between Fall-2008 and Fall 2009…………………………………………………………………………… 74

Table 2  Data Collection Timeline………………………………………………… 78

Table 3  Frequency of Pronouns in Cathy’s and her American Peers Online Discussion Posts…………………………………………………………………………… 122

Table 4  Frequency of Words (Lemmas) Associated with Cathy’s and Her Peers’ Cultures……………………………………………………………………… 131

Table 5  Top 20 Frequently Used Words (Lemmas) in the Texts Posted by Cathy and Her 7 American Classmates…………………………………………… 173
# List of Figures

| Figure 1 | Research design ......................................................... | 65 |
| Figure 2 | Interconnections between data sources .................................. | 88 |
| Figure 3 | Chapter 4 sections ........................................................ | 102 |
| Figure 4 | The structure of section I in Chapter 4 ................................ | 103 |
| Figure 5 | Question 7 results ......................................................... | 104 |
| Figure 6 | Question 8 results ......................................................... | 104 |
| Figure 7 | Question 9 results ......................................................... | 105 |
| Figure 8 | The structure of Section II in Chapter 4 ................................ | 135 |
| Figure 9 | Question 20 results ......................................................... | 142 |
| Figure 10 | Question 21 results ......................................................... | 144 |
| Figure 11 | Question 23 results ......................................................... | 144 |
| Figure 12 | Question 24 results ......................................................... | 146 |
| Figure 13 | Question 25 results ......................................................... | 147 |
| Figure 14 | Question 26 results ......................................................... | 148 |
| Figure 15 | Question 27 results ......................................................... | 148 |
| Figure 16 | Question 22 results ......................................................... | 151 |
| Figure 17 | The structure of Section III in Chapter 4 ................................ | 163 |
| Figure 18 | Question 12 results ......................................................... | 164 |
| Figure 19 | Question 13 results ......................................................... | 165 |
| Figure 20 | Question 19 results ......................................................... | 165 |
| Figure 21 | Question 18 results ......................................................... | 166 |
| Figure 22 | Question 16 results ......................................................... | 167 |
| Figure 23 | The structure of Section IV in Chapter 4 ............................... | 184 |
| Figure 24 | Question 10 results ......................................................... | 185 |
| Figure 25 | Question 14 results ......................................................... | 186 |
| Figure 26 | Question 11 results ......................................................... | 188 |
| Figure 27 | Mind map for research findings: Balancing multiple discourses ................... | 215 |
| Figure 28 | Mind map for learner-centered pedagogical practices .................. | 217 |
| Figure 29 | Mind map for benefits and drawbacks of online learning ................. | 226 |
| Figure 30 | Shift in epistemologies ...................................................... | 227 |
Chapter One: Introduction

Background of the Problem

While most universities and colleges see their native citizens as their primary target audience, growing world population mobility and interest in higher education increase the number of students who wish to obtain a tertiary degree from a foreign institution. It is predicted that by the year 2025, there will be about 8 million international students as compared to 2 millions in 2004 (Albach, 2004; Bohm, Davis, Meares & Pearce, 2002). Currently most of those students – over 723 thousand students - are heading to the US making higher education one of the country’s largest service sector exports (Open Doors, 2011). Clearly, US universities and colleges are interested in attracting these students, but what do they do to make their learning experiences successful? How welcoming is the learning environment for this group of students? And what happens when an international student gets deprived of in-person interaction with members of learning communities, i.e., when she/he is engaged in distance (online) learning?

While the value and legitimacy of online education have yet to be accepted, a growing number of US universities and colleges acknowledge its key role in their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2005) and continue expanding their distance learning programs. Even though “getting students from new geographic regions or new markets of students” is ranked as the reason #1 why US higher education institutions engage in online learning (Schiffman, Vignare & Geith, 2007), only a few US universities go global and design online programs specifically for international audiences. Moreover, many of those educational institutions who made attempts to launch their distance
programs in the global market, experienced lack of enrollment (MacLeod, 2006) and had to step back and target mostly in-home students. Consequently, most online programs and courses offered by American universities and colleges are designed for in-country usage. Even though several elite universities, such as M.I.T., Harvard and Stanford, have recently launched new projects and plan to offer massive open online courses (MOOC) to the global audience (Lewin, 2012, May 2), there seems to be no indication that these experimental courses for mass consumption will factor in such complicated variable as students’ culture.

Statement of the Problem

The world’s preoccupation with globalization and internationalization impact the short-term and long-term strategies of higher education institutions around the globe (DeBry, 2001; OECD, 2004), but it seems to have little effect on most American institutions (Marginson & Wende, 2007). While US universities and colleges are happy to accept foreign students and scholars, they are expected to conform to the norms of the American academy (Altbach, 2005, Marginson & Wende, 2007). The “sink or swim” policy seems not to change much with the rapid growth of online learning and its movement towards transnationalism, which have significantly increased the possibilities of cross-cultural interactions.

Bridging cultures in the context of computer-mediated learning environment could be as complex as the concept of culture itself. However, not attempting to do so might prove to be detrimental for successful learning to happen. The dominance of a single culture may result in miscommunication (Reeder, Macfadyen, Roche, & Chase, 2004) or missed communication (Ware, 2005), ineffective strategies of communication

---

1 Here and later “American” is used to refer to the United States of America.
with the instructor (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005), dissatisfaction with teamwork (Thomson & Ku, 2005), high anxiety and stress (Pan, Tsai, Tsai, Tao, & Cornell, 2003), and confusion with course requirements and unmet course expectations (Shattuck, 2005). Consequently, American-centric online (and traditional) courses may lead to silencing, isolation and marginalization of students whose background is different from that of the dominant culture.

On the other hand, statistical data show a steady increase in the number of international students who study at US universities and colleges (Open Doors, 2011), most of whom successfully graduate. Studies demonstrate that international students may show academic engagement and achievements comparable to, or even surpassing accomplishments demonstrated by their American peers (Zhao, Kuh & Carini, 2005).

Thus research shows that while international students, specifically those studying online, may experience significant challenges when studying in a class designed by American instructors for in-home consumption, they are still able to succeed and gain desirable learning outcomes in the classroom that may not be particularly sensitive to their cultural background. The questions then arise: what are these students’ learning experiences and what and/or who may help them succeed in the classroom that targets local students? There is a dearth of research studies that address these questions and enable researchers and practitioners understand how an international student manages to survive and thrive in the academic discourse that is significantly different from her/his native discourse. Insufficient effort has been made to investigate the topic from multiple perspectives and to obtain a close-up contextualized view over how a student learns a new academic discourse and what impact such study may have on her/his subsequent
coursework. Previous research, further discussed below in Chapter 2, suggests the need for investigations that would involve a variety of qualitative and quantitative data so as to situate experiences of an individual student within a broader context.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

This study aimed at exploring learning experiences of international students in fully online courses offered in a US university. The primary goal was to examine the interplay of host and native cultures in an online learning environment and study its effect on international students’ learning experiences.

It was the intention of the present study not only to obtain a broad perspective over the matter but, what was more important, to gain a close-up view over the effects of native culture on the learning experiences of a particular international student studying in a US university. Therefore the research was designed as a two-stage mixed methods study. For obtaining information on trends and for gaining an initial pool of participants, the first stage of the investigation involved a survey of online international students and follow-up online interviews with selected survey participants. This stage singled out one particular case - a female graduate student from China who chose to be called Cathy. The selection of Cathy as the key informant led to the second stage – s case study that involved the collection of data derived from interviews with Cathy, her peers, her online instructor, and gathered from Cathy’s reflective journals and archived logs of the online graduate course that she took while residing in her native city of Shanghai.

The case study enabled focusing on “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 2003, p.2) and obtaining “specific language and voices about the topic” (Creswell, 2003, p. 22) while providing a close-up examination of the interplay
between individual and contextual factors, which were combined to serve the purposes of the study. The case study approach also aimed at avoiding stereotyping and unwarranted generalizations that could be made about culture groups in research that concerns cross-cultural issues (Hewling, 2005). On the other hand, the survey and follow-ups that involved other international students enabled the research to situate Cathy’s case within a broader perspective and to compare her experiences with that of other students, thus highlighting her individual and culture-specific traits.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How might international students’ affiliations to their native academic discourse and culture affect their learning experiences in an online course in the United States and how, specifically, is one student affected over time?

2. What were the experiences of a Chinese student in integrating previous learning experiences within the Chinese academic discourse on her learning experiences within the academic discourses she encountered in the United States?

The study employed a mixed research paradigm where qualitative methods dominated quantitative. The content analysis of the qualitative data from interviews, reflective journals, and online course logs was complimented by the descriptive statistics (raw numbers and percentages) derived from the survey. Moreover, quantitative methods of corpus-based linguistics were used to analyze and compare discussion posts of Cathy and her American peers, which highlighted students’ linguistic choices and showed how students interacted within an online course as well as how cultural affiliation affected their choice of words and linguistic patterns. Such a “methodological pluralism” (Burke
Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.14) served the purposes of triangulation and ensured the rigor and trustworthiness of the study.

**Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions were adopted.

*International students* generally refer to students who are not citizens or permanent residents of the country where they study. This study involved only those international students who were officially enrolled into a program at a US university and who took online courses designed for students of this university. Participants of the study might have resided in the US or outside of it.

*A fully online course* refers to a course taught via the Internet and which involves no on-campus classes. The study was conducted at the university campus that adopted Blackboard Learning System™ as its primary learning management system.

*Culture*, being widely used (and abused) concept, has many definitions all of which inspire argument and disagreement (Agar, 2006). Scollon and Scollon (2001) view culture from the social constructivist position and study it as a social phenomena focusing on how people make meaning when interacting with other members of a social community and how they organize their “internal sense of cohesion and membership” (p. 140). This understanding of culture differs from the so-called “essentialist” view which equates culture to “values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior that are learned through our experience and environment” (Reeder, Rocher & Chase, 2004). Based on the “essentialist” view of culture, G. Hofstede and E. Hall developed their nationally-driven constructs, i.e., theories in which a concept of culture is applied to a nation (country). This study uses both approaches to examine the influence of culture from both the
individual construction of cultural meaning, and the more global approach of Hofstede and Hall. More detailed discussion of the concept of culture is included in Chapter 2.

Discourse generally refers to a spoken or written text studied within its relation to extralinguistic factors such as pragmatic, sociocultural, or psychological factors (Lingvisticheskij encyclopedicheskij slovar, 2002). Discourse becomes a unit of analysis in research that focuses on communication and involves the study of hows and whys conversational partners (also referred to as interlocutors) engage in verbal and nonverbal exchange of communication codes in a given context. The current study focused on sociocultural factors that effect communication between a student and an instructor and among students in a fully online US course. Scollon and Scollon’s (2001) discourse approach to the study of intercultural communication, described in more details in Chapter 2, was utilized as one of the research methods.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is situated within the sociocultural paradigm, pioneered by the Russian psychologist L. Vygotsky (1978, 1981, 1982, 1991, 1994) and later extended by other scholars including R. Scollon and S. W. Scollon who proposed a discourse approach to the study of intercultural communication (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). The sociocultural theoretical framework, which emphasizes the importance of social and contextual factors and underlines the significance of culture in communication, enabled the research to focus on the learning experiences of a specific student and to study the affect of social environment and culture on interactions within a classroom.
While individual- and context-oriented sociocultural theories provided a magnifying lens for researching international students’ learning experiences, the nationally-driven theories developed independently by G. Hofstede and E. Hall situated the phenomenon within a broader context of national cultures offering the big picture of cross-/inter- cultural communication. These constructs were instrumental for comparing Cathy’s experiences with those one would expect to find among students with backgrounds as her own. Such a comparison was of significant importance for revealing Cathy’s affiliation to the Chinese culture while also highlighting her uniqueness as an individual in a specific context.

The ideas derived from both frameworks enabled the formulation of six theoretical foundations on which the study was carried out:

Foundation #1: Cultures differ in dimensions of cultural variability (Hofstede, Hall).

Foundation #2: Communication is interpersonal rather than intercultural but ideological positions of culture affect interpersonal communication. Viewing communication outside of its unique situation (context) may lead to stereotyping and oversimplification (Scollon and Scollon).

Foundation #3: Human beings from their birth are exposed to environmental stimuli that are mediated by culture-specific tools. Therefore psychological functions and tools they internalize in the process of informal socialization and formal education may differ from culture to culture (Vygotsky).
Foundation #4: All learning is social and social interaction is essential for the learning process. Interlocutors may have different understanding of how social interaction happens due to previous socialization and education experience (Vygotsky).

Foundation #5: Most psychological tools are language-based and language is inherently ambiguous. Conversations that involve interlocutors whose native languages differ are prone to misunderstandings and misinterpretations (Scollon and Scollon).

Foundation #6: Each person belongs to several discourse systems that affect her or his sense of identity and membership. This may require assuming multiple faces and may complicate a person’s (learning) experiences (Scollon and Scollon).

A detailed discussion of the theoretical framework is provided in Chapter 2.

Significance of the Study

There are two major reasons why US universities and colleges need to be concerned with needs of online international students. The first reason is purely pragmatic: international students increase revenue (Bohm, Davis, Meares, & Pearce, 2002; Darrup-Boychuck, 2002). In 2010, this group of student population brought over $21 billion dollars to the US economy (Open Doors, 2011) and considering the global demand in tertiary education, the number of foreigners willing to spend their money for prestigious and highly appraised American education is likely to grow. Moreover, the global e-learning market is predicted to reach $107.3 billion by 2015 (Global Industry Analysts, 2010) and the US universities are certainly interested in obtaining their share of this market.

American universities, however, are not alone in their desire to export higher education: the US has to compete with Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand,
European countries, as well as new players on the educational market – Singapore, South Korea, and China (Australia’s Competitors, 2005; McNeill, 2008; Romizowski, 2008). If it is true that lack of cultural sensitivity is one of the reasons why some e-learning institutions failed to attract international students (Marginson & Wende, 2007), then it becomes apparent why studying the needs of this group of learners is in the interests of educational institutions who care about their revenues.

Money matters, however, are not the only rationale that one has to keep in mind when weighing the significance of the issue under discussion. The second reason to attend to learning interests of international students lies within the domain of such concepts as equality, multiculturalism, diversity and democratization. Distance education in its latest online format theoretically provides access to education to anyone and anywhere. However, “given the persistent international digital divide and the potential for the host institutions and languages to be those of wealthy, industrialized countries, international online distance higher education (IODHE) fits into the global marketplace in ways that do not always reflect the “equal access to existing knowledge and information” predicted in Tom Friedman’s flat world” (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009).

The issue of cultural diversity has long been discussed in the US academy but with different emphasis. US studies on multiculturalism mostly refer to culturally diverse American students and explore needs of American minorities – women, non-white, or low-income groups (see, for example, Lai & Ball, 2004; Rasmussen, Nichols & Ferguson, 2006; Schoorman, 2002). While such studies provide valuable insight into the issue of equality, they often overlook the problems of those students whose individual culture is even further from that of white, Anglo-Saxon, American born and raised,

---

middle class populations. Not only do international students have to conform to norms and traditions of culture dominant in a host country, but they also have to acquire new skills and knowledge in a foreign language, sometimes new technologies and software, often with little awareness of those culture norms and traditions and occasionally without adequate technical support. To complicate the issue, internationals students should always check if they comply with immigration laws, which after September 11 have been less friendly to internationals students (Carnevale, 2005; Harley, 2001).

There is widespread agreement among distance education scholars that courses need to provide safe spaces for learners of different cultural backgrounds by avoiding ethnocentric course and program design (Bentley, Tinney, & Chia, 2005), escaping the hegemony of the dominant culture and using online education for a dialogue across differences (Lauzon, 1999). However, there are only a few studies that describe how to design an online course sensitive to needs of those international students who lack experience in American traditions of learning and teaching (Shattuck, 2005). There is hardly any systematic qualitative or quantitative research that provides insight on what roles peers and instructors might play in learning experiences of international students. Very little is known about how international students meet challenges and overcome difficulties they face in American-centric online classes. No study has investigated how newly adapted knowledge and skills of learning in a US online classroom may affect international student’s experiences in a traditional face-to-face classroom or how this new knowledge may affect the student’s views of her/his native academic discourse and culture. This study addresses these deficiencies.
To date, a large number of cross-cultural studies are based on Hall’s and Hofstede's essentialist view of culture. However, “ideas associating culture with nations or ethnicities are not without value, but focusing on these ideas is of limited usefulness in examining the interpersonal, intercultural interaction in the online classroom” (Hewling, 2005). There is dearth of research that study the topic on both levels – national and individual, displaying learning experiences of a specific international student as a product of both individual traits and national culture.

Thus the present research focuses on questions that are of significant importance for university administrators, policy makers, practitioners, scholars, and, of course, international students themselves. This two-stage mixed methods study that involved a variety of data sources and methods of analysis was an attempt to draw attention to the “dreadfully neglected” (Zawacki-Richter, Backer, & Vogt, 2009, p.21) international aspect in online education and offer insights that might potentially help to attract international students to US online programs while assisting practitioners in designing courses where these students would feel welcome and be able to receive the support that meets their academic and personal needs.

Limitations

As the case study was the most significant source of data, the research findings have limited generalizability to larger populations. The case’s key informant, Cathy, is an adult international student from China majoring in language education and her learning experiences in one fully online graduate course offered in a large research university may not be generalized to other educational contexts or to other students. Cathy’s very high level of English language proficiency, apparent interest in the system of education,
mature and hard-working personality may make her case somewhat atypical for non-native speakers of English who take US online and face-to-face courses. However, survey results coming from 11 other international students and online interviews with selected survey participants gave Cathy’s experiences a broader perspective and contributed to the validity and transferability of the study results. Moreover, the study enabled expanding and generalizing sociocultural theories, thus demonstrating the analytical generalizability (Yin, 2003) of the study.

A participant selection bias might have also served as a limiting factor. The research involved a self-selected group of participants who provided data in English language mostly via the Internet (except for a face-to-face interview with Cathy). This might have attracted those students who had higher language proficiency levels and who were also more proficient in technologies than an average international student. Proficiency in language and technology skills have been linked to international students’ perception of and satisfaction with online courses (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009; Thomson & Ku, 2005; Zhang & Kenny, 2010), and therefore this study’s findings might be partly attributed to these participants’ abilities.

Another possible limitation of this study might have occurred due to the fact that the collection of data for the case study directly involved my research advisor who taught an online course taken by the case study main informant – Cathy. The research advisor was aware of the purpose of the study, which might have affected her replies to interview questions. However the collection of data for Cathy’s case started only after the course was over, which excluded the observer effect and should not have affected the behavior of those who participated in the course – Cathy, her American peers and the instructor.
On the other hand, the fact that I studied the course of the instructor who was my professor and research advisor might have biased my evaluation and interpretation of the course. Data triangulation, particularly the involvement of the survey and follow-up interviews, should have minimized my personal biases.

The research was conducted by a single researcher and investigator triangulation was not used, which possibly limited analytic validity of the study. Being neither a Chinese nor an American, I had to rely on research data, previous research findings and some personal experience when interpreting data related to culture. However several years of living and studying in the US as an international student provided me with a unique perspective of an insider, which apparently increased sensitivity to the subject matter and helped to establish trust-based relations with study participants. Moreover the feedback of an experienced peer reviewer, as well as a continuous guidance and comments for early and later drafts by the research advisor and two other dissertation committee members, should have contributed to the credibility, dependability and confirmability of the research.

**Summary**

The growing demand for higher education around the globe and the increasing supply of online programs offered by many educational institutions in the USA and other countries result in multicultural classrooms where students might be divided by hundreds of miles, several hours in time zones and years of growing up and being acculturated in cultures that have little in common. What happens in these classes and how to accommodate the needs of culturally diverse students warrant an in-depth and prolonged investigation.
The purpose of this study was to explore the learning experiences of international students in a large US research university with the primary focus on the experiences of a graduate student from China. The research investigated how these learning experiences were affected by the student’s native culture and more specifically her affiliation to the Chinese academic discourse. The sociocultural paradigm, complemented by nationally-driven constructs of G. Hofstede and E. Hall, was employed to build the theoretical foundation of the study. Designed as a two-stage mixed methods study, the research involved the collection and analysis of mostly qualitative data, which was supplemented by quantitative methods of data collection and analysis, specifically a survey and a corpus-based linguistic analysis of textual data. While the study design might have limited the research findings’ generalizability, the employment of a mixed research paradigm, as well as the researcher’s position of an insider, contributed to the transferability and validity of this study.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Theoretical Perspective

This study draws on the sociocultural theoretical framework which underscores the importance of social and contextual factors and emphasizes the centrality of culture in communication. The research is particularly informed by works of the prominent Russian psychologist L. Vygotsky, and also by contemporary American scholars R. Scollon and S. W. Scollon who developed and applied a discourse approach to intercultural communication. The sociocultural paradigm enabled the research to focus on experiences of a specific international student placed in a particular learning environment. The study centered on the social relationships within the given context and paid close attention to the roles that peers and instructors might play. Such attention to contextual and social factors provided perspectives on the affects of previous learning experiences within one’s own native academic discourse on the experiences within the US classroom.

The research journey, however, started with the nationally-driven constructs associated with two prominent figures – G. Hofstede and E. Hall, whose ideas have been instrumental in developing a solid foundation for understanding dimensions on which cultures may differ. This understanding was of particular significance for comparing learning experiences of a given international student, Cathy, with those one may expect to find among students with similar cultural background, thus highlighting both Cathy’s uniqueness and her affiliation to the Chinese academic discourse and Chinese culture in general.
The selected theoretical framework, which draws primarily on sociocultural theories but does not ignore nationally-driven constructs, manifested itself in the design of the study. The Cathy’s case study provided data for the detailed examination of social and contextual factors, while the survey and follow-up interviews were used to gain information on general trends and situating Cathy’s case within a broader perspective. Combined data made it possible to answer research questions that required both broad and deep research efforts.

This chapter provides a detailed description of the research theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 1. It also reviews theoretical and empirical studies related to the current research. Because of the complexity of the concept of culture, the literature review starts with the discussion of the multiple interpretations of this concept followed by the description of culture dimensions as given in nationally-driven constructs. I then focus on the sociocultural learning theory developed by L. Vygotsky and his followers. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the Scollon and Scollon's discourse approach to the study of intercultural communication. I then review previous studies that examined cross-/inter-cultural interactions in a variety of education settings and focus on learning experiences of online international students in US higher education institutions, as well as experiences of other students whose culture was different from the dominant course culture. More specifically, I draw attention to studies that describe how international students interact with their instructors and peers and how technology may affect their online learning experiences.

**Defining culture.** As suggested earlier, the concept of culture, which is heavily utilized in many disciplines, causes a good deal of argument and disagreement (Agar,
While some studies adopt “essentialist” view of culture found in Hofstede (1986, 1998) and Hall (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 1990) who equate culture to “values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior that are learned through our experience and environment” (Reeder et al., 2004, p.89), other studies, including this one, tend to base their understanding on social constructivist views, such as that adopted by Scollon and Scollon (2001) who study culture as a social phenomena and focus on how people make meaning when interacting with other members of a social community and how they organize their “internal sense of cohesion and membership” (p. 140). Most scholars now view culture not so much as a collection of tangible and visible aspects of the society (clothes, songs, or dances) but they rather focus on symbolic and intangible culture that has to do with how members of a culture group interpret and react to the world (Banks, 2010).

In the context of education, it is appropriate to talk about multiple cultures involved in the development and use of a learning unit. Collis (1999) distinguishes the cultures of the institution, the subject disciplines, the instructors, and the learners. In the context of online learning, this list could also be expanded by the culture of technology (cyberculture). The interplay between these cultures determines how culturally loaded the course is and how culturally sensitive the learning process is meant to be.

Even though one may speak of individual culture and study the culture of one person, it is what one shares or does not share with other people that inspires more scholarly interest. An individual may belong to multiple culture groups based on such factors as race, nationality, gender, age, social class, or religion. While membership in a culture group (or groups) does not determine behavior, it makes certain types of behavior more probable (Banks, 2010). It is on this expectation of shared behavior patterns, that G.
Hofstede and E. Hall developed their highly acclaimed and widely used nationally-driven constructs.

**Dimensions of culture in nationally-driven constructs.** Hofstede, who defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind” (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p.4), argues that cultural differences are based on differences in patterns of thinking, feeling and acting which are established in childhood and relatively constant. Based on extensive quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, which involved more than 50 countries, Hofstede has identified five dimensions on which one culture differs from the other(s): 1) collectivism versus individualism, 2) large versus small power distance, 3) masculinity versus femininity, 4) strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance, and 5) long term versus short term time orientation.

In **collectivist** cultures, a person belongs to a tight “in-group(s)” which expect(s) his loyalty and provide(s) him protection. **Individualism** puts emphasis on personal interests and interests of immediate family; it values freedom and self-respect (Hofstede, 1986). Students coming from different cultures are expected to have different motivation to learning, willingness to critically assess someone else’s work, openness to innovations, access and distribution of information (Tylee, n.d.). For example, for the US students, who come from an individualist society, motivation is understood in terms of personal satisfaction and individual success, while Chinese students arguably seek education to fulfill obligations to families and societies (Thomson & Ku, 2005).

**Power distance** refers to “the extent to which the less powerful persons in the society accept inequality in power and consider it as normal” (Hofstede, 1986, p. 307). In high power distance cultures, power is centralized and organization hierarchy in society
status distribution is accepted. In low power distance cultures, hierarchies are flatter and differences in status are less visible. In the learning context, this translates into teacher-student relationships: the teacher could be perceived as either a sage whose expertise and power is not questioned or an equal partner whose knowledge and opinion could be challenged and whose dominance in the classroom is far from absolute (Neuliep, 2009). Students from low power distance cultures would be more critical and opinionated, while those from high power distance would prefer to agree showing respect (Thomson & Ku, 2005).

*Masculine* cultures strongly differentiate traditional gender roles (masculine assertiveness and competitiveness versus feminine tenderness and care), while feminine cultures do not put these roles in opposition assuming that both genders can be caring and tender. Tylee (n.d.) suggests that this culture dimension may determine if an online environment exhibits traditional gender roles or not, which impacts the nature of online collaboration and cooperation.

*Uncertainty avoidance* refers to the degree of tolerance for ambiguity in relationships and organizational structures. Cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance tend to create formal rules and rituals and organize structures in institutions and relationships. In such cultures, students seek a structured learning environment and expect to be rewarded for precision in problem solving. In cultures with weak uncertainty avoidance, relationships are not so formalized and ritualized; students are encouraged to perform independently and find original problem-solving paths (Hofstede, 1986).

The fifth dimension – *time orientation* – was added to the previous four after a study that utilized an instrument designed from an eastern background by M. H. Bond
It was found that societies whose cultures could be traced back thousands of years, such as Asian countries, have long-term time orientation. They value age, experience, hard work, patience and perseverance. Students who grew up in such cultures will place an emphasis on acquiring information, practicing skills, and achieving results rather than expressing opinion and seeking truth as it is the case with students who come from cultures with short-term orientation (Tylee, n.d.).

Along with Hofstede’s five dimensions, investigation of cultural differences is often based on E. Hall’s differentiation between low context and high context cultures (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 1990). According to his theory, cultures differ in communication styles which depend on the extent of mutually understood information. In low context cultures the interlocutors share little common information and therefore unambiguous oral or written utterances are required for successful communication to happen. Communication style in low context cultures is described as direct, explicit, and open.

In high context cultures, shared background information allows the interlocutors to understand each other without verbalizing or writing all information; the message is conveyed not only through words but through situation, behavior and para-verbal cues recognized by members of the culture group. High context communication is implicit, reserved and strives to maintain harmony (Würtz, 2005). The former type of culture is referred to as “contract culture”, whereas the latter - as “relationship culture” (Morse, 2003).

It is important to point out that the dimensions of cultural variability should not be seen as opposites, i.e., for example, one should not contrast individualistic cultures to
collectivistic. Rather cultures should be examined as varying in magnitude by degree in a
given variable: one culture could be characterized as high in collectivism and low in
individualism (Neuliep, 2009). Moreover, one may find both traits in one culture co-
existing: what might be characteristics of one subgroup may not be characteristic to
another subgroup within one national culture. For example, women may be higher in
collectivism than men in a culture that overall scores high in individualism (such as the
US), which has been very well illustrated in D. Tannen’s studies (see, for example,

Thus, recent studies emphasize the variability of culture dimensions within one
national culture. While Hofstede’s or Hall’s theoretical frameworks allow scholars to
compare nations on a number of dimensions, they are found to be not of much help when
researching collaboration among a limited number of multicultural group members in a
given context: “As anything other than a generalized derivative, the individual disappears
in an approach that uses the nation as a determinant of culture and thus of online
behavior” (Hewling, 2005, para. 10). However, ignoring these constructs might also be
counterproductive. In the current study ideas developed by G. Hofstede and E. Hall found
their most valuable application on the interpretation stage when learning experiences of
Cathy, the key informant, had to be compared with experiences that might have been
expected from learners with similar background.

The research, however, showed that to carry out a small-scale in-depth study of
the learning experiences of particular international students, specifically for the study of a
single case experiences, the nationally-driven framework used in isolation might not be
as useful. A sociocultural framework was found to be most appropriate for focusing on
individual learning experiences and the roles that peers and instructors may play in these experiences. Rooted in the theory developed by Russian psycholinguist L. Vygotsky, the sociocultural view of the role of culture in learning enables researchers to conduct small-scale qualitative studies that consider the context of communication, thus paying close attention to the interaction of contextual and individual factors.

**Sociocultural framework: Vygotskian ideas.** Vygotsky, a key figure in the *Sociocultural Theory of Mind* (Swain & Deters, 2007), believed that the development of the human mind could be understood through the study of human culture and history (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky attributed to culture an essential role in human development and argued that the perception of reality, as well as knowledge, is *mediated* by the society. Culture, in its turn, was believed to be “the product of social life and human social activity” (Vygotsky, 1986, p.168). Thus, Vygotsky intertwined learning with the concept of culture and social activity.

Vygotskian ideas, put forward in Russia decades ago, have recently been widely used by Western scholars and educators. More often than not they are used in application to the education of young children and adolescents, as it was intended by Vygotsky himself and his Russian followers (A. Luria, A. Leontiev, P. Galperin, etc.) many years ago. However, Vygotskian concepts, such as the notion of the zone of proximate development (ZPD), are gradually finding their place in adult education (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008), though one may hear strong voices of scholars who are cautious about multiple (mis)interpretations and misapplication of Vygotskian ideas (see, for example, a collection of articles in Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, and Miler (Eds.). (2003). While in this study a Vygotskian framework is applied to adult education, it is important to discuss his
major tenets within his theory of child development. As I will show later, these ideas are important and relevant for interpreting findings of this study.

Before going into details of Vygotsky’s framework, I should note that an attentive reader may find some parallels between Vygotskian ideas and those that appear in Activity Theory (AT), a conceptual framework currently actively used in social sciences. This study, however, was never conceived or designed within the AT framework. The similarities between the two frameworks can be understood if one looks at the roots of Action Theory that owe much to the sociocultural traditions of the Soviet psychology where Vygotsky played the key role. While A. Leontiev is generally cited as the founder of AT (Kaptelinin, 2012), he certainly drew on the ideas developed by his colleague Vygotsky with whom he worked in the Moscow Institute of Psychology. Not surprisingly many concepts, such as “tool” and “mediation” are found in both frameworks.

Vygotsky distinguished two forces that affect a child’s development: “First, there is the line of natural development of behaviour which is closely bound up with the processes of general organic growth and the maturation of the child. Second, there is the line of cultural improvement of the psychological functions, the working out of new methods of reasoning, the mastering of the cultural methods of behaviour” (Vygotsky, 1994, para. 1). Focusing on the second line, Vygotsky argued that in each developmental period a child can operate with a group of psychological functions that are maturing, which eventually results in “the restructuring of the existing functions to the formation of a new structure” (Chailkin, 2003, p. 49); a child then transfers to a new developmental period.
The development of human mental (psychological) functions happens in mediated activity. Mediation (oposredovanie) is a key concept in the Vygotskian theoretical framework. He believed that mental functions appear twice: they are “first developed in the group when children interact and then they become psychological functions of an individual” (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 145). Thus in the Vygotskian theory, the roots of psychological functions lay outside of the individual, specifically in his/her interactions with other individuals and with other objects developed by the society he/she belongs to.

This Vygotskian view of the child development transformed the acquisition model of learning, which had long dominated in the field of education, into a mediation model (Kozulin, 2003).

Vygotsky and his followers distinguished two agents of mediation: a human mediator and symbolic mediators. The role of a human mediator might be assumed by any more knowledgeable ‘other’, though research usually focuses on how this role is performed by an instructor or parent and more rarely by a peer (see, for example, Hadegaard, 1990; Shumow, 1998; Wertsch & Stone, 1985). In this regard, Vygotsky’s classical concept of the zone of proximate development (ZPD) needs to be highlighted.

The ZPD is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). According to this concept, a learner, being in her/his zone of proximal development, can fail to perform independently, but can succeed when supported by a more knowledgeable other, i.e., usually by an instructor, parent or peer. External social interaction is therefore seen by Vygotsky as a key factor in human
development: “what was once social (occurring through interactions with people) becomes individual” (Levykh, 2008, p.86).

When discussing the ZPD, Vygotsky uses the term *podrazhanie*, which could be translated as imitating, copying, or following a model. In his theory *podrazhanie* is closely connected to understanding; a person (or an animal) is able to copy only those actions that he is able to comprehend. Vygotsky writes “By imitating actions he sees while collaborating (with peers) or under the guidance of an adult, a child is able to do much more and he does it consciously and independently. It is the difference between what a child can do under the guidance and with assistance of an adult and what a child can do independently is what defines his/her zone of proximate development”\(^3\) (Vygotsky, 1991, p. 385). Therefore, *imitation* in the Vygotskian theoretical framework is a sign of independent mental work rather than cheating or stealing someone’s ideas.

While Vygotsky was not the first and the only one to emphasize the importance of imitation in learning,\(^4\) it was he who recognized the value of imitation as *mental* and *independent* activity for learners of different age.

Literature that attempted to put Vygostkian ideas into practice discusses a number of forms, types and techniques of human mediation, even though “the parameters of human mediation turned out to be too numerous and context-dependent to allow for a simple classification” (Kozulin, 2003, p.19). Such offsprings of Vygotskian theory as reciprocal teaching (Palinsar & Brown, 1984), apprenticeship (Rogoff, 1990), scaffolding (Wood, 1999), and the Elconin-Davydov teaching approach based on the concept of

---

\(^3\) Here and later quotes from Vygotsky’s works published in Russian are translated by the author of this work.

\(^4\) Educational literature often discusses imitation in its relation to very young children (e.g., Nielsen & Blank, 2011), children with disabilities (e.g., Ingersoll & Lalonde, 2010) or language learners (e.g., Schimke, 2011 or Sasaki, 2010).
learning activity (Tzukerman, 2005) are among many approaches that have placed the Vygotskian mediation model into the center of their conceptual frameworks.

Besides human mediators, Vygotskian theory includes symbolic mediators that may also mediate interactions of the individual with environments. Such mediators could be primitive tools or higher order psychological tools. Among primitive tools Vygotsky discusses “casting lots, tying knots, and counting fingers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.127). Tying knots, for example, is an old and primitive mnemonic device used to support memory information retrieval. Higher order psychological tools include signs, symbols, texts, formulae, and graphic organizers, with writing being of utmost importance among symbolic mediators. These tools are different for each given culture and therefore which tools a child internalizes, which mental functions are emphasized, and eventually which ways a child develops depends on the culture in which he/she grows up.

Considering the importance of mediators on child’s performance, Vygotsky criticized traditional standardized methods of assessment, such as the IQ test, that may assess only what a child can do independently in a given moment and does not take into consideration cultural background of a child being tested. Vygotsky, as well as contemporary works (see, for example, Banks & Banks (Eds.), 2010), demonstrated that culturally insensitive assessment methods may result in a child being misdiagnosed as having learning disabilities. As an alternative to standardized testing, he proposed dynamic assessment where a child is assessed based on how she/he solves the problem that could be beyond her/his mental age with some kind of assistance, such as demonstration or leading questions (Vygotsky, 1998; Lidz & Gindis, 2003). Vygotsky experimentally showed that while the actual development of two given children could be
at the same level, their “developmental dynamics” could be different: one may have a larger ZPD revealing better progress in school and illustrating higher intellectual abilities. This confirmed his belief that “for the dynamics of intellectual development and for school success, the functions that have already ripened are not so important . . . as the functions that are being in the process of ripening” (Vygotsky, 1991, p. 402). The idea of dynamic assessment once again highlighted Vygotsky’s view of learning as a social process.

Thus Vygotsky focused on the importance of the social environment in child development, emphasized the mediating nature of all learning, while underscoring the necessity to assess the child’s development as dynamic in order to tailor learning according to her/his individual zone of proximate development. Even though in his framework of a student, learning is assisted by symbolic and human mediators, Vygotsky argued for the primacy of the student's individual actions in the process of education: “Strictly speaking, from the scientific point of view, no one is able to educate the other. In the final analysis, the child educates himself” (Vygotsky, 1991, p. 82). Vygotsky opposed the authoritarian pedagogics by insisting on placing child's interests, motives, and readiness in the bases of education letting the child carry out his own personal activity. The teacher’s role is to organize the student's interaction with the environment, to guide and control it. However, the experience is defined only by its social environment that becomes “the true lever of the educational process” (Vygotsky, 1991, p.83) and as such all learning is culture dependent.

Vygotskian ideas provided a major direction for the current study. Vygostky’s close attention to the individual development of the learner, the sociocultural
environment, and the roles peers and instructors may play in the learner’s development determined the focus of the research. The Russian psychologist’s ideas found their application in all stages of the study – including early stages of the study design and the later stages of analysis and interpretation.

**A discourse approach to intercultural communication: Scollon and Scollon's theoretical framework.** The nationally-driven constructs put forward by Hofstede and Hall and a theoretical paradigm developed by Vygotsky selected units of analysis that hardly intersect. In theories that compare national cultures, an individual person seems to disappear, while in Vygotsky’s framework, the individual comes to the foreground and shadows the national culture. R. Scollon and S. W. Scollon in their work “Intercultural communication: A Discourse approach” first published in 1995 were able to build a framework whereby culture and an individual person exist as one inseparable entity and as a single unit of analysis. Their study is the examination of “how the ideological positions of cultures or of discourse systems become a factor in the interpersonal communication of members of one group with members of other groups” (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p.139).

For the current study Scollon and Scollon’s ideas were of primary significance not only because they provided the framework where individual/contextual and national/cultural factors were placed in a shared coordinate system, but also because much of the empirical data that they used to develop their framework was based on the discussion of Western versus Eastern (Asian, oriental) cultures. This fact became very important when Cathy, a native of a Chinese city of Shanghai, became the key informant of the case study.
Scollon and Scollon (2001) argue that when communicating, people are in a state of uncertainty that comes from the inherent characteristics of any language—its ambiguity. The ambiguity comes not so much from poor knowledge of the language but rather from different knowledge of the world that results in different expectations about what a person might say in a given situation and eventually affects how we interpret the meaning of utterances: “. . . as long as nothing to the contrary leads us to expect differently, we assume that the world will operate the way we have come to expect it to operate” (ibid., p.11-12). Knowledge of the world is the result of formal education and, what is more important, socialization, the term the Scollons use to refer to the process of learning culture in informal contexts (from family members, peers, etc.). Thus, to resolve uncertainty a person has to make inferences based on language produced by the speaker and one’s own knowledge of the world. These inferences are fairly accurate if conversationalists share common background—history, culture, and life experience—but they might be quite inaccurate in intercultural communication. These scholars use illustrative examples to demonstrate that no matter how well two or more conversationalists speak a common language, they may still use this language in a way that may be interpreted by the hearer differently from what the speaker intended.

Among one of the most important differences in language use is the difference in the rhetorical strategy (or discourse pattern) that a speaker selects in a given situation. Scollon and Scollon differentiate deductive and inductive patterns in discourse. In the deductive discourse pattern the topic is given at the very beginning and supporting arguments follow them. In the inductive discourse pattern the main point (topic) is introduced at the end of the discourse as a conclusion from supporting arguments that
come at the beginning. Westerners tend to start the sentence with the topic, i.e., they often use the deductive rhetorical strategy. The inductive rhetorical strategy, which is more probable in Asian cultures, allows a period of warming up, checking the mood and position of the other participant (i.e., facework period) before the introduction of the topic. Such facework period is especially important for Asians when they are engaged in *inside interaction* with family members or people they have frequent and longstanding relations. *Outside interactions*, such as buying a ticket in the box office or calling a taxi, require little interpersonal negotiation and therefore do not need a period of facework.

Scollon and Scollon believe that an inductive discourse pattern is a carry-over from the hierarchical Confucian relationship where a person of a higher status (older, more educated, wealthier, higher in institutional position, etc.) has a right to introduce the topic no matter who started the interaction. This may explain why Asian students feel uncomfortable to introduce a topic unless they receive such a right from the person in a higher position, i.e., from an instructor. Even so the authors warn against simply characterizing inductive pattern as Asian and deductive as Western: “It is the difference in expectations on participant roles, or face, which leads to the frequently observed differences in the introduction of topics in Asian and western discourse” (ibid., p. 95). The use of different rhetorical strategies in a conversation may lead to miscommunication and failure to agree on the interpersonal relationship and as a result to mutual dissatisfaction and bitterness between conversationalists.

As seen above, one of the most important concepts that the Scollons discuss throughout their work is the concept of *face* defined as “the negotiated public image,
mutually granted each other by participants in communication event\(^5\) (ibid., p. 45). The Scollons explain that when meeting a person we make assumptions about his personality, status and how he wants to be perceived. We can make these assumptions about each other before communicating and negotiate face in the process of communicating.

The Scollons point to two sides of face: the need to be involved in communication and the need to show one’s independence and let the other side be independent.\(^6\) These seemingly paradoxical sides happen simultaneously. There are linguistic and non-linguistic strategies to demonstrate both aspects. Involvement is evident when a participant:

- pays attention and shows strong interest in other participant’s affairs (“I like your jacket”\(^7\));
- points out common in-group membership (“All of us here at…”);
- claims a common point of view, attitude, knowledge, empathy (“I know just how you feel. I had a cold like that last week”);
- demonstrates that she/he knows other participants’ wants and takes them into account (“I’m sure you will all want to know when this meeting will be over”);
- assumes or asserts reciprocity (“I know you want to do well in sales this year as much as I want you to do well”);
- is optimistic (“I think we should be able to finish that annual report very quickly”);

\(^5\) Scollon & Scollon (2001) explain that the Theory of politeness strategies of face was developed by Brown and Levinson (1978) and was later extended by Scollons in a number of their works (1981, 1983, 1994). The concept of “face”, which came from Chinese ideology, was first publicly discussed by Hsien Chin Hu who published his work in *American Anthropologist* back in 1944.

\(^6\) The terms “involvement” and “independence” in relation to face wants was first introduced by Tannen, 1984, 1989, 1990a (Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

\(^7\) Here and later the illustrative examples are taken from Scollon & Scollon (2001).
- uses first names (“Hi Jack”);
- exhibits volubility;
- speaks in the participant’s native language;

A participant shows the independent aspect of face when she/he:

- makes minimal assumptions about the wants, needs or interests of others (“I don’t know if you will want to send this by air mail or by speedpost”);
- gives the options not to do the act (“It would be nice to have tea together, but I’m sure you are very busy”);
- minimizes threat (“I just need to borrow a little piece of paper, any crap will do.”);
- apologizes (“I am sorry to trouble you, could you tell me the time?”);
- is pessimistic (“I don’t suppose you’d know the time, would you?”);
- dissociates hearer from the discourse (“This is to inform our employees that. . .”);
- states a general rule (“Company regulations require an examination. . .”);
- uses family names and titles (“Mr. Lee, there’s a phone call for you.”);
- exhibits non-communication or taciturnity;
- uses her/his own language or dialect.

The choice of language in the communication directly affects face negotiation: “If negotiations go on in the native language of one of the participants (or group of participants) that will tip the balance of involvement towards their side. It will give the other participants a sense of having their own independence limited, perhaps even unduly” (ibid., p.50).
Based on their discussion of face, Scollons put forward a *Politeness (or Face)* System that reflects “general or persistent regularities in face relationship” (ibid., p.52). Depending on the power difference (+P, -P) and on the distance between participants (+D/-D), Scollon and Scollon distinguish three major types of politeness systems:

1) difference politeness system (-P, +D) when participants consider each other to be on the same social level but are distant and use independent strategies (for example, university professors that met recently);

2) solidarity politeness system (-P, -D) when both sides feel equal in social status and feel close and use involvement strategies (for example, two close friends);

3) hierarchical politeness system (+P, +/-D) when participants see each other to be on different social status levels and the one of higher status uses involvement strategies while the one of lower status uses independence face strategies.

Scollon and Scollon conclude that “when two participants differ in their assessment of face strategies, it will tend to be perceived as difference in power” (ibid., p. 59).

Scollon and Scollon argue that in many Asian cultures hierarchical relationships practiced from birth and kinship become a central idea that governs thinking and behavior. Children grow up believing they are indebted to their parents, while parents are indebted to their children. Therefore actions are motivated by the need to pay the debt: a person learns and works well to bring credit to parents and to provide security to children. In other types of relationships Asians also tend to see themselves as members of a group and their actions are mediated by the group’s interests: group harmony is valued over individual welfare. Such cultures are high in collectivism and their members tend to
modify their communication behavior depending on who they are talking to – insiders (members of the same family, same social group, same culture) or outsiders. Western cultures, especially in North America, emphasize individualism and egalitarianism and “kinship relationships are seen as significant barriers to individual self-realization and progress” (ibid., p. 143). A person from a Western culture tends to value independence and care more about her/his own personal face needs. Her/his communication style does not differ much from situation to situation as the relationship is established and negotiated in each case.

Culture scholars warn against stereotyping and oversimplification when studying culture groups. They oppose a binary view when comparing two cultural groups like Americans and Chinese because each member of any culture belongs to a number of discourse systems based on age group, gender, occupation, SES, etc. A person may also belong to two intersecting (or cross-cutting, as Scollon and Scollon put it) discourse systems which may lead to conflicts of identity. Using ESL teachers as an example, the Scollons demonstrate that multiple memberships in discourse systems may result in:

1. **Conflicting ideologies:** “the purposes of the two (or more) systems pull the person toward different goals, and as he or she places a value on both sets of goals, it becomes a recurring problem to decide in any particular case which set of goals to emphasize” (ibid., p. 217).

2. **Fragmentation of socialization and experience:** a person’s previous education and experience might have different value weight in different discourses, which will force a person to choose which aspects of his background knowledge to employ in
a particular context. This constant need to make choices may result in the feeling of fragmentation.

3. *Dilemmas in choosing the most appropriate forms of discourse:* as different systems favor different discourses, a person will be faced with the need to select one or the other form of communication.

4. *Multiple faces:* different face relationships in different systems may force a person to build multiple faces.

As mentioned above, Scollon and Scollon’s framework served as a connecting link between nationally-driven constructs of Hofstede and Hall on the one side and Vygotskian individual-oriented ideas on the other side. The Scollon and Scollon’s discourse approach was most instrumental for the study of language used in classroom. Moreover, their detailed discussion of the conflict of identity that an individual may experience when two cultures intersect was highly valuable for directing the research attention to how an international student may feel when being placed in a new learning discourse. Because these scholars often illustrated theoretical points juxtaposing Western and Asian cultures, their works proved to be readily applicable to the current case study as it focused on learning experiences of a Chinese student in the US educational context.

**Theoretical foundations revisited.** As outlined in Chapter 1 and detailed in the above sections of this chapter, the theoretical framework of this study was built on the ideas developed and applied by the Russian psychologist L. Vygotsky, American scholars R. Scollon and S. W. Scollon, as well as on concepts put forward and tested by E. Hall and G. Hofstede. These ideas were synthesized and summarized in six theoretical foundations first provided in Chapter 1 and revisited below. These foundations are
chiefly based on sociocultural views as interpreted by Vygotsky and Scollon and Scollon. However, the idea that cultures (and people belonging to these cultures) may vary from each other based on a number of cultural dimensions was also found to be valuable for the current study.

The following six foundations provided theoretical lenses for review of previously done research, for designing the study, and for interpretation and discussion of findings.

Foundation #1: Cultures differ in dimensions of cultural variability (Hofstede, Hall).

Foundation #2: Communication is interpersonal rather than intercultural but ideological positions of culture affect interpersonal communication. Viewing communication outside of its unique situation (context) may lead to stereotyping and oversimplification (Scollon and Scollon).

Foundation #3: Human beings from their birth are exposed to environment stimuli that are mediated by culture-specific tools. Therefore psychological functions and tools they internalize in the process of informal socialization and formal education may differ from culture to culture (Vygotsky).

Foundation #4: All learning is social and social interaction is essential for the learning process. Interlocutors may have different understanding of how social interaction happens due to previous socialization and education experience (Vygotsky).

Foundation #5: Most psychological tools are language-based and language is inherently ambiguous. Conversations that involve interlocutors whose native languages differ are prone to misunderstandings and misinterpretations (Scollon and Scollon).
Foundation #6: Each person belongs to several discourse systems that affect her or his sense of identity and membership. This may require assuming multiple faces and may complicate person’s (learning) experiences (Scollon and Scollon).

The combination of the theories enabled the research to focus on individual and contextual factors that affect learning experiences while situating these experiences within larger contexts of national cultures. The design of the study reflected the selected theoretical framework when involved both a survey of international students and an in-depth case study of learning experiences of one of them. The involvement of Hofstede and Halls’ ideas determined the need to collect data that would involve students from different cultures and that would display them as representatives of their national culture. On the other hand, the sociocultural foundations necessitated the collection of data that would provide a close-up view of the relationship of the participants with their peers and instructors and of the contextual factors that formed the discourse of intercultural communication.

Culture in the Online Classroom: Review of Relevant Literature

Online classroom discourse. International students studying in the US simultaneously belong to two major discourse groups: they are students of an American university situated within the US cultural discourse system and they are citizens of their native country, i.e., they are members of their national discourse system. The American classroom discourse that online international students find themselves immersed in is often based on constructivist pedagogy that focuses on active engagement of students, development of their critical thinking skills, collaboration and partnership with peers and
instructors, sharing and co-construction of knowledge (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Oren, Mioduser, & Nachmias, 2002; Ruey, 2010).

Besides being constructivist in approach, an American online course carries characteristics of the US cultural discourse system. Particularly it reflects the culture of its developer and/or facilitator (instructor) and members of the learning community. In the case of a multicultural classroom, the culture of the majority will dominate. The dominant American culture, that is that of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASP), is described as an individualistic, uncertainty-oriented, and small power distance culture that exhibits low-context communication (Neuliep, 2009).

Meanwhile according to the Institute of International Education (IIE) supported by the US Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the majority of international students are coming from Asian countries. In 2010/2011 academic year the top 5 countries of origin were China (21.1%), India (14.4%), South Korea (10.1%), Canada (3.8%), and Taiwan (3.4%) (Open Doors, 2011). While Asian countries vary in different dimensions of culture, they are often placed on the opposite side of the continuum in relation to ‘western’ cultures and described as collectivist, high-context, large power distance and certainty-oriented cultures (Neuliep, 2009). This of course is a very broad generalization but it enables one to anticipate conflicts of identity when international students find themselves in the midst of cross-cutting discourse systems. Moreover, the American online classroom based on constructivist ideas may not be a learning format many international students have been exposed to in their native countries as seen, for example, in Wang (2007) who compared US, Korean and Chinese online classrooms, in Zhang and Kenny (2010) who conducted an exploratory case study
that involved graduate students from Japan and China, or as I know from personal experience studying in Russia.

In the constructivist classroom interaction with peers is encouraged or even required. Class or small-group discussions involve critical analysis of course readings and open exchange of ideas on course topics. Course activities are often based on team work and assessment may involve peer review and self-evaluation (Pelz, 2004, Pickett, n.d). These modes of learning require active involvement of a student and her/his extensive interaction with the course content, peers and an instructor. How does culture manifest itself in a highly interactive learning environment?

**Manifestation of culture in communication.** *Communication in a non-native language.* In the Vygotskian framework, most psychological tools a child acquires and uses in his/her development are language-based (Bodrova & Leong, 2003) and so are the assessment tools used to measure the development of students’ cognitive functions. As such, the learning process and assessment becomes more complicated when they are based on a language that is not native for students. Studies consistently demonstrate that many international students link their learning difficulties to the fact that they study in a foreign language. To keep up with discussions, write papers and do other class assignments, international students not only have to possess rich vocabulary, good command of grammar rules and be skillful in academic writing, but they also need to be aware of colloquialisms, set phrases, slang, culturally specific analogues and metaphors, as well as references to American (popular) culture (Bentley, Tinney, & Chia, 2005; Ciano, 2003; Ishikawa, 2002; McBrien, 2005; Shattuck, 2005, Tan, Nabb, Aagard, & Kim, 2010; Zhang & Kenny, 2010). In the virtual learning environment, these language
issues could be complicated due to lack of visual cues and immediate feedback. The online classroom shows “great potential for misreading communicative strategies such as turn taking, criticizing, apologizing, recasting, switching registers, etc.” (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009, p. 98).

Inadequate language skills and lack of understanding of communication rules may develop a fear of speaking, such as that described by a Shattuck’s (2005) interviewee:

Making the first step to join their [emphasis added] discussion needs some courage because you don’t know whether your words will hurt them or not, whether they will look down upon you or not only because your first sentence having a grammar mistake…you will see that American students will do their discussion freely while international students are very cautious and trying to meet the minimum required posts…and their posts’ formats are mostly formal, in good structure, and seldom colloquial. (pp. 153-154).

Language mistakes may be perceived as an obstacle for doing collaborative activities. In the study conducted by Zhang and Kenny (2010), a Japanese student reported: “I always worry about my English writing. My writing is not so good so other people might don't [not] want to work with me, especially for group assignments” (p.25). Apparently language inadequacies are seen as factors that lower the student status and prevent building a solidarity politeness (face) system (Scollon & Scollon, 2001), i.e., prevent establishing friendly equal partnership relationship with peers.

Language embedded discourse patterns may manifest themselves not only on the sentence level but also in longer paragraphs and whole texts. A study conducted by Krampetz (2005) demonstrated how these patterns affect academic writing skills of
Krampetz researched writing experience of on campus international students and found evidences in support of the notion of “contrastive rhetorics” started by R. Kaplan (1966) that states that languages may favor different underlying patterns when the text is composed: text written in Anglo-European languages select linear development, while texts in Asian languages may prefer less direct (“spiral”) development of thoughts when a writer comes to the main point at the end of the text; other languages may prefer other types of thought development (ibid.; see also Elizarova (2005) for discussion of language specific discourse types).

Thus studies demonstrate that language issues go far beyond struggles with foreign vocabulary and grammar and enter the realms of culture. Many contemporary scholars that focus on second language acquisition, such as C. Kramsch, M. Byram, and A. Ommagio Handley, advocate for integrating culture into the language classroom: “Cultural understanding must be promoted in various ways so that students are sensitive to other cultures and prepare to live more harmoniously in the target-language community” (Ommagio Handley, 1993, p. 77). However, they also demonstrate that learning culture in the language classroom is one of the most challenging tasks to fulfill and that not everyone shares the understanding of the importance of this task (Kramsch & Ware, 2004; Ommagio Handley, 1993). If this is indeed the case, international students who successfully pass a languages qualification exam, such as the TOEFL, may still struggle to keep up with the requirements set in an English-language-American-culture classroom.

*Rules of communication in class discussions.* The cultural aspect of language acquisition and usage involves learning and applying rules of communication accepted in
a target culture. Research consistently demonstrates that cultures may have different communication rules, which may concern what, how and to whom something could be said. In a qualitative case study of Chinese graduate students’ experiences and attitudes towards online learning, Thomson and Ku (2005) found that while American students could openly disagree with the author of required reading and their posts were often critical and opinionated in nature, their Chinese classmates preferred not to contradict. Graduate international (mostly Asian) students in Biesenbach-Lucas (2003) also seemed to find it inappropriate to challenge and criticize ideas; furthermore they may not have known appropriate scripts and formulas to do so. In support of that, critical discourse analysis of discussion postings conducted by June and Park (2003) revealed that international students tend to use ‘powerless’ language such as disclaimers, hedges and tag questions. Reluctance to confront others is also illustrated in Al-Harthi (2005) who studied Arab students. Dissimilar cultural norms and expectations, specifically lack of common understanding of what it means to be a student and how to carry out an online conversation in a given context, is also reported in Hewling (2005) who examined interaction among online Australian and non-Australian students, some of whom lived in North America, South East Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

Communicative behavior of some international students could also be affected by differences in age and gender. Shattuck (2005) reports that for one of her Korean interviewees “all interactions begin with an assessment of age and gender. Honor and deference are the basis of interacting with someone older. A sense of responsibility for offering something is the basis of interacting with someone younger.” (p. 165). Gender could be of great importance for establishing communication strategies for Muslim
students (Al-Harthi, 2005; Shattuck, 2005). Even though lack of physical appearance may be perceived as a way to increase participation of Muslim women in education, Al-Harthi’s study (2005) reveals that an Arab woman remains restricted by traditions of her culture and has to constantly monitor who she talks to online and even log off when a male student who knows her family joins a whole-group discussion. Similar findings were reported in Pan et al. (2003) who examined the pedagogical roots of graduate students from China and Taiwan. Their preliminary results showed the strong influence of Confucian pedagogy, where modesty, respect to elders and those of higher status and ability to listen is valued more than initiative, individual competitiveness, and ability to speak up openly and freely disregarding hierarchical system.

This is consistent with the Scollon and Scollon’s idea that membership in two or more discourse systems may result in the conflict of identity and the necessity to choose between dissimilar (or even opposing) forms of communication. The fact that international students often select the discourse system they learned in their home country aligns with Vygotsky’s paradigm in which informal socialization and the formal education that a person receives in his early stages of life is internalized and stays with a person throughout her/his life.

Sticking to one's ‘native’ discourse, however, may be problematic for adequate assessment of a student’s learning. In the constructivist classroom where expressing opinion, criticizing and arguing is a part of the regular learning process, reticent students that tend to agree with others online are not seen as exemplary students. In Zhang and Kenny’s study (2010) a student from Iran reported that she avoided posting as much as she could have because she was afraid of “looking stupid”. It shows that some
international students may exhibit low participation rate not that much because of low
cognitive abilities or lack of relevant thoughts, but because they try to avoid facing
embarrassing situations. Evidently, in the case of conflicting ideologies, international
students may be unable to assume multiple faces and tend to choose a ‘native’ form of
communication even when it may hurt their status as American students.

The need to fit into a new discourse system may also result in selectivity of
communication partners. In the Zhang and Kenny’s study (2010), a Chinese student first
chose to contact those classmates who had Chinese names or who looked Chinese on
their profile pictures. Having come to the understanding that many of those contacts did
not speak Chinese and had little knowledge of Chinese culture, she started
communicating with peers with similar opinions or those who posted in reply to her
discussion entries. Apparently, this student was looking for someone from her native
discourse as this helped negotiate face with less stress and enabled her more easily
establish communication of solidarity as described in Scollon and Scollon (2001). This
example reveals that the student consciously resisted speaking to those with conflicting
ideologies thus avoiding disharmony in a group.

Heavy emphasis on discussion participation in constructivist online classroom
seems to very well match US students' preferred learning styles and motivation to learn
while being in conflict with those of international students, specifically coming from
Asian countries. Thomson and Ku (2005) point out that

many Western students are verbal/analytic learners who are verbally oriented and
favour abstract analysis. In contrast, most Asian students are visual/holistic
learners who prefer to observe first and gain competence before performance.
Therefore, learning motivation varies between different cultures. In individualistic societies such as the US, students generally conceive motivation in terms of personal satisfaction, competition between individuals and individual success. In collectivist societies such as the Chinese students frequently seek learning largely as an obligation to their families and societies. Thus, students feel obligated to perform well and avoid the shame of the community (p. 35).

These conclusions echo Scollon and Scollon's observations of western-eastern dissimilarities.

Communication of peers that have differing discourse systems may result not only in miscommunication and dissatisfaction with the learning process but also in false assumptions and stereotyping of the ‘other’ culture group. Chen, Hsu, and Caropreso (2006) found that fast-paced responses of American students were perceived as a sign of aggressiveness by their Taiwanese counterparts, while Americans attributed Taiwanese students’ delayed participation in discussions to passivity and weakness.

**Team work.** While team projects may seem very well-suited for collectivist cultures, group work in American education discourse may not be what an international student may expect. In fact, many students new to the American system of education may not expect to have team projects in online classes at all. Wang (2007) states that online courses in Chinese institutions never require formal teamwork, South Korean universities rarely do so, while most American courses do involve small group activities. In Gan’s study (2009) students from mainland China and Hong Kong also showed very low use of social strategies, such as collaborative work on a class project outside of the class. A Chinese student in Shattuck’s study (2005) reported that team projects are rarely assigned
and have little value for assessment in their culture. Team work might also be an unthinkable learning activity for female students from the Middle East where religious beliefs prohibit them to work in a team with a male student with similar background due to restrictions in interaction between men and women (Shattuck, 2005).

Understanding how team work is conducted might also be specific to culture groups as illustrated in Chen et al. (2006) who studied American and Taiwanese graduate students working together within an American curriculum and course management system. They found that American group leaders divided work between group members and expected everyone to do their part of the work individually, while Taiwanese students seemed to prefer working together on the group assignment. Researchers identified here two dissimilar approaches to group work described in Ingram and Hathorn (2004): while Americans work *cooperatively*, i.e., they synthesize a final product from parts developed independently, Taiwanese work *collaboratively*, i.e., they assembly a learning product together. Variations and disagreement in understanding of task sharing and decision making between multicultural group of team members are also mentioned in Ishikawa (2002) and McLoughlin (1999).

In spite of difficulties associated with online multicultural team work, researchers generally agree on its value for relationship building and learning overall (Uzuner, 2009). Small groups of diverse cultural background are recommended as the best arrangement for peer-to-peer scaffolding and guidance (Thomson & Ku, 2005). Being a part of a group also seems to give students courage to approach instructors for assistance, thus neutralizing the power distance affect (Wang, 2007). At the same time researchers show the need to give sufficient time for relationship building before a team project takes off.
(Liang & McQueen, 1999) and insist on active instructor’s involvements in the process by means of providing clear team goals, assisting with establishing healthy team spirit, and resolving conflicts if such is needed (Wang, 2007).

Educational value of group work naturally finds its support in sociocultural theory. Vygotsky emphasized the importance of peers as “more capable others”. While Vygotsky talked about the value of peer interaction only in cases where one of the peers is more knowledgeable than the other, his followers argue that learning happens even if none of the peers possesses higher expertise: “the cooperation of equally inexperienced partners becomes the crucial proof of the nonadditive nature of human interaction, when the group result exceeds the sum of operations performed by all the participants” (Zukerman, 2003, p.194). In the multicultural classroom, this nonadditive effect of human interaction may be amplified by involvement of cultural capitals coming from two or more discourse systems, which supporters of multicultural education find most beneficial for learning (see, for example, Banks, 2010).

*Culturally embedded topics and references.* With few exceptions, the American classroom discourse generally focuses on topics relevant to American life and related to American culture. American-centric content selection may seem natural for a course designed for local students and it could be an important point of attraction for international students willing to immerse into American culture. However, international

---

8 The term *nonadditive* here is used as an opposite to *additive* to emphasize the value of learning with peers that results in the construction of new knowledge which is more than the sum of knowledge 1, knowledge 2,…. knowledge n. Zukerman (2003) uses this term to show that value of cooperation of equally inexperienced partners, emphasizing the value of group work should not be “reduced to the input of the expert” (p.194). Banks (2010), in his turn, talks about the need to go beyond the contribution and additive approaches to the integration of ethnic content (p.237-254) and advocates for the restructuring of the curriculum and practicing the transformative and the social action approaches. While the scholars use the terms *additive* and *nonadditive* in different contexts, it seems that both imply that the human interaction in general and the interaction in the classroom in particular may and should go beyond just *adding* knowledge and move to knowledge that is co-created and plays a transformative role.
students with limited previous exposure to American life may find it too overwhelming, challenging and frustrating when course topics have little relevance to their native discourses system and when their American peers and instructors use cultural references that complicate learning the course content.

In Shattuck’s study (2005), a Philippine student was unable to connect course content to her previous experience as only American case studies were presented. Frustration with cultural reference is also illustrated in Thomson and Ku (2005) who examined learning experiences of Chinese students. The presentation of the course material only from a US perspective was also found problematic in Krampetz’ study (2005) where an international student felt frustrated when the class discussed the politics of her native country not considering other viewpoints. In the same study another student felt appreciative of the opportunity to write about her own culture. These examples illustrate the need to anticipate and minimize potential clashes of cross-cutting discourses. Providing background information for cultural references might be a way to address this issue (Uzuner, 2009).

**Student-instructor interaction.** Both a student and an instructor come to class with a set of expectations of how student-instructor interaction should happen. Relevant literature generally discusses this in terms of a student-instructor power distribution and a role each party plays in the classroom. As discussed earlier, in online education a traditional teacher-centered approach, where an instructor assumes a dominating role of a “sage on the stage”, has not been generally accepted by the community of US online educators; instead a learner-centered approach based on constructivist philosophy has widely been supported and popularized. Moreover, because the US is a culture with low
power distance, the American instructor assumes a less authoritative position than it might be in cultures with high power distance and is more inclined to treat students as equal. As a result the role of an online American instructor may be that of a course facilitator who passes leadership in course discussions and other activities to students. Research, however, shows that many international students come to American classroom with different expectations.

Dissatisfaction and discomfort with teacher involvement was expressed by participants in a number of studies. In Shattuck’s (2005) research, lack of visible direct teaching was perceived by some students as ‘bad’ teaching, and heavy reliance on co-construction of knowledge in discussions was not highly regarded. Moreover, some students were disappointed that their instructors paid no attention to a ‘personal attack’ and ‘unfriendly’ postings of their American classmates (ibid., p. 158). Similar findings are reported in Thomson and Ku’s study (2005), where a graduate Chinese student attributed lack of focus in chat communication to low instructor involvement in an activity; this showed that some international students expect the instructor to exercise more control over student-to-student interactions.

The lack of teacher presence in teamwork and her/his subsequent perceived inability to fairly assess the quality of individual contribution was also reported to be of concern for international students (Shattuck, 2005; Wang, 2007). Wang (2007) suggests that instructors need to provide multicultural groups of students with clear guidelines for successful teamwork, as well as monitor and help resolve conflicts and not to rely on peer reviews for grading team members.
Cultural differences in student-instructor power distribution become most evident in one-on-one interactions. Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) compared communication topics and strategies used by American and international students when e-mailing to the instructor and found quantitative and qualitative differences. In her study, both groups of students were reported to use e-mail to comment about the course or post phatic comments. However “American students demonstrated greater initiative and ability to adapt to the spatial and temporal remoteness between interlocutors in e-mail interaction, especially when using e-mail to solicit face-to-face appointments and input on projects” (p. 24). Biesenbach-Lucas attributes these differences to several factors including low English language written communication skills, inadequate computer proficiency, and, what is more important, lack of understanding about appropriate relationships between students and American professors or in Scollons’ terms – the mismatch of the discourses.

Chen’s (2006) critical discourse analysis of the emails sent by a Taiwanese student to her American professors confirmed that international students might have insufficient pragmatic knowledge to compose appropriate and effective electronic messages, which was evident in “unclear, delayed purpose statements with many irrelevant details, requests framed from a student-oriented perspective and with a strong help-needed tone, failure to demonstrate status-appropriate politeness, and ineffective use of reasons or explanations as supportive moves (ibid., p. 50). The scholar relates students’ email writing difficulties not only to their language abilities but also to cultural differences in student-instructor relationships. Considering how important email messages to professors could be for a student to achieve her/his academic goals, Chen
advocates for the explicit instruction of communicational patterns that would be appropriate on language, cultural, and medium levels.

Besides difficulties with the form of the email messages, international students may lack understanding of appropriate situations when an email exchange could be initialized. US students are generally aware that they can email professors asking for help with an assignment, seeking feedback on a paper draft, challenging a quiz score or explaining personal circumstances that prevent them from completing work on time and asking for an extension. These opportunities, however, may be unused by many international students that come from countries where an instructor is seen as a person of high authority, such as China and South Korea (Wang, 2007). In such context, the instructor may need to explicitly encourage students to contact her/him and initiate steps towards re-imagining the traditional teacher-student relationship (Bretag, 2006).

Thus studies generally confirm Hofstede’s (1986) argument that “as teacher/student interaction is such an archetypal human phenomenon, and so deeply rooted in the culture of a society, cross-cultural learning situations are fundamentally problematic for both parties” (p. 303). This however should not undermine students’ ability to learn new discourse and adjust once native discourse to environmental factors. In this regard Gan’s (2009) research provides important insight. In her mixed methods study of on campus university students in mainland China (N=339) and HongKong (N=280) who took English language courses, she found that the majority of students disagreed that “the best way to learn a language is mainly in the classroom and from a teacher” (p. 51). Confucian traditions shared by both groups of study participants were not found to be predictors of students’ attitudes and behaviors, while a contextual factor,
the necessity to pass a nationwide language test, was. Based on survey results and interviews with selected students from both groups, Gan concludes that “institutional contexts and social environments rather than cultural traditions tend to determine students’ attitudes towards and strategies in learning English” (p. 53). While Gan’s study examined only a language classroom, it demonstrates that Asian students may question the superiority of their instructors, exhibit positive attitude to self-directed learning and are ready to take more responsibility for the learning process and outcomes on themselves.

International Students’ Culture vs. Cyberculture of US Classroom: Mediating Role of the Technology

In online education, learning is mediated by the technology. Relevant literature discusses a number of levels on which technology-mediated knowledge and skills acquisition is different from that that takes place in traditional face-to-face classroom. For the purposes of the current study, this is narrowed down to topics that concern learning experiences of international students. This section will review studies that describe why and how technology may be a factor that affects what happens in an online classroom that involves culturally diverse groups of students.

Culture of technology. Technology is often described as a culture loaded phenomenon. “As with every other dimension of human activity, so with ICTs: their design, usages and effects are deeply shaped by culture” (Ess, 2009, p. 20). Because cyberspace is predominantly English-speaking and because network technologies and software are often designed in the US and/or with English-speaking target audience in
mind, technologies are said to be “imbued with euro-American cultural values” (Lum, 2006, p. 117) and the Web is seen as reflecting cultural values of White, western, industrialized ideologies (McIsaac, 2002, p. 19).

Chase and his colleagues (Chase, Macfadyen, Reeder & Rocher, 2002) illustrate how those values are transferred to online conversations and may result in miscommunication. They examined a large corpus consisting of 23 students of different cultural backgrounds who were taking blended courses in a Canadian university and observed instances of cultural gaps that exist between speakers and the dominant “cyberculture”. In this study, students of aboriginal background (First Nations) decreased their participation in online discussions and were perceived as different from other students by course facilitators who altered their discourse patterns when interacting with them. Study findings led the researchers to conclude that “characteristics of electronic genres, communication styles and routines, and viewing/listening practices differ between cultures” (ibid, para. 67). This argument, however, needs to be supplemented by the Hewing’s (2005) quote which reminds us that “practices may vary from nation to nation, but as students move online their varied collective prior experiences of "doing" face-to-face education become a frame of reference implicated in how culture in the online class may be understood” (para. 53)

**Computer-mediated communication.** Even though “doing” face-to-face education might be a point of departure for “doing” online education, one should not underestimate the affect of technology (computer) mediated knowledge acquisition on learning experiences in general and communication in particular. Online communication might take a form of written or oral and synchronous (real-time) or asynchronous
(delayed) communication (Meskill & Anthony, 2010). Relevant literature, however, reports that in a typical online classroom communication usually happens in asynchronous text-based mode, i.e., when all ideas are expressed in a written rather than oral form and when there is a significant time lapse between a post and a reply to it. More rarely students are required to utilize text-based chats when communication happens in real-time mode. How does this affect learning experiences of international students?

Numerous studies on technology-assisted learning suggest that computer-mediated communication (CMC) can equalize participation and liberate minorities by giving them voice in a less stressful and more equal environment of electronic communication (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2003; Bump, 1990; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996). The equalizing effect spreads to international students who often show better involvement when compared to face-to-face communication. Thomson and Ku (2005) found that in the online classroom international Chinese students tend to speak up more than in the traditional classroom. Because the instructor sets minimum participation requirements and because the online class has no time limitations, international students feel obliged to post and do not feel being rushed. Similar findings are reported in Morse (2003). In this study, non-native speakers of English from China, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand, who were required to participate in asynchronous discussions with native speakers of English from the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, perceived computer-mediated discussions as a place where they could openly express their thoughts. Biesenbach-Lucas (2003), who compared native and non-native graduate students' perceptions of asynchronous discussions, also observed better involvement of usually reticent international students in electronic conversations.
Thus studies provide evidence in support of an equalizing effect of CMC, particularly in its text-based asynchronous format. However research also demonstrates drawbacks of CMC for non-native speakers of English. CMC has less interactive features such as questioning, recasting, confirmation checks, and paraphrasing; online conversation may lose coherence and end abruptly leaving discussion threads incomplete (Warschauer, 1996). Moreover, telecommunication exhibits reduced social cues (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) while printed information lacks sociocultural cues, which makes text-based communication more problematic for students that come to class with different cultural capital (Roald, 1999). This seems to be most important for international students with relatively low English language proficiency and for online tasks that require participation in synchronous forms of electronic written conversations – text-based chats. This phenomenon is demonstrated in empirical studies conducted by Pan and his colleagues (Pan et al., 2003) and by Thomson and Ku (2005). In both of these studies, Asian international students had significant difficulties communicating in synchronous chat-rooms, which in the case of the Pan et al. study took a form of “written paralysis” (p. 323).

Students' involvement in CMC activities is also linked to culturally-specific perception of online environments as places for socializing. Scholars argue that some cultures can perceive computer-mediated communication as impersonal and even impolite and this may negatively impact their online interactions (Kwon & Danaher, 2000; Wang, 2007). Morse (2003) found that students from China, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand, the countries identified as high context cultures, did not see CMC as a place to get to know others and build social relationships, which contrasted feelings of
their classmates from low context cultures (US, U.K., Australia and New Zealand). In support of this finding, Zhang and Kenny (2010) report that in their study international students from China, Japan and of Iranian background did not perceive an online space called “Socializing/Mingling” as an environment for socializing, while their peers did use it extensively for making posts unrelated to the course itself (conference announcements, sharing jokes, etc.). Socializing difficulties and a lack of peer engagement were also reported in a Hannon and D'Neto study (2007) who surveyed 241 students of a large university in Australia, 52% of which were non-native speakers of English. Lim's quantitative study (2004) of Korean and American students' online learning motivation indicated that obtaining a sense of belonging could be one of the motivating factors for American students but not for Korean students. Thus while lack of social interaction presents a barrier to learning of all online students (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005), some international students might be most disadvantaged. Attempts to cultivate social presence, believed to be one of the key factors for building quality online classroom (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999; Swan & Shih, 2005), may be less productive in an online learning environment that brings together students with diverse cultural backgrounds. Moreover, cultural differences in CMC perception may result in unbalanced peer involvement and thus jeopardize the value of peer-to-peer learning, so important in Vygotskian understanding of the learning process.

**Culturally-sensitive web design.** When it comes to web design, research demonstrates that cultures have different preferences in colors, content layout, backgrounds, graphics, navigational paths, use of audio- and video capabilities, etc. (Faiola & Matei, 2005; Hedberg & Brown, 2002; Loring, 2002; Marcus & Gould, 2001;
Segev, Ahituv, & Barzilai-Nahon, 2007; Würtz, 2005). As such, an online course design is not culture neutral and reflects the culture of the host university, who generally dictates the choice of a learning management system (LMS), and the culture of a course developer who adapts a LMS to her/his own preferences and the objectives of the course.

While not studying international students' learning experiences in a real classroom, numerous studies show that this group of web users may be at a disadvantage when logging in to their American online courses due to their culturally specific preferences in web design features. Marcus and Gould (2001) reviewed each of the five Hofstede’s dimensions and discussed implications these dimensions may have for user-interface and web design. The authors, for example, argue that power distance may influence on whether the access to information is structured or less structured; or that high-uncertainty avoidance cultures emphasize simplicity and provide redundant cues (color, typography, sound, etc.) to reduce ambiguity; or that long-term orientation countries prefer content focused on practice and practical value, while short-term orientation countries desire content focused on truth and certainty of beliefs.

Nationally-driven constructs were also applied in Würtz’ (2005) study. Using Hall’s differentiation of high- and low-context cultures, Würtz compared McDonald’s website and found that websites in high-context cultures (Japan, China, and Korea) tend to use more prominent animated and sound effects, prefer montage approach to layout, choose bright colors and fonts, and promote an exploratory approach to navigation. In low-context cultures (Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and the US), websites use more subtle colors and less animation, provide clear and more linear navigation and choose images that focus on values associated with individualistic
societies, such as freedom and personal needs. Würtz’s findings complement an earlier study conducted by Evers (2001) who found that to understand the website content, Japanese users would be looking for graphic icons, while Americans and British users would derive most of their understanding from text. Differences in how websites are constructed and processed by members of different cultures are empirically tested in Faiola and Matei’s study (2005). By focusing on cultural background of web developers, researchers demonstrated its effect on the speed of processing information. In the experimental study that involved participants of Chinese and American backgrounds, they found that site users completed information-seeking tasks faster when websites' layout (typography, graphic elements, and information structure) was developed by designers from their own cultures. These results are in agreement with Hedberg and Brown (2002) who studied how students from China, Hong Kong and SAR interpreted visual information of an online course designed in Australia. Their research showed that visual information in online courses is not culture neutral and that meaning and interpretation of visual information is related to users’ cultural background.

Thus studies demonstrate the significance of cultural background for how students interact with technology, what they expect to find on the website, how fast they process information via the interface they use, and what meaning they derive from non-verbal information they find when logging in to an online course. Web design features (colors, icons, navigation paths, etc.) play the role of symbolic mediators that in the Vygotskian paradigm mediate interactions of the individual with environment and that are learned and internalized by an individual in the culture she/he grows and develops. Previous research suggests that culturally-embedded web design expectations might affect learning
experiences of online international students. Therefore course developers should not only consider different cultural preferences for navigation and audio-visual messages found on the web, but also examine tasks and activities for their appropriateness for a particular cultural group (Marcus & Gould, 2001). This, however, is not a simple task as shown in Rogers, Graham, and Mayes' (2007) study in which interviews with 12 web course designers revealed that awareness of cultural differences does not always translate into cultural sensitivity of online courses delivered cross-culturally.

**Gaps in Research**

This literature review reveals gaps in methods employed to study learning experiences of international online students. Most of the research related to the topic of this study employs either quantitative analysis of large-scale survey results or qualitative analysis of interviews with a few international students. Some researchers have also made good use of student posts that underwent discourse analysis. Experimental study design was used to study cultural preference in web design (Faiola & Matei, 2005). The topic, however, warrants mixed methods studies that would involve a variety of data source including interviews with stakeholders, a questionnaire, reflection journals, and course transcripts analysis and that would provide a close-up examination of selected cases. Such studies would provide in-depth understanding of the issue and enable one to see it from multiple perspectives.

Gaps in research also concern theoretical perspectives utilized to conduct studies and analyze their results. A great number of studies employ nationally-driven constructs, while others, especially those focusing on online communication and second language acquisition, rely on ideas developed by Vygotsky and those who extended them further.
within a sociocultural paradigm. None of the studies located, however, attempted to apply Scollon and Scollons’ perspectives and methods of analysis on the study of international online students’ experiences. The Scollons’ theoretical framework, which pays close attention to both national culture and interpersonal communication, enable researchers to tie together nationally-driven theories and Vygotskian ideas that foreground an individual and her/his relations with others. Therefore a study that looks at the subject with the Scollons’ perspective is justifiable and warranted.

This literature review reveals little about how students manage multiple faces and what role peers and instructors play in building adequate skills for functioning in two cross-cutting discourses. The topic, however, warrants focusing on the progression of how a student learns a new discourse system, what and who assists her or him, and how new knowledge may affect student’s view of her or his native discourse. The Scollon and Scollons’ discourse approach seems to enable one to do so. A study that examines the topic both diachronically and synchronically would enrich this literature.

Lastly, no study located used face-to-face learning experiences as a foil to reflect on previous online experiences. Such opposition might be productive for evaluating the value of both learning environments and highlighting benefits of online learning for preparing an international student for further learning on campus.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a detailed description of the theories that laid the foundation for this study and reviewed existing research related to how culture may affect learning experiences of online students. It also highlighted six theoretical foundations that tied nationally-driven constructs developed by G. Hofstede and E. Hall with the
sociocultural paradigm pioneered by L. Vygotsky and further developed by R. Scollon and S. W. Scollon. These foundations, most of which were derived from sociocultural theories that underscore the interdependence of individual and social (cultural) factors in learning, then assisted in reviewing and discussing relevant literature.

Previous research demonstrates that students’ cultural background is a significant factor that should not be overlooked by web course developers and facilitators, as well as by peers. International students are caught in the midst of two cross-cutting discourse systems – their native discourse and that of a US online course. This might significantly complicate a person’s experience as he/she “must constantly tune and adjust his or her sense of identity and membership so that the goals of both systems of membership are at least minimally satisfied” (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p. 217). International students that have none or very limited experience with US cultural discourse, have to start building their identity as US students from scratch. In doing so, they rely on formal education and informal socialization they acquired and internalized in their native country. Consequently, cultural differences manifest themselves in peer-to-peer and student-to-instructor communication, revealing a mismatch in rules of communication, team work, and background knowledge.

Culture also penetrates into the realm of technology. Research makes evident the mediating role of the technology and reveals that US online course cyberculture might challenge students’ native discourse when being imbued with ethnocentric values and characteristics. Some international students might not see the online environment as a place for socializing and therefore course facilitators might experience difficulties cultivating social presence in a class that supports a constructivist philosophy. Culturally-
embedded preferences in web design might also complicate the learning process. On the other hand, research shows that computer-mediated communication, particularly asynchronous written communication, may have an equalizing and liberating effect on discussion participants and that many international students exhibit better involvement in online communicative activities when compared to participation in face-to-face discussions.

This literature review reveals multiple gaps in researching the learning experiences of international students. The topic warrants a multi-stage mixed methods study that utilizes a variety of quantitative and qualitative data sources, employ diachronic and synchronous views, and shows an international student both as a representative of her/his national culture and as an individual.
Chapter Three: Method

Restatement of the Research Questions

The following research questions guided all stages of the study:

1. How might international students’ affiliations to their native academic discourse and culture affect their learning experiences in an online course in the United States and how, specifically, is one student affected over time?

2. What were the experiences of a Chinese student in integrating previous learning experiences within the Chinese academic discourse on her learning experiences within the academic discourses she encountered in the United States?

Overview of the Research Design

This study explored learning experiences of international students in US-run, fully online courses. Drawing on theoretical and empirical studies within the domains of intercultural communication, cultural studies, cultural anthropology, multicultural education, and the like, this study examined the complex interplay of host and native cultures in an online learning environment with the intention to record and interpret the effect of culture on international students’ learning experiences.

The research conceptual framework was built on the bases of sociocultural ideas put forward by the Russian psychologist L. Vygotsky and his followers, as well as by American scholars R. Scollon and S. W. Schollon whose discourse approach to intercultural communication proved to be instrumental for the current study. While the sociocultural theoretical paradigm enabled a close-up view of individual learning experiences of study participants, G. Hofstede’s and E. Hall’s cultural dimensions provided a broader data interpretation framework thus enabling the discussion of
individual experiences within a broad national context. The theoretical foundations of the study built on both sociocultural and nationally-driven constructs are outlined in Chapter 2.

This research was designed as a two-stage mixed methods study (see Figure 1). Initially a survey was administered to international students who took online courses in a large research university situated in the north-east of the US. Five of the 12 survey participants then completed follow-up online interviews. Cathy, a student from China who completed a survey and follow-up interviews, was then recruited for the in-depth case study. On the second stage of the study, data related to Cathy’s case was collected from several sources – her online peers, online instructor, and herself.

Figure 1. Research design.
The two-stage design of the study served the research purposes. The survey, which consisted mostly of close-ended questions, was used to obtain information on trends and gain an initial pool of participants. The results of the survey, complemented by follow-up online interviews, provided a general picture of learning experiences of international students and enabled the research to collect background information on Cathy, the key informant of the study. These data was important for situating Cathy’s experiences within a broader context, i.e., for comparing Cathy’s experiences with that of other international students from the same university.

The second stage of the study focused on a single case. The case study method enabled showing “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 2003, p. 2), obtaining “specific language and voices about the topic” (Creswell, 2003, p. 22) and involving both qualitative and quantitative data (Ritchie, 2003; Yin, 2003). The case studies best match sociocultural view over the topic as they enable a close-up examination of the interplay between individual and contextual factors. Moreover, the case study approach aims at avoiding stereotyping and unwarranted generalizations often made about culture groups when nationally-driven theoretical frameworks are employed (see Hewling (2005) for discussion of this issue).

Combined, data obtained on both stages of the study enabled the research to address the research questions that called for gathering broad information on trends, as well as for conducting an in-depth study of a single case.

This study involved both qualitative and quantitative methods, but considering the research questions and the selected theoretical framework, qualitative methods took precedence over quantitative. When properly designed, qualitative inquiry enable the
respondents’ to reveal “depth of emotion, the way they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions” (Patton, 2001, p. 21). The qualitative approach was selected as the leading method of data collection and analysis in this research because the aim of this study was to examine learning experiences of online international students, to learn what they think about online learning environment and about learning within a US academic discourse and with US peers and instructors. Moreover, due to the nature of research questions, the study was planned as a naturalistic inquiry (i.e., the study of naturally occurring real-world situations) and with holistic perspective that focuses “on complex interdependencies not meaningfully reduced to a few discrete variables and linear, cause-effect relationships” (Patton, 1990, p. 40), and therefore the domination of qualitative methods was inevitable.

Besides raw numbers from the survey, quantitative methods of corpus-based linguistics were used to analyze and compare discussion posts of Cathy and her US peers. This analysis enabled close examination of the students’ linguistic choices, the process that proved instrumental for studying interactions within an online course and for examining the linguistic manifestation of students’ cultural affiliations.

The employment of a mixed research paradigm that involved both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis enabled collecting rich data and served the purposes of data triangulation and validation of study findings. The mixed methods approach allows the researcher to neutralize biases inherent in a single approach (Creswell, 2003). Moreover such “methodological pluralism” is said to frequently result “in superior research (compared to monomethod research)” (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 14), is currently supported by experts in research design (see, for
example, Creswell, 2008 or Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), and has recently been actively employed by many researchers (Bryman, 2006). In the current study employment of both qualitative and quantitative methods enabled enhancement and elaboration of the results derived from each of the methods, i.e., it served the purposes of complementarity, while also serving development purposes (Greene, Caracelly, and Graham, 1989) when the results of the quantitative methods helped inform the qualitative method and vice versa.

**Settings and Participants**

Survey and follow-up interviews. The study was conducted in a large research university in the north-east of the United States. The survey involved 12 international students (including Cathy, the key informant): 5 students from China, 2 students from Turkey, 2 students from Nepal and one student from each of the following countries – India, Nigeria, and South Korea. One of the students from Nepal completed only the first 7 survey questions, while the rest completed all or skipped only a few questions. A student from India indicated that his native language was English, a Nigerian student was identified as bilingual (Urhobo and English), while the rest spoke English as a foreign language.

Five of these students chose to provide their personal emails for follow-up interviews and therefore participated in two rounds of online interviews. Besides Cathy, the key informant of the case study, this stage of research involved students who selected the following nicknames that were used for communication and reporting purposes: Amanda, CJ, HS, and Moi.

**Amanda.** Amanda was a female graduate student from China. She received her bachelor degree in English in one of the universities in China but chose to pursue a
degree in accounting at a US university. Before coming to study to the US she had had no experience living and studying in the US or other foreign countries. The online course she took while residing in the US was required by her program and she learned online while also attending on-campus courses. She described herself as an easy-going, hardworking, honest and friendly extrovert who liked new experiences, sport, and who readily got involved in volunteer work. When talking about her culture, she emphasized a deep history of her native country, and that this “magnificent treasure” made her “a complete person”. Describing her family, she chose to talk about her immediate family members – mother, father and a younger brother. Amanda defined herself as an atheist. However, without being prompted, she also added that she was a follower of Confucianism that taught her “to be humble, to pay more attention the family, care about the country and the people, to respect others” and oneself.

CJ. CJ was a female student from South Korea. She graduated from one of the South Korean universities with a BA in English and arrived to the States to continue her studies in the field of education. While having extensive traveling experience in Europe, including several visits to the UK, she had had no previous experience living and studying in the USA before arriving here and signing up for online and on-campus graduate courses. The online course she reflected upon in her survey and interviews was a required course, so she had no choice but take it. Describing her individual culture, she talked about her Asian background and focused on its “conservative” features related to social, political and educational matters. CJ clarified that the conservative nature of Asian culture was evident in its “caution lifestyle” that mismatched a “freewheeling lifestyle” of the Americans and in how considerate Asian people were toward each other. While CJ
did not hesitate to associate herself with Asian culture, when asked about qualities that
did not hesitate to associate herself with Asian culture, when asked about qualities that
made her different from or similar to other people, she preferred to talk about her
personality traits like love for traveling and meeting people.

HS. HS was a graduate student from Shanghai, China majoring in accounting. He gained all of his previous educational experience in his native city where he grew up, went to school and eventually received a bachelor degree in international politics. As an exchange student HS lived and studied for one month in Australia and also visited Thailand and Japan as a tourist. Before starting an MS program, he spent four months in the US thus acquiring some experience living in the host culture. He characterized his culture as “more traditional” and less “outgoing” than American. He also chose to emphasize the long history of his country that possesses “much culture heritage”. The online course he took was a required course in Advanced Excel that was offered only in a fully online format.

Moi. Moi was a graduate student from Nigeria who took an online course in health behavior in the School of Public Health. He held a bachelor’s degree in Medicine and Surgery and a master’s degree in Anatomy that he received in his home country. He identified himself as African and lamented about not being understood sometimes due to his accent. In the survey he chose Urhobo as his native language. However in a later interview it became clear that he was bilingual as English was the first language he learned and used at all levels in the Nigerian school that he attended. Taking a fully online course was his personal decision rather than a program requirement. He explained his decision by the desire to have a flexible schedule and ability not to travel to campus. Moi had not lived or studied in the US. before his arrival, and his only other international
experience was in the UK where he had visited on several occasions. However he seemed to feel very well prepared to take the course thanks to his direct affiliation to the English-speaking world and previous education that included a master’s level work.

Case Study. Settings. The data for the case study was collected from a fully online course offered in the School of Education. This graduate level course was designed and taught by a US instructor and taken mostly by in-service and pre-service teachers of a variety of school disciplines. This was a spring course that lasted the whole semester and required no physical presence of students on campus.

The course was based on the Blackboard Learning System (BLS) that had been utilized by the university as a major e-learning platform for several years. This system allows course designers and facilitators to build and manage learning content and to provide synchronous and asynchronous tools for computer-mediated communication; it also enables the course designers to use a variety of assessment tools such as quizzes and tests (see http://www.blackboard.com for further details). The Blackboard platform supports constructivist classroom activities such as whole-group and small-group discussions, chats, team projects, inquiry-based activities, open-ended assessments, knowledge sharing (the media library and web links), journaling, etc. It also has an internal mailing tool which enables private communication between an instructor and a student or among students. The choice of tools and ways these tools are applied, however, may vary depending on the course content and teaching approach selected by the course designer and facilitator.

Cathy, the key informant. The key informant of the study was a female international student from Shanghai, China. She chose to go by her nickname Cathy, the
name she used interchangeably with her real Chinese name not only for communication throughout the research, but also for communication within her online course.

The online course under analysis was the first US course she took while residing in her home country, thus she was a neophyte in online learning within the US academic culture. She did not live in the US before taking an online course but visited it several times when leading groups of Chinese students. Her only other international destination was Australia which she visited several times for short trips.

Cathy held a bachelor degree in international economy and foreign trade from one of the Shanghai institutes. However she chose to pursue a new career in the field of education and therefore enrolled into a master program in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) in a large US university. This program enabled her to take some of the courses fully online but required residency for some other courses. Therefore, after taking one course online in the spring semester, she arrived in the US and spent a full fall term taking courses on campus.

When asked to describe her individual culture, Cathy chose to emphasize her affiliation to Asian culture, mention her large family consisting of four generations, and touch gender issues. She wrote that she felt “no obvious oppression or inequality” in male-female relationship and attributed it to the fact that she lived in a modern city of Shanghai where she felt “privileged in some aspects”. While in her first interview Cathy wrote that she had no religion, in her later interviews she confessed that she might be described as a follower of Confucianism and that the Confucian concept of respect and obedience to authorities may have affected, perhaps even on a subconscious level, her learning style.
**Cathy’s American peers.** Seven American students who took the same fully online course as Cathy agreed to participate in the study. Because the study objectives did not require active involvement of American peers, no demographic data for these students were collected. American students were asked to permit the researcher to use transcripts of their online discussion posts for qualitative and quantitative analysis.

**Cathy’s online instructor.** The instructor who designed and facilitated the online course under analysis was a female full-time tenured professor. She shortly characterized her own culture as WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant). In her early career stages she worked as an ESL (English as a Second Language) instructor. This experience helped her to become “hyper aware of structures and idioms that non-native speakers may not have mastered” and taught her to alter her writing style and language when composing messages intended for international students. Extensive experience in conducting research in language education and designing professional development training for faculty working with English language learners, as well as several year of online teaching, extensive international traveling and knowledge of two foreign languages, have apparently provided the professor with knowledge and skills needed to effectively design and manage a distance learning course that includes international students.

The professor’s teaching philosophy aligns with sociocultural ideas that underline the importance of human interaction. “I believe the most compelling dimension of online teaching and learning is the human one”, she stated in her interview. Therefore online whole-class and small-group discussions and teamwork had found their prominent place in the course that Cathy happened to sign up for.
Recruitment and selection of study participants. The study involved international students who took one or more fully online courses in the period between fall-2008 and fall-2009 semesters. The total number of international students and the number of students who took online courses in these semesters are indicated in Table 1 below. This information was received from the Office of International Student and Scholar Services that provides assistance to all international students at the university offering Cathy’s course.

Table 1

*The Total Number of International Students and the Number of Students Who Took Online Courses in the Period between Fall-2008 and Fall-2009*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>Fall 2008</th>
<th>Spring 2009</th>
<th>Summer 2009</th>
<th>Fall 2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total N of students</td>
<td>1170</td>
<td>1134</td>
<td>data not available</td>
<td>1177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of students who took fully online courses</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The recruitment of study participants was carried out in several stages. In mid February of 2009, the Director of International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) forwarded a study invitation letter and a link to the online survey to all international students in the listserv of the ISSS. The same invitation letter was sent again in three weeks and later in 3 months after the first invitation. Due to a low response rate, in January 2010 the letter was forwarded again but only to those international students who were indicated as having taken an online course in the ISSS database. Twelve students responded to the invitation and completed the survey. Considering that the total number
of international students who took an online course between fall 2008 and fall 2009 semesters was 101, the response rate was 12%.

Out of these 12 survey participants, five agreed for follow-up interviews. The initial research design had called for a stratified purposeful sampling (Patton, 2001) with 5-6 participants selected by country of origin, years of living in the United States and experience in online learning. However, due to the low response rate, it was decided to consider all five of those self-selected students as candidates for follow-up interviews. A criterion sampling (Patton, 2001) was identified as applicable in such a case. The following important criteria were identified for selecting participants:

- their native country was other than the US;
- they indicated their native language was other than English;
- they took at least one online course in the university where the study was conducted;
- they were able to communicate in English as was evident from the online survey they were invited to complete.

The survey results indicated that these five self-selected candidates met all these predetermined criteria.

The survey and follow-up interviews showed that Cathy, one of the study participants, might become a very good key informant for the case study. Cathy belonged to the largest group of international students who come to study to the US and thus she could represent a typical case. On the other hand her survey and follow-up interviews showed that at the moment of research she took her first US online course while residing in her home country and she was planning to come to the US to study on campus. This
made her an excellent candidate for purposeful *intensity sampling* as she “manifest[ed] the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely” (Patton, 1990, p. 182). Moreover, Cathy’s online instructor happened to be a research advisor of the author of this study, which made the collection of data more feasible and convenient. Therefore, Cathy was contacted again and invited for additional online and face-to-face interviews after the course was over, to which she agreed. Her online instructor volunteered to help with collecting other data for Cathy’s case study. At the end of the online course, Cathy’s American classmates were asked to permit the instructor to forward the researcher their online posts. Seven of Cathy’s colleagues agreed to do so. Cathy’s online instructor also agreed to be interviewed. This enabled the collection of rich data for Cathy’s case that formed the core of the current study.

All procedures involved in the participants’ recruitment and selection (including necessary modifications to these procedures) were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University where the study was conducted. All study participants granted their informed consents. All five students who participated in the survey and online interviews received a gift card of $50. Cathy also received additional $50 after all data for her case were collected. The researcher did not meet or know personally before the study any of the international and American students who participated in the study. Cathy’s online instructor was the university professor and research advisor of the researcher.

Overall, just as in Shattuck’s study (2005), the subject recruitment procedures for the study of international students’ online learning experiences proved to be complicated and time-consuming. However, they enabled the involvement of 20 participants that
provided rich data for the current research and contributed to the trustworthiness of the study findings.

**Data Collection**

The data sources and collection timeline on each of the two study stages are visualized on Table 2 below. As could be derived from this table, five data collection methods were used:

- survey;
- online interviews (survey follow-ups and online interviews with Cathy and her instructor);
- documents (online course logs);
- face-to-face interview with Cathy;
- Cathy’s reflective journals.

This set of data collection methods, which are mostly qualitative, reflect the theoretical framework of the study and the research questions. The study that drew mostly on sociocultural theories with their emphasis on contextual and individual factors and that aimed at investigating learning experiences of its participants naturally required qualitative inquiry methods. The focus on experiences of a particular case also called for in-depth study that would involve collection of qualitative data. On the other hand, the need to study the effect of culture on learning of a relatively large number of students called for the survey. Surveying a pool of international students enabled the research to obtain information on trends and situate the experiences of the key informant Cathy within other experiences.

Each of the data collection methods is described below.
### Table 2

*Data Collection Timeline.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research stage</th>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Time data collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>12 international students who took fully online course(s) in a US university</td>
<td>February 2009 – January 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up online interviews</td>
<td>5 international students who completed the survey</td>
<td>May 2001 – February 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>Documents (online course logs)</td>
<td>7 Cathy’s online American peers, Cathy and Cathy’s instructor</td>
<td>June 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online interview with Cathy’s online instructor</td>
<td>Cathy’s online instructor</td>
<td>August 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online interview with Cathy</td>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>September 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Face-to-face interview with Cathy</td>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>November 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cathy’s reflective journals</td>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>September 2009 – February 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Survey.** A cross-sectional survey (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2005) involved 12 graduate international students who have taken at least one online course. A questionnaire consisting of 36 items served as a survey instrument (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was developed based on an extensive literature review that enabled differentiating factors and categories of issues related to the learning experiences of international students. Questions related to participants’ home country and native
language provided initial data on their cultural background and thus helped form initial expectations about them as representatives of a particular nation (culture) along the line of nationally-driven concepts of Hofstede and Hall. In its turn, the sociocultural framework dictated the emphasis on questions related to social interactions and context of communication. Because within this framework learning is viewed as a social activity, the majority of questions concerned students’ interaction with their peers and the instructor, as well as the interaction with the course content and form (course policies), which were perceived as products of a given social environment within which they were developed.

The questionnaire also included specific questions that concerned participants’ experiences with online discussions and team work because these are activities that are often utilized in US online courses as a way to foster co-construction of knowledge. The factors and categories with matching survey questions are presented in Appendix B.

Because the length of a questionnaire is crucial in obtaining responses (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2005), the instrument was revised several times and shortened to limit the completion time to 15-20 minutes. The survey included mostly close-ended questions related to participants’ demographic information, reasons to take an online course and likes/dislikes of course activities. The survey also included twenty-five Likert-scale statements that participants needed to agree or disagree with, a space for optional comments, and finally a space for writing a pseudonym (a nickname) for those participants who were willing to be further interviewed. The questionnaire was reviewed by an external non-native speaker of English to strengthen its readability by this group of participants.
The survey was administered via an online service SurveyMonkey http://surveymonkey.com/. Computer-administered surveys are described as inexpensive and convenient data collection techniques that may increase respondents’ readiness to disclose their feelings and thoughts (Walston & Lissitz, 2000). To ensure the security of survey data and to have an access to all SurveyMonkey tools, the service’s basic account was upgraded to a premium account which was active for over 1.5 year period when the data was collected and analyzed. The first survey was completed on February 18 of 2009, while the last survey participant filled in the questionnaire on January 20, 2010. Eleven out of twelve participants completed all or most questions of the survey. However one of the participants chose to discontinue answering the questions after completing Question 7.

Survey Monkey enabled summarizing and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data, as well as creating diagrams for each question that yielded quantitative results. The quantitative data consisted of raw numbers and percentages derived from close-ended questions. The data also included answers to open-ended questions related to participants’ demographic information. Question #35, completed by four survey participants, requested that students write any additional information related to their online learning experiences.

All responses were archived electronically and printed out individually along with a summary of results. The survey was anonymous but participants were invited to provide their nicknames and directed to the researcher’s personal email if they agreed to participate in follow-up online interviews.
**Online interviews. Survey follow-up interviews.** Online interviews were one of the major qualitative data sources of the study. This method of data collection is currently perceived as a legitimate technique that may yield credible research findings (James & Busher, 2009; Salmons, 2010; Shattuck, 2005). Not only does it enable the researcher to reach participants regardless of their location and time zones (James & Busher, 2009), but it has also been reported to help to reduce anxiety associated with disclosing information to the researcher (Walston and Lissitz, 2000) and to produce more substantive response (Gaiser, 2000 as cited in Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009). This attention to participant anxiety and location was of significant importance for the current study that involved non-native speakers of English including Cathy who lived in Shanghai, China when she was first involved into the research.

Interviews were conducted electronically in asynchronous written format. To avoid unnecessary difficulties with learning a new platform, the relatively old and well-known method of email message exchange was utilized for sending and receiving interview items. Participants were emailed interview questions in an attachment that they downloaded, filled in and emailed back. All replies were saved in electronic format and printed out for further analysis.

Open-ended questions for interviews were developed based on individual survey results from each of the five participants (Amanda, Cathy, CJ, HS, and Moi). The sixth participant who initially agreed to answer follow-up interview questions withdrew from the study for an unknown reason. The questions aimed at

- clarifying answers in the survey;
• extending survey answers by asking why the participant selected a particular answer;

• enriching understanding of the topic through additional questions related to participants’ culture and US learning experiences online and on campus.

Each of the five participants received her or his own set of interview questions (up to 20 questions) depending on the survey results. However, most core questions did not vary in order to increase comparability of responses. After reviewing participants’ answers, a few additional questions to clarify and extend the answers were developed and forwarded to each participant. A sample of online interview questions (developed for Amanda) is provided in Appendix C.

**Online interviews with Cathy.** Besides an online interview (survey follow-up) outlined above, Cathy, the key informant of the case study, was invited for an additional round of online interviews. This second round of interviews was carried out after Cathy agreed to participate in the case study. Based on the preliminary analysis of Cathy’s online course logs, 23 open-ended questions were generated and emailed to the respondent. These questions (provided in Appendix D) asked Cathy to describe or clarify:

- relationships with her online course peers;
- communication with an online instructor;
- linguistic issues that came out in class;
- difficulties with course assignments;
- learning points;
- changes in her own learning style over the course period;
- peculiarities of the Chinese classroom;
• attitude to Confucianism and its effect on her learning.

Because Cathy provided very substantial and clear answers, only one of the questions (related to a word usage) was discussed in a follow-up email message exchange.

**Interview with Cathy’s online instructor.** A semi-structured open-ended online interview with Cathy’s online instructor was administered to collect case study data. At the study design stage it became clear that such an interview might significantly enrich the research as it would provide the perspective of one of the most important stakeholders – an instructor, and thus it would counterbalance data coming from Cathy and her classmates serving triangulation purposes.

The interview was designed to determine the instructor’s teaching philosophy, cultural background, experience of teaching international students, as well as to elicit instructor’s opinions and feelings about how she should be teaching international students and whether she needed any training to do it more effectively. The overall goal was to juxtapose an instructor’s teaching model to Cathy’s learning model. It was believed that this would help to determine the extent to which the examined online classroom had provided adequate scaffolding and fostered the dialogue of cultures (Bakhtin, 1981), i.e., created conditions for effective and mutually beneficial relationship. The interview was expected to provide a new perspective on the research by focusing on the individual culture of the online instructor and her role in building a learning environment conducive to cultural differences.

The interview questions were developed based on literature review and the researcher’s personal experience of learning and teaching online in a multicultural
context. The instrument included 14 open-ended questions and was comprised of experience/behavior questions, opinion/value questions, a feeling question, and background/demographic questions (see Appendix E). The interview questions were forwarded to the instructor via email. The electronic file with answers was saved on the researcher’s personal computer and analyzed.

**Documents (online course logs).** Documents, such as automatically archived online course logs, increase visibility of the phenomena under research (Prior, 2003) and serve the purposes of methodological and data triangulation (Bowen, 2009). Moreover, they bear “immense value… in case study research” (Bowen, 2003, p.29) as they “can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem” (Merriam, 1991, p.118).

In this study online course logs were one of the major sources of the case study data. Online course logs were extracted from a fully online graduate course offered in the spring of 2009 and taken by Cathy. To protect school records of the course students, the extraction of automatically archived logs was carried out by the course instructor who then forwarded them to the researcher electronically. These documents included:

- all posts composed by Cathy (her discussion posts, written assignments, and letters to the instructor);
- discussion posts made by seven American students (Cathy’s classmates) who agreed to participate in the study;
- all public posts by the instructor and her private messages to Cathy;
- tracking statistics (number of read and sent mail messages, read course content files, read and posted discussion messages) for all student participants.
The goal of collecting these data was twofold. First of all it was expected to reveal classroom dynamics that may have had any affect on learning experiences of international students. Tracking statistics and course posts helped to partially compensate for the limited availability of observation data in the online research context. Secondly, the collection of course posts provided documentation of language used in the course and enabled capturing linguistic characteristics of texts composed by Cathy and her American peers. These data proved to be invaluable for analyzing students’ language as a knowledge mediating tool and the embodiment of students’ culture.

**Face-to-face interview with Cathy.** A face-to-face interview with Cathy was perceived as a necessary and very important phase of the data collection. First of all, it enabled testing preliminary results received from previously employed sources – survey, online interviews, and online course logs. Most importantly, however, it aimed at collecting data that would explore the suitability of online learning, as compared to traditional on-campus learning, for students like Cathy. In mid November of 2009 when the interview was conducted, Cathy was taking on-campus courses in the US but still had fresh memory related to her previous semester when she lived in Shanghai and took an online course. Thus a traditional in-person format of interviewing was chosen as most appropriate since 1) it helped to clarify questions that the researcher had in abundance by this stage of data collection and analysis, 2) it seemed to fit better (than previously employed online interviewing) for the exploration of online vs. face-to-face interaction topic, and 3) it was a chance to meet with the key informant personally and help to built better understanding of Cathy as an individual. Overall, this interview was very
informative and confirmed Patton’s suggestions that this method of data collection could become “a way to unlock the internal perspectives” of the interviewee (1990, p.358).

A general interview guide approach was selected as most appropriate as it ensured that all topics were covered while the interviewer remained “free to explore, probe, and ask questions” related to these topics (Patton, 1990, p.283). The topics concerned 3 types of interaction in online and traditional learning environments: student-to-student, student-to-instructor, and student-to-content (see Appendix F). Besides guiding questions, detailed-oriented, elaborated, and clarification probes (Patton, 1990) were used, which significantly enriched the data and clarified interviewees’ responses. While throughout most of the interview both parties stayed on topic, the researcher intentionally allowed for digressions in order to establish a better personal contact with the interviewee, i.e., to build rapport (Patton, 1990, Seidman, 2005) and allow time for facework that is reported to be of significant importance for many representatives of Asian cultures (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). The digression topics included talk about traveling, educational technology and life in the US.

The interview was conducted in an office on the university campus and lasted for 59 minutes. It was recorded on the digital tape recorder and later copied to the computer, transcribed and analyzed.

**Cathy’s reflective journals.** Reflective journals (diaries) as a method of data collection may provide invaluable insight into participants’ thoughts and feelings. Diary data may enhance research rigor as it enables recording fresh impressions that, if recollected in retrospect, may fade and be distorted (Clayton & Thorne, 2000). Diaries
are also reported to help to collect data “unaffected by the researcher’s presence” (Nicholl, 2010).

In the current study a reflective journal was used to gain a fresh account of the key informant’s experiences while she was studying on campus in the fall-2009 semester. Before the semester started, Cathy was requested to start keeping a journal where she would describe and reflect upon her on-campus learning experiences. She first hesitated and asked for further clarification of the task. After the researcher explained that she was to record any thoughts and feelings related to her face-to-face classes and overall learning experiences, she began journaling. In her final journal Cathy was also asked to compare her online and on campus learning experiences. The journals were supposed to be emailed biweekly. However, only five journals were composed in the period from September to January, but Cathy made an attempt to make up for missed journals by covering experiences of the missed weeks in subsequent journal entries.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is “part of a four-component, interactive, cyclical research process involving data collection, data analysis, data interpretation and legitimation” (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003). In the current study, the iterative and spiral nature of the research process and the interconnectedness of its components became evident from the very beginning of the data collection and analysis. The collection of certain data was impossible without prior analysis of the previously collected data as it is illustrated in Figure 2 below. The diagram shows that online interviews were developed only after survey results were analyzed, while a face-to-face interview with Cathy was based on data derived from the interview with her instructor, online course logs, reflective journals
and online interviews with Cathy. On the analysis and interpretation stage, data collected on Stage 1 of the research was mixed and matched with Stage 1 data and vise versa, thus showing the interdependence of all data and the cyclical nature of the research process.

Figure 2. Interconnections between data sources

Due to the nature of the research questions that required obtaining both breadth and depth in the understanding of the topic, and because of the two-stage mixed methods design of the study that involved several data sources, the data analysis posed significant challenges. The difficulty was not only in how to “make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns” (Patton, 1990, p.371), which is expected from the qualitative analysis, but also in doing quantitative analysis and integrating both sets of data to construct a coherent and meaningful “framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal” (Patton, 1990,
p.372). To address this challenge, Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie’s (2003) model for the mixed methods data analysis process was utilized.

Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003) distinguish seven stages of data analysis: data reduction, data display, data transformation, data correlation, data consolidation, data comparison, and data integration. They point out that some stages might be optional and that their implementation depends on the purposes of the mixed methods research. In the current study four stages were found to be appropriate: data reduction, data display, data comparison, and data integration.

In the *data reduction stage* data are being reduced in dimensionality. In the current research the following data reduction was undertaken:

1. Survey results were reduced to descriptive statistics done with the help of Survey Monkey software. Raw numbers and percentages were calculated for each close-ended question. Answers to one open-ended question were saved in a separate file and were later included for qualitative data analysis.

2. Qualitative data derived from online and face-to-face interviews, reflective journals, and online course logs (with an exception of logs belonging to Cathy’s American peers) underwent content analysis, i.e., “the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data” (Patton, 1990, p.381). To prepare for the analysis, the face-to-face interview was transcribed word for word. All texts were read and coded twice. Codes were grouped into themes (categories) and appropriate passages from raw data were grouped together in accordance with these themes and codes. Because the qualitative data collection continued for a period of about 12 months, the content analysis of quantitative
data was done in several waves as new data arrived. These resulted in emergence of new codes and themes and revision of previously identified ones. When the data collection was completed, all qualitative data underwent final content analysis.

3. Cathy’s and her American peers’ online course logs were extracted, grouped into two corpuses (i.e., text files) and underwent linguistic analysis for word frequencies and the usage of certain words (pronouns and words related to culture). The analysis employed a corpus-based approach which enables handling large amounts of electronic texts and examining patterns of language use while analyzing contextual factors (Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 2002). Concordance software developed by R.J.C. Watt (http://www.concordancesoftware.co.uk) was utilized for these purposes. Three categories of words for both corpuses (Cathy’s logs and logs of her American peers) were identified and grouped together: a) top 20 most frequently used words, b) pronouns, and c) words related to culture.

The data display stage involves creation of tables, graphs, charts, lists and other forms of information display that helps to make information more comprehensible. On this stage the following forms of data display were created:

1. Graphs for every close-ended question in the survey. This was initially done with the help of the Survey Monkey software. However later Microsoft Excel was found more appropriate as Excel graphs took less space and were more readable when reduced in size.

2. Three tables to present frequently used words in two corpuses - Cathy’s and her American peers’ online course logs.
3. Based on the content analysis, a list of codes was composed, which enabled to differentiate major themes (categories).

The next stage involved data comparison. Comparison of qualitative and quantitative data is generally carried out in mixed methods research that involves both forms of data for triangulation, initiation or complementarity purposes (Green et al., 1989). As such it was found appropriate and highly beneficial for the current research.

Two major comparisons were carried out. First, quantitative results of the survey were compared with qualitative results of the online interviews (survey follow-ups) for 5 participants (Cathy, Amanda, CJ, HS, and Moi). The second comparison involved only data collected for Cathy. Quantitative results of Cathy’s survey and results of words frequencies derived from Cathy’s posts were compared with results of content analysis of Cathy’s online and face-to-face interviews, her reflective journals, and online course logs. This comparison was first carried out on the early stage of data collection, i.e., before the face-to-face interview took place and reflective journals were collected. While no contradictory results were found, such early comparison enabled identification of unexplainable results and gaps in data, which were later used to compose an interview guide for the face-to-face session and to create guiding questions for the final reflective journal.

At the data integration stage “data are integrated into a coherent whole or two separate sets of coherent wholes (quantitative and qualitative)” (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003, p. 377). It was found appropriate to create one coherent whole and use themes that cut through qualitative data to create the structure for the final stage of analysis and for further interpretation. Such a structure reflected the domination of qualitative data over
quantitative in the study that drew on theories that required close attention to cultural, contextual and individual factors which could hardly be reduced to numbers. However, in several cases quantitative data from the survey was found to be beneficial for opening the discussion and setting the scene for (mostly qualitative) case study data, which is reflected in Chapter 4 of this study. The use of both forms of presenting data enabled the research to give prominence to either Cathy’s learning experiences or that of other international students, thus addressing both research questions.

Overall, the data analysis revealed the complexity of handling quantitative and qualitative data coming from several data sources and involving 20 human subjects. Due to this complexity, data-analytical techniques involved two out of three types of mixed analysis outlined in Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003) – sequential and concurrent (but not parallel). Sequential mixed analysis was utilized to process first quantitative survey data and then to conduct content analysis of all qualitative data, where the qualitative perspective was given the primacy (Quant -> QUAL). Concurrent mixed analysis, in which qualitative analysis preceded and dominated over the quantitative analysis (QUAL + quant), was employed when online course logs first underwent content analysis and then concordancing for word frequencies.

The continuous and iterative process of data analysis led to (and partly coincided with) data interpretation and report writing stage. On this stage it was found appropriate and helpful to create additional diagrams to summarize findings and to better illustrate conclusions and implications of the research.
**Legitimation**

Data collection, analysis and interpretation may not be properly conducted without addressing the issue of what Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003) call *legitimation*. Study conclusions could be made only when “the analyst believes that the interpretation represents the most plausible explanation of the underlying data (i.e., legitimation)” (ibid., p.378).

In quantitative research, legitimation involves the assessment of the quality of instruments (surveys, tests, etc.), which enables establishing *validity* and *reliability* of the study findings (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996). Validity refers “to the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of the specific inferences researchers make based on the data they collect” (ibid., p.153), while reliability – “to the consistency of the scores obtained” (ibid., p.160).

In this research two types of quantitative instruments were used: a questionnaire to conduct a survey and Simple Concordance Program to measure word frequencies in online course logs. The questionnaire was designed based on extensive literature review and included questions that were seen as most insightful for the purposes of the study on its initial stage. The questionnaire was also reviewed and approved by the research advisor who had extensive experience in study topic. This provided *content-related evidence of validity* (ibid.). Moreover, the survey quantitative results were compared to results of content analysis of qualitative data, thus enabling obtaining *criterion-related evidence of validity* (ibid.). To address the reliability issue, techniques employed in *internal-consistency methods* of establishing reliability (ibid.) were employed. The
questions in the survey were grouped according to a major theme, thus enabling comparison of answers to several questions related to the same theme.

Simple Concordancing Program is electronic software that enables researchers to calculate word frequencies for large texts (corpora). The quality of inferences based on such calculations depends on the ability of the researcher to use this software in accordance with methods of corpus-based linguistics, as well as to ask questions and draw inferences that would be considered plausible by other linguists working in this field. Thus the legitimisation depends not on the instrument but on the skills of the researcher to use the instrument. Having both a bachelor and advanced degree in linguistics and having published three articles that involved corpus-based linguistics methods, I felt confident to conduct such an analysis with appropriate rigor.

Most importantly, however, the quantitative survey results, as well as quantitative concordancing results, have been used only in combination with qualitative data. It was the qualitative data analysis that took the primacy over quantitative analysis when inferences were made. As such, the validity and reliability of findings based on quantitative data should be discussed in the context of legitimisation of qualitative findings.

In qualitative research legitimisation of study findings is commonly described as the process of establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A number of strategies were employed to establish the credibility of this research. First of all, the active phase of data collection that involved direct engagement with the participants took a period of over a year, which enabled development of in-depth
understanding of the phenomena. Secondly, the study design enabled triangulation of seven different data sources, and inferences were made based on the integration of both qualitative and quantitative data analysis, which, as outlined above, adds to the rigor of research. Third, peer debriefing was used “to enhance the accuracy of account” (Creswell, 2008, p.192). This study was reviewed by a colleague holding a PhD degree in the field of education with a substantial record of published research and with a personal experience of studying in a US university while recently emigrating from a non-western country. Finally, credibility of the research is hopefully enhanced by the researcher’s knowledge in the field of cross-cultural communication, education and linguistics, as well as researcher’s open reflection on personal biases as described in an appropriate section below.

Transferability involves the provision of “rich, thick descriptions” that enable readers to decide if findings of a given study are applicable in other contexts (Merriam, 2009, p.227). Besides detailed description of the study participants, settings, data collection and analysis methods, transferability of the current study is also enhanced by careful record keeping, generous use of quotes from qualitative data, as well as references to relevant studies that assist the readers in interpreting results and situating findings in broader perspectives. Moreover, the detailed account of quantitative results of the survey enhanced generalizability of the study findings demonstrating benefits of the mixed methods research paradigm.

Dependability, also referred to as “consistency” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), implies that the results of the study are consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 2009, p.221). Dependability of the current study is reached by means of triangulation, peer examination
and researcher’s knowledge in the subject matter and research procedures. All three of these strategies also ensure credibility and are described earlier. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also recommend that researchers use the audit trail that may help the reader to compare findings with data. The “Method” chapter of this paper provides a detailed description of the data collection and data analysis procedures, while the “Findings” chapter includes a large number of illustrative materials, both qualitative and quantitative. Moreover, there are several Appendices that may also help the reader to check the consistency of the findings.

The audit trail is also of great importance for ensuring confirmability of the research. Also described under the term “objectivity” (Shenton, 2004), confirmability refers to “the degree to which the researcher can demonstrate the neutrality of the research interpretations” (Hoepfl, 1997). All raw data for this study is archived and the “Method” chapter is providing a detailed account of the data collection and analysis. Chapter Two of this paper provides a detailed description of the theoretical perspective including a clear enumeration of the researcher’s theoretical foundations, which may enable an external auditor to understand and assess the theoretical lenses used to conduct data collection and analysis and interpret the findings.

As a researcher I fully understand that how the study was conducted and what implications were drawn might have been affected by my individual characteristics, such as my culture and educational background. Therefore the next section is devoted to the question of researcher’s objectivity.
Researcher’s Objectivity

I have a personal interest in the topic of the study and it might have been a source of bias. I am an international student from Russia and have been studying in the United States (with some breaks) since September, 1999. While most of my coursework was completed when I was a resident student, I have a substantial experience learning and teaching online. As a graduate student, I have taken two fully online courses at the University at Albany and have taught two fully online courses during several semesters. I believe that online education is not less effective than face-to-face but I learned that it usually requires more time and effort for both students and faculty to succeed. I also think that courses offered in the United States hardly ever make any adjustments for international students and that this practice is universal for both traditional and online modes of education. My personal experience and experiences of some of my friends and students, also international students, have taught me that this situation may negatively affect the process and outcome of learning and diminish the perceived learning and satisfaction from a course. While I personally have been very much satisfied with my learning experience, I believe more could be done to make this experience satisfying for other international students taking online courses offered by US educational institutions.

I agree with Merriam (1998) in that “the researcher must be sensitive to the context and all the variables within it, including the physical setting, the people, the overt and covert agendas…” (p. 21). I have a lot in common with the study participants and I dare to believe I was able to exhibit sensitivity necessary for conducting this research. On the other hand, the fact that I had had very little knowledge of the culture of the key informant Cathy before I started the research might have limited my understanding while
also supporting my curiosity, raising my interest in the Chinese culture, and inspiring me to develop new strategies for understanding factors that might have affected learning experiences of this student.

While my background could have been a source of subjectivity and bias, it gave me empathy for the study participants and their experiences. It is my hope that I was able to adopt a stance of empathic neutrality (Patton, 2001) needed to counterbalance researcher’s personal feelings and experiences related to the study topic. Moreover, the fact that I possessed the knowledge of the insider should have minimized the degree of overgeneralization and stereotyping found in some cross-cultural studies (Gunawardena et al., 2003). The employment of the mixed methods research design and multiple sources of data, prolonged engagement with the participants, as well as peer reviewing and debriefing sessions with the research advisor, served the purposes of triangulation and strengthening the trustworthiness of the research.

Chapter Summary

This study examined learning experiences of international students in the US fully online courses focusing on the cultural factors that might affect students' interactions with peers, instructors and the course content. To examine the complex interplay of host and native cultures in the US classroom, the study employed a mixed methods research paradigm where qualitative data collection and analysis methods were given the primacy over quantitative methods. Data collection and analysis was carried out in two stages. The first stage involved a survey and follow-up online interviews, while the second stage focused on a single case and collected a variety of data related to learning experiences of the key informant – Cathy, an international student from China. While Cathy's case
enabled obtaining a close-up view of the phenomenon, data that came from the survey and follow-up online interviews provided a broader perspective locating the single case into a larger picture.

The data collection took a period of over 12 months, involved 20 participants and employed five methods – the survey, online interviews, face-to-face interview, reflective journals, and documents (archived course logs). The data analysis partly coincided with the data collection period due to the interconnectedness of data sources. Sequential and concurrent mixed analyses were utilized to process qualitative and quantitative data that underwent four stages of analysis – data reduction, display, comparison, and integration.

The continuous and iterative process of data analysis led to data interpretation where the question of legitimation was given primary importance. The rigor and trustworthiness of the current study first of all are based on data triangulation and methodological triangulation. Other strategies that added to the quality and credibility of the research findings include peer-reviewing, provision of thick description, availability of audit trail and researcher’s understanding of individual strengths and weaknesses.
Chapter Four: Findings

Before presenting and discussing my research findings, I would like to restate the major tenants of the study’s theoretical framework that first guided the research process, then data analysis, and finally enabled me to build a logical progression of data interpretation that is reflected in the structure of the sections to follow.

In the Vygotskian view, human development happens in *mediated* activity. Human mental functions grow, expand and eventually move to a new level of development in interaction with two types of mediators – *human* and *symbolic*. In a formal education setting, such as an online course in a US university, instructors and peers serve as human mediators and peer-to-peer interaction is most prominent in constructivist classrooms. Symbolic mediators that constitute higher order *psychological tools* include signs, symbols, texts, formulae, and graphic organizers; they are imbedded in the content of the course and their selection is directly related to the course culture (Vygotsky, 1982; Kozulin, 2003). Classrooms under analysis in this study are mediated by US symbolic tools, with English language being most prominent.

In the context of intercultural communication, such as that which international students find themselves when starting taking classes offered in a US university, conversational partners with different cultural backgrounds may employ different (sometimes conflicting) strategies for communication (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Moreover, each interlocutor may hold membership in multiple *discourse systems* that may lead to *conflict of identity*. Differences in communication strategies and multiple discourse membership might be most prominent in situations where communication
involves representatives from Western and Asian cultures as demonstrated in numerous studies such as Scollon and Scollon (2001).

These theoretical ideas put forward by Vygotsky and Scollon and Scollon have laid the foundation for the structure of this chapter divided into four major Sections (see Figure 3). Such an organization of the Findings chapter did not only reflect the theoretical framework of the study, but also enabled the construction of a logically organized story that answers the research questions. The first two Sections are devoted to knowledge mediators that have a direct impact on the learning experiences of any student – peers and instructor. The third section focuses on the most prominent and obvious symbolic mediator – the language, which for international students studying in the non-native language environment is of particular significance. These three Sections show the affect of students’ native culture on their interactions with peers and instructors, and highlight their communicative and linguistic choices. The last section is a culmination point that bares the conflicts of identity that an international student may face in the situation of intersecting (cross-cutting) discourse systems – the discourse of a US classroom and that of her native culture. The chapter logically ends with the discussion of the new vision of teaching and learning that an international student may construct while studying in the US classroom, indicating the epistemological changes and their potential impact on a student’s future.
Figure 3. Chapter 4 sections.

To reflect the study design, where appropriate sections will have separate subsections for findings based on the survey and follow-up interview questions, as well as those findings that come from Cathy’s case. To highlight the specifics of online learning environment, discussions of online experiences will be complemented by and compared with a narrative related to on-campus learning experiences of the study participants. Each section will open up with a visual and short discussion of the section organization to assist the readers with its understanding.

I. Peers as Knowledge Mediators

Most learning situations that happen within traditional national systems of mass education involve student-to-student interactions. For many students it is classmates who make school years either enjoyable or dreadful experience. School peers often become not just friends but also more capable others that facilitate knowledge acquisition.

This section will examine the role of peers in the learning experiences of international students focusing on how students’ affiliation to their native academic discourse and culture may affect peer-to-peer relationships within the US academic discourse. Using Cathy’s data, I will also explore how the format of learning – online or
face-to-face – might affect a Chinese student’s relationship with peers within the US academic discourse.

The presentation and discussion of these topics will follow the structure outlined in Figure 4. Thus structure reflects the three major themes that cut through the research data related to peer-to-peer interaction: a) the value of learning from/with peers, b) personal relationship as a key to learning and c) peers as cultural entity.

Figure 4. The structure of Section I in Chapter 4.

The value of learning from/with peers. Survey and follow-ups. The value of learning from and with peers was a recurrent theme that surfaced throughout the whole process of data analysis beginning with the survey data. To gain an insight into students’ preferences for course activities and to learn the place of group activities among other course requirements, three survey questions asked respondents to indicate their most liked, most disliked and most difficult activities (Questions 7, 8, and 9 respectively). The results of the survey demonstrated that whole group discussions were favorite activities for 6 out of 13 respondents (Figure 5), but it was also the most disliked activity for 3 international students who completed the survey (Figure 6). Small group discussions were preferred at the same rate as reading lectures and individual projects (Figure 5): four respondents enjoyed discussing topics in small groups, while none of the respondents named this activity as most disliked or most difficult. Team projects, on the other hand,
were selected as the most liked and as the most difficult activity only once by two
different respondents (see Figure 5 and Figure 7 respectively).

Activities that do not generally involve interaction with peers also had their fair
share in students’ answers. Individual projects, reading lectures, and reading course texts
were among favorites for 4, 4, and 3 respondents respectively (see Figure 5). Individual
projects were also selected as the most disliked activity by 2 respondents and as the most
difficult activity by 4 respondents and (Figure 6 and Figure 7 respectively).

**Figure 5.** Question 7 results.\footnote{9}

![Figure 5](image)

**Figure 6.** Question 8 results.

\footnote{9} Here and later in other graphs, bars represent the number of respondents who selected a
particular answer choice.
Figure 7. Question 9 results.

These results could be indicative of the most popular activities selected by course designers. Whole group and small group discussions, as well as individual projects, are very common in online courses and it is not a surprise that students select these activities so often. However, follow-up interview results added a new insight to this. Interviews with five self-selected survey participants, who provided their justification for the answer choices, indicated that they valued experiences and knowledge that their peers bring to class. Moi enjoyed whole class discussions because they “tend to clarify the class readings and also present the topics from different perspectives” (Moi, follow-up online interview, May 2009), while CJ granted similar values to small group discussions that she saw as a place for sharing, broadening and exploring ideas of other people.

The survey participants who took part in the follow-up interview also explained the value of individual course activities. Amanda, who selected reading course books as her most liked activity, enjoyed the ability to access information as often as she needed and perceived reading books as an easy activity. Cathy saw books as a source of new and valuable information that enriches her knowledge of theory while informing her about
“specific cases” she was not aware of before. On the other hand, CJ disliked reading textbooks, explaining it by her preference for “more active” learning and for using visuals as learning tools.

As for the most difficult activities, individual projects and essays scored the highest votes. Moi, who selected individual projects as the most difficult (along with quizzes and tests), felt it was his indecisive and procrastinating nature that made these activities harder than others. However other follow-up interviewees found another reason that lies outside of individual characteristics of a student. This reason was best summarized in CJ's explanation of her dislike for individual projects: she wrote “two heads are better than one” (CJ, follow-up online interview, January, 2010). Amanda repeated CJ's idea by saying “it is hard to manage and think about a whole idea by oneself” (Amanda, follow-up online interview, May 2009). Clearly, the lack of someone to turn to in order to discuss the project, share ideas, learn how-tos, and get a push to avoid procrastination were seen as factors that made learning more difficult for these international students.

A quite interesting explanation for selecting class discussions as the most difficult was provided by HS. While he felt that the written mode of communication was more helpful than difficult, it was the lack of an immediate reply to his messages that frustrated him:

By discussion, I felt easy to talk with my classmates. Writing English is easier than speaking English because I can organize the words. The difficulty is that I cannot get response directly. Maybe I have to wait for days or even no one
responded. I don’t like asynchronous discussions (HS, follow-up interview, March 2009).

This adds a new dimension to thinking about online discussions as a form of natural computer-mediated communication (CMC). This issue of delayed response articulated by HS will be explored in more detail later in this chapter in the section devoted to language as a mediating tool.

Online asynchronous discussions were not the only means of communication among the online students. Amanda reported having discussed course matters with classmates via IM and Skype. Having lived on-campus while taking an online course, she took advantage of face-to-face meetings with her online classmates. HS also indicated that on-campus meetings with his peers enabled him to understand course requirements better and to learn how to learn in a US university: “I just felt difficult to know what to do next. After several homework and discussion with my classmates (face to face), I began to be used to learn” (HS, follow-up interview, March 2009).

Overall results of the survey and interviews with the follow-up interviewees reveal that international students may value group activities for the ability to connect with their peers, learn from their experiences and take advantage of their knowledge of the field of study. Group activities enable the international student to compensate for the lack of psychological tools (Vygotsky, 1978) which are culture specific and therefore are not readily available to students who are new to a host culture. This is further confirmed by data derived from Cathy’s case study.

Cathy’s case. Group work as the best format for learning. Cathy’s responses in the survey, interviews and her course transcripts demonstrate her strong preference for
learning with and from peers. Her need and desire to learn from her classmates are evident in a number of discussion posts she addressed to her classmates throughout the course:

I am very pleased to know you experienced classmates and hope that I can learn from you (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

Honestly, as a foreign speaker, I am not very confident about my English literacy. I hope I can learn from you day by day (ibid.).

As a native Chinese speaker, I think there are a lot of points in your summary from which I could learn (ibid.).

The following post, however, illustrates Cathy’s difficulties related to using communication strategies valued in her newly adapted learning community:

I am partially satisfied with the quality of my posts on relevance and truism, but very disappointed with my interaction with my peers in class and my skills for moving the discussion forward (Cathy, retrospective analysis, online course assignment, January-May 2009).

Holding a strong belief in a value of learning from and with peers, Cathy understands that she needs to develop skills required to perform well in American-centric online discussions. Apparently, she found that small group activities are more appropriate for her learning style and her learning needs. In her survey, she selected small group discussions, chats and team projects as her favorite activities, and the only individual activity that she favored was reading textbooks. However, Cathy chose whole group discussions as her least favorite activity because she felt they tend to be “more general and superficial” (Cathy, follow-up interview, May 2009) than small group discussions.
When justifying her positive attitude to small group discussions, Cathy talked about their role in promoting “deep discussions” (Cathy, follow-up interview, May 2009) and encouraging interpersonal communication. Team projects in her assessment are described as activities where “each team member can make best use of their personal strengths to co-labor under one task...” (Cathy, follow-up interview, May 2009). Clearly Cathy places high value on cooperation and collaboration and sees benefits of uniting team efforts for producing the best possible learning outcome.

Cathy further reveals why some international students may find individual projects difficult and may prefer group projects:

Since it is my first course taken outside China, and it is in my second language, I am not very familiar with something like the right format of an [essay] and the criteria of good individual projects. By doing team projects, I learn from other team member and I grow out of it as well (Cathy, follow-up interview, May 2009).

This quote points to the fact that international students’ learning experiences may be complicated by their lack of familiarity with the format of activities used in the US academic discourse. As outlined above, follow-up interview participants also pointed to this issue. Similar findings are reported in a number of studies that explored learning experiences of international students studying on campus and online (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010; Krampetz, 2005; Labour, 2001; Thomson & Ku, 2005). In Vygotsky’s terms this could be explained by the mismatch of psychological tools that exists between educational systems in the US and outside of it. Moreover, Cathy’s previous educational experience did not provide her with strategies for applying those psychological tools in
ways that are generally expected in the US academic discourse. For example, in her retrospective analysis of a team project, Cathy describes her newly acquired skills working on a team project in a small group:

In this module 3, our group did a wonderful job in assigning roles to each player and finally in coming up with a satisfying presentation in the format of PPT. I find it quite a novel idea to work together on a project that can incorporate not only plain words but picture, video, shape and color. Each member in our group was assigned a part out of the whole text so that when all parts were done, the coordinator of our team edited it as the final step to make it smooth in coherence and logic. . . I learn a lot through this process regarding the media use and the team work (Cathy, retrospective analysis, online course assignment, January-May 2009).

Collaborative work, where group members split responsibilities as they develop a group product, seemed to be a new idea for Cathy. The skills for working collaboratively, however, are essential for successful group work in the US education setting. In Asian cultures such as Taiwanese, working cooperatively on a learning product, i.e., not splitting work but rather doing it together, is more common as pointed out in Ingram and Hathorn (2004). Data indicates that Cathy first failed to do her part of the work, but her group mates were able to provide adequate scaffolding and demonstrated how to work in groups the American way. Cathy’s later posts demonstrate that she grasped the idea very

---

10 It is worth mentioning that collaborative rather than cooperative learning seems to be more appropriate for online learning when mostly asynchronous forms of communication are employed. In a situation when team members are divided geographically and have 12 hours time difference, face-to-face meetings are out of the question while synchronous web conferences are possible but still difficult to set up due to time difference, potential technical problems, cost, and possible lack of experience in online team work.
well: she readily informed her group mates of her progress, encouraged them to do their part and thanked them for the work done:

Hi everyone, I think it is good to use google docs again this time. I will have my reading finished by Sunday and write something as well. If you have any ideas about our assignment, it is very welcome (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

All, I did my part today and am going to polish it tomorrow when I can get something better from net when I am available from work. Thank you for your hard and excellent work and I will let you know if I have any new idea re this presentation (ibid.).

Besides learning how-tos of online team projects and experiencing a positive outcome, Cathy also learned that online team projects that involve members who have different schedules and live on different sides of the world may face logistical problems:

The frustrating part however, is that not all of us four are flexible in schedule and I have a problem of time difference (Cathy, retrospective analysis, online course assignment, January-May 2009).

Logistical difficulties associated with global e-learning that involves participants from different parts of the world are documented in literature (Ishikawa, 2002; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009; Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008). Cathy, who lived in Shanghai, China while taking an online course, had to factor in a 12-hour difference with her American classmates who lived in the US and relatively close to the main university campus. Therefore scheduling real-time communication via Skype or other web conferencing software was problematic for her. However, she made every effort to be
online with her group mates while also actively utilizing asynchronous forms of communication to post her part of the work and consult with team members. This was evident in her messages to group members where she wrote about her personal schedule, asked peers to inform her about online group meeting, and actively discussed upcoming assignments.

Not only did peers serve as mediators of factual information for Cathy, but they were also her *source of inspiration*. “Jennie,¹¹ I can always feel “power” in your words which makes me even more eager to be an educator” (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009), Cathy wrote in her discussion post. She also thanked another classmate whose thoughts on multicultural education she found inspiring:

Donna, It is an interesting idea to learn to be more generous and tolerant towards students of multi-cultures by reflecting upon and analyzing the reason of our different perspectives of being a good educator or a learner due to diverse races and history. The idea of discussing is good itself. Thanks for the inspiration (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

Cathy’s words support the “nonadditive nature of human interaction” (Zukerman, 2003), i.e., the idea that a group product is more than the sum of operations done by each group member. Learning with peers, Cathy received more than just the content knowledge: she was also inspired and empowered and thus ready to conquer new heights in her life.

*Cathy’s online instructor’ reflections.* Cathy’s online instructor also noticed the importance of peers for Cathy’s success in the course:

---

¹¹ Here and later real students' names are replaced with fictional names.
The notion of working in groups for those who are new to online learning tends to be unsettling at first, especially for those unaccustomed to working in groups as part of instruction. Cathy, from China, fell behind early on as she was unclear about how the course worked, but quickly caught up with the help of her group members (Cathy’s online instructor, online interview, August 2009).

Cathy’s instructor’s observations speak for the valuable help that Cathy was able to receive from her classmates. They also suggest that anyone with little experience working on online team activities within a constructivist classroom needs to be provided with assistance and extra scaffolding to ensure that she/he understands the rules of working on an online team and collaborating on a group product. Such an activity might be unfamiliar to some international students, as indicated in Cathy’s own posts, in the post of her instructor and in related literature (Gazi, 2009; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009). Without extra help of the peers and/or instructor, a student may fall behind and eventually drop out of the course. In Cathy’s case such help was especially important at the beginning of the course. Cathy reported being overwhelmed by the amount of work she did not expect to have. She also blamed her shy nature that prevented her from asking for help from her peers from the very beginning:

I think it was mainly because I was kind of shocked by the amount of assignment required by instructor. I have to say at the very beginning, I had no idea about what it was like to do a good project. And it was a little bit difficult for me to finish all reading in time, given they are heavy in amount and they are in English rather than Chinese. Besides, I was sometimes shy to turn to my classmates for
help but I successfully adapted to learn to resort to others in the end” (Cathy, follow-up interview, May 2009).

Clearly, it was Cathy’s lack of previous experience working in US graduate courses that caused her initial disappointing performance. She did not expect to have such heavy reading requirements. Moreover, her previous educational experience (all in China and all face-to-face) did not provide her with adequate psychological tools for learning. It was Cathy’s group mates who basically took a traditionally instructor’s role in ensuring that she stayed afloat, caught up and eventually succeeded in her educational journey through foreign bumpy roads with minimal road signs. Using Cathy’s online instructor’s words, American classmates took international students “under their wings and mentored them along” (Cathy’s online instructor, online interview, August 2009). However, it was the instructor who set up team projects that ensured that Cathy had those mentors to help her.

*On-campus interaction with peers.* Cathy’s on-campus experience that she reflected upon not only in her journals but also in the face-to-face interview, confirmed her belief in the importance of peer-to-peer communication. The number of times she confessed that interacting with classmates in class or outside of it was the highlight of her one-semester study in the US. Data demonstrate that Cathy’s on-campus courses were also student-centered and placed emphasis on students’ cooperation and co-construction of knowledge, something that Cathy enjoyed a lot:

…. Again in this class, instructor allowed us to sit in circle, so that we can talk in a free, open and on a collaborative way. And I heard about a lot of interesting
things happened to my classmates too. I enjoyed it so much (Cathy, reflective journal, October 2009).

I felt very comfortable with the process that each of us from different cultural backgrounds shared personal views and then collaborated to make comparison based on which we draw conclusion (Cathy, reflective journal, September 2009).

Studying on-campus Cathy further enriched her arsenal of US specific psychological tools related to the content of the subjects she studied and to the form of activities she had to perform in classes. A vivid example of this was her clinic class where she had to design and actually teach a language lesson. She reported feeling uneasy not having a background in foreign language teaching and having very little knowledge of the educational system in the US. However she showed her strong desire to succeed in many ways relying on the help of her classmates:

I felt a little bit nervous honestly, ‘cause I have to admit many of the topics or academic terms or educational concepts, organizations and the like are quite unfamiliar to me. I have a real eager to learn and to be a productive and contributive member of my group and my class. . . (Cathy, reflective journal, September 2009).

Cathy’s learning experience was also enriched by preparing and taking part in a live group presentation, which was a completely new form of academic activity for her. The following quote shows that Cathy acquired a new perspective over group work, its process and outcome:

It made me think that rather than being a monodrama, the class presentation should be “a whole piece of cake” where every member concerned could be
engaged in by contributing a variety of personal opinions and ideas to it.

Moreover, it is really important that you value teamwork when group assignment is concerned (Cathy, reflective journal, September 2009).

When asked to compare online and on-campus learning experiences, Cathy pointed out that online learning has its advantages such as constant availability of course content. However, she did not hesitate to favor a traditional form of learning for one major reason – the ability to have face-to-face communication with her classmates. Once again Cathy showed her preference for co-learning with peers, while seeing on-campus learning to be more appropriate for international students like her:

People like me have low concentration span that doesn't last that long like 2-3 hours, I could have missed something, I may ask my peers to help me with some stuff, so I turn to them. And it is only on campus. I mean you have some peer relationship with them and you would like to help them, rather than you try searching everything by yourself. So you can have cooperation with peers you are familiar with (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).

Apparently it was much easier for Cathy to receive a helping hand from her on-campus peers than from her online classmates. This ease seems to be related to the absence of an additional medium – the computer – that would stand between her and peers and would make help delivery less convenient, i.e., more difficult to show the need for help, more time consuming, more prone to misunderstanding, etc. For instance, in her journal she described how helpful were her face-to-face group mates in developing a unit plan for the clinics class. Designing a lesson for English learners based on theories and practices supported in the US was very challenging for Cathy, and it was her classmates
whose ideas and feedback helped her do it well. Not having teaching experience, Cathy was particularly appreciative of her classmate who gave pedagogical advice and reassured her of her abilities:

After the class, I talked with my classmate, telling him my concern of my performance on my clinic classes that are coming. He assured me that I can deal with these students very well as long as I sufficiently prepare in advance and I can find them interesting topics. Inspired by him, I am now thinking of developing some ideas of my native culture which is traditional Chinese, such as the Mid-autumn Festival and incorporate it into my lesson plan (Cathy, reflective journal, October 2009).

Data reveal that when learning on-campus, Cathy took advantage of learning not only in class but also between classes when she had a chance to discuss course topics informally. The following quote from her journal reveals that in some cases Cathy saw peers as more desirable capable others than her instructor even when she had a direct access to instructor’s help:

But, we really hate the feeling of getting totally lost when professor tried to make sense of a new concept of leadership, he always would like to refer to other theories about communication that my peers know very well, the theories I have no idea at all. He seemed to love to do that! Not to make myself look stupid, I would consult my classmates for missed points during break, rather than pointing them out directly to professor at class. I don’t know if students from other cultures in my position would have done the same, I just felt comfortable this way (Cathy, reflective journal, October 2009).
In her interviews Cathy indicated that interrupting an instructor for asking clarification questions was not a common practice in her native educational discourse as this might be perceived as very rude and inappropriate; this finding aligns with descriptions of Asian students who grew up in Confucian societies (Greenholtz, 2003). Showing everyone that she did not know the topic that everyone else seemed to be knowledgeable about indicates Cathy's fear of negative evaluation and loosing face. Asking peers or most probably one or two particular students she knew well was probably a less face threatening experience for her. Obviously this is a cultural phenomenon as Cathy indicates herself. Saving face for Asian people might be more important than having a definite answer, which is demonstrated in a number of studies including Scollon and Scollon’s (2001).

Summing up, data suggest that international students taking online courses in the US may find themselves in the class built on student-centered practices that encourage peer-to-peer interactions. International students may like taking advantage of class discussions, team projects, chats, and other collaborative activities. They appreciate such an opportunity and they value their classmates’ readiness to share their knowledge and experience. Peers may successfully assume the role of a more capable other by contributing not only to the course content but what is often more valuable for international students, to the peers’ understanding of the course activities, projects’ formats, academic writing and presentation conventions, and to the self-confidence of those who need reassurance of their abilities. Those international students who study on-
campus might also enjoy the benefits of face-to-face interaction with peers both in class and out-of-class.

While study findings speak for the benefits of a constructivist classroom for international students who took part in this study, they might not be widely generalized. It is worth reminding here that previous studies reported that international students might feel uncomfortable participating in discussions and team projects with American peers due to inadequate language skills (Ciano, 2003; Lee, 2007; Zhang & Kenny, 2010), uncertain or culturally inappropriate rules of communication (Hewling, 2005; Shattuck, 2005; Pan, Tsai, Tsai, Tao & Cornell, 2003), somewhat aggressive and critical form of discussions (Al-Harthi, 2005; Thomson & Ku, 2005), or unfamiliar, unclear or culturally unacceptable rules of working on a team (Chen, Hsu, & Caropreso, 2006; Ishikawa, 2002; Shattuck, 2005). In some cases this may result in marginalization and isolation of international students (Shattuck, 2005). However, as we see in Cathy’s case, this discomfort, which at the beginning may hinder student’s participation, may then be overcome and lead to a very fulfilling and rewarding learning experience. Peers’ assistance is most valuable in this process.

**Personal relationship as a key to learning. Cathy’s online experience.** Cathy’s discussion posts, messages to her group mates, reflective journals and interview transcripts are full of sentences that emphasize the importance of a social factor in learning. She repeatedly stresses the necessity to establish an interpersonal relationship with her classmates:
I need to talk more with my instructor and my classmates, building up interpersonal relationship to facilitate active communication (Cathy, reflective journal, September 2009).

Small group discussion encourages more interpersonal communication and deep discussion (Cathy, follow-up interview, May 2009).

The very fact that small-group activities are her favorite illustrates Cathy’s desire to establish a closer relationship with others with whom she shares a learning space. Her classmates become her family, where “I” is a part of “we” and where a success of one member is seen as a success of the whole group. This is evident in the following messages Cathy addressed to her team members:

As a native Chinese speaker, I think there are a lot of points in your summary from which I could learn. However, what is more important is that you follow the thread we keep throughout the whole process of discussion and your words are so inspiring and encouraging. I am so proud of being a member of this family (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

I quite enjoy the way you follow the thread of connecting all 5 articles which is much much better than that of mine. Happy to learn from. We are No.1!!! (ibid.).

Clearly Cathy demonstrates her longing for social presence. Social presence, along with teaching presence and cognitive presence, constitute the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) that has been widely used as a leading theoretical model guiding studies in online learning in higher education (Shea et al, 2010). Social presence in traditional face-to-face communication context is described as “feeling intimacy or togetherness in terms of sharing time and place” (Shin,
In an online learning environment, social presence is “the degree to which a person is perceived as “real” in mediated communication” (Ganawardena & Zittle, 1997, p. 8); it is “about relationships, connecting with others despite physical separation” (Irwin & Berge, 2006). In the absence of a face-to-face contact, such a relationship is not easy to develop and maintain, however it is possible in the classroom built on the constructivist ideas that promote a high level of interaction and engagement among peers (Lock, 2002).

Cathy’s and her online classmates’ engagement in the learning process and interest in each others’ affairs is evident in the high frequency of pronouns they used referring to themselves and others when exchanging messages in the discussion forum. Table 2 below demonstrates that personal pronouns (I, my, you, they, we, etc.), as well as possessive pronouns and determiners (me, mine, our, yours, etc.), were frequently utilized by Cathy and her American peers. The high frequency of such pronouns contributes to social presence. Personal pronouns are often used in sentences where students share details of their personal experiences and where they express emotions. Self-disclosure and open expression of emotions are evidences of social presence (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999), just as a high frequency of possessive pronouns that are believed to be indicative of community (Hughes, Ventura, & Dando, 2007).

While the high frequency of pronouns is seen in both corpuses, comparison of two groups showed a significant difference in how often particular pronouns are used. As seen in Table 3, American students more frequently use pronouns that refer to themselves (I, my, mine, me), to the conversational partner (you, your, yours) and other people (they, their, them), while Cathy excels in the usage of the first person plural pronouns we, us,
our, and ours. Z-test for proportions revealed that this difference is significant on the 99% confidence level. This result might speak for cultural differences that exist between Cathy, who comes from a collectivistic society, and her American peers who grow up in the highly individualistic US culture. The usage of these inclusive pronouns (we, us, our) is an indication of cohesion that contributes to social presence (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999). Thus high frequency of these pronouns in the discussion posts shows its author’s need to be a part of a community. This need seems to be more essential for Cathy than for her American peers whose individualistic culture promotes personal independence, and self-fulfillment (Neuliep, 2009) and therefore, where I identity dominates we identity (Ting-Toomey, 1988 as cited in Lee, 2007).

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Cathy N = 16660 Nfreq = 2489</th>
<th>American Students N = 70866 Nfreq = 5424</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I (264) + my (79) + me (33) + mine (2)</td>
<td>2.27** (378)</td>
<td>I (1629) + my (312) + me (128) + mine (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We (186) + us (23) + our (49) + ours (1)</td>
<td>1.55** (259)</td>
<td>We (529) + us (91) + our (266) + ours (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They (60) + their (68) + them (33) + themselves (6)</td>
<td>1.0** (167)</td>
<td>They (474) + their (364) + them (198) + themselves (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You (105) + your (44)</td>
<td>.89** (149)</td>
<td>You (556) + your (291) + yours (2), yourself (3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1: Frequency is given in per cent. Raw numbers are provided in brackets.

Note 2: Calculations based on Z-test for two proportions (independent groups).

Calculator located at [http://www.mccallum-layton.co.uk/stats/ZTestTwoTailSampleValues.aspx](http://www.mccallum-layton.co.uk/stats/ZTestTwoTailSampleValues.aspx)

*N is word count, i.e., overall number of words in corpus. Nfreq is word vocabulary, i.e., number of different words in the corpus.

**p<=.01, two-tailed
Cathy’s willingness and necessity to feel personally connected to her online peers is also well illustrated in a particularly close relationship, one may classify as a friendship, with Jennie, one of the team members with whom Cathy worked throughout the whole online course and also did a pair project. Course transcripts and interviews revealed that both Jennie and Cathy interacted with each other on a regular basis and utilized not only discussion spaces set up in the online learning platform, but also a synchronous form of communication – particularly Skype, that enabled them to carry on real-time conversations. Evidently, Cathy gained a lot from these conversations; she valued this relationship and openly expressed her appreciation of the friend's role in her professional growth:

Jennie, I have to say that my personal online talk with you is one of the most impressing experiences in this semester. I learned a lot from you by this live talk and I do hope that we can have more chance to exchange like this which greatly shortens the geographical distance between U.S and China (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

Virtual friendship could have even led to actual friendship as Cathy and Jennie had agreed to meet on campus when Cathy arrived in the US the following semester. Cathy seemed to be very excited about such a possibility when writing “Keep in touch and I am looking forward to seeing you and your daughter in [name of the city] this coming fall.” However, they had not met by the time Cathy was interviewed in the second half of the semester that she spent in the US. When asked why, Cathy explained that Jennie was very busy taking a quarter course and doing other work. When saying so, Cathy seemed to be disappointed at the missed opportunity to carry friendship over from
a virtual to traditional format. Moreover, there were some indications that Cathy did not feel like talking much about this issue as she switched the topic twice when being asked about this friendship. However, at the same time she also seemed to be very excited with her new friendly relationship which she developed with her other on-campus classmates.

**Cathy’s on-campus experience.** It was the on-campus friendly relationship with her peers that Cathy clearly valued in the traditional learning environment. She expressed her strong preference for on-campus learning because she believed that face-to-face interaction encourages the development of a personal relationship making communication more “human”. This “human” nature of on campus learning is evident, for example, in this quote from Cathy’s face-to-face interview:

> If you compare this situation, on campus is small, more human, which means you can talk to each other in real situation, and you can feel them not only by the words, which are quite plain, but you can also feel you peers' personality when talking … Just like here. I am here now, so I get to know my friends who are Americans or people from other countries. They know your face, they know your personality, and if they like you, they like to be with you whenever you have problem, they would like to help you. So, it's more human (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).

Here again Cathy emphasizes the value of peers in learning and the importance of personal contact for bringing out a ‘human’ in a classmate that in a virtual environment can be seen as less “real” and available to offer help. Clearly for Cathy peers are not just knowledge mediators: they humanize the learning process making it more enjoyable and less stressful. Here is how she describes her on-campus clinic class:
I really felt like I was immersing in my learning about how to teach and I enjoyed it so much. My master teachers and all my group peers gave me not only a lot of constructive idea but emotional support (Cathy, reflective journal, October 2009).

We see that Cathy’s interest in live communication with peers went beyond a pure cognitive domain. On-campus life enabled Cathy to get on friendly terms with peers and receive their emotional support. This was especially important for her because she was living in a foreign country and did not have support of her family and friends that she left in China. Her classmates provided her with such a support system and their help, encouragement, and praise served as an important factor that contributed to her learning satisfaction as it is evident in the following quote from her reflective journal:

Today is a big day for our group and we presented our case study which was about reading aloud to the whole audience. It was successful. After class, several of my peers came up to me and spoke highly of my performance by saying that my part was compelling and obviously they felt that I knew how to make a speech clear by using strategies such as pausing, stressing and intonation when it was necessary. I was so glad to hear that since I had not expected it at all. It was a big reward to the efforts I have done upon my presentation and my group work as well. . . I know that my peers may be kindly flattering me, still I felt very happy (Cathy, reflective journal, October 2009).

The next quote also shows that making friends in the host country may be essential for international students like Cathy; they become a source of confidence and happiness and make an invaluable contribution to the successful learning experience on campus:

125
I think being an international student, one thing is that really important is to establish the relationship with people. It's very-very important. Otherwise you will feel very-very lonely without any friends whether these are friends in China or friends in America. You need friends wherever you are. Friends that help you build your confidence, build your happiness. So, it's really important for international students (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).

On-campus studies also provided Cathy with opportunities for informal communication with peers. Data indicates that the online course that Cathy took did not provide much space for social talk that would go beyond academic topics. For Cathy this was a disappointing point and a reason to favor traditional face-to-face classes:

I mean everybody working online and have very busy schedule and what we usually do is talking about assignments a teacher asks us to do and, so we are only working on this part but beyond that – nothing (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).

This ‘nothing’ was said with a tone that suggested Cathy’s frustration and willingness to have social talks on non-academic topics. Even though online learning management systems (LMS) often provide a special space for informal communication, such as a Bulletin Board, practice shows that they are not very popular. Online discussions are generally initiated by instructors who do not offer non-academic topics for discussions. On the other hand on-campus instructors in the US are more inclined to incorporate informal communication in their classes: telling about one’s family, life experience or joking are often perceived as a good way to build a friendly atmosphere, bring variety in the classroom, and eventually ease the process of learning content.
knowledge. It is also not an uncommon practice to have food in class or through a party at the end of the semester as it was the case with one of Cathy’s classes:

[The class X] reached its climax at the night when we had a party with all teachers and students joining in it. We ate delicious pizza and home-made food brought by participants… With it and sound music, we laughed and shared with each other wonderful memory we had had in this semester. I really enjoy it so much, since back home in China, we seldom have party like this at the end of academic terms. I think it is a good occasion for people developing personal friendship, or telling some truth outside classroom (Cathy, reflective journal, December 2009).

Describing another out-of-class gathering, Cathy talks about the joy of face-to-face communication and its benefits for learning motivation:

We talked a lot, on a good variety of topics, not limiting on education but more interesting experiences. It was just like old friends chatting with each other. I felt like a real member of a team with these amiable faces of my classmates in my mind. The thing is if it was online, I could never have had chance to know these friendly guys in such a close way. Face-to-face talk stands out at this point, given the fact that with this kind of zero-distance exchange, I am more motivated or willing to communicate (Cathy, reflective journal, September 2009).

Again we see that for Cathy face-to-face meetings were associated with a much desired opportunity to build personal relationship with classmates, to feel connected to them on a personal level, and to discuss matters unrelated to course subjects. Cathy’s verdict as to the level of her social involvement when learning online and on-campus was predictable:
Compared with learning online, I thought learning on campus made me feel more involved. It must have something to do with the personal relationship/friendship built by physically meeting each other in the class every week (Cathy, reflective journal, January 2010).

Thus, establishing a personal friendly relationship with classmates may become a matter of necessity for international students like Cathy. This aligns with research findings that demonstrate that “social interaction with people from the United States seemed to have a positive effect on international students by linking them to resources, increasing satisfaction levels, decreasing alienation, and enhancing the adaptation process” (Kim & Sedlasek, 1995, p.6). Being electronically mediated, online socialization is more complicated than face-to-face socialization (Irwin & Berge, 2006). Data presented above reveals that lack of personal interaction with peers that is available on campus may be perceived as a significant disadvantage of online learning. This aligns with Thomson and Ku’s study (2005) that demonstrated that Chinese online students were not satisfied with peer interaction within an online course and did not experience the online course as a place to build friendship and learn their culture.

However Cathy’s data, and specifically her close interaction with one of her online classmates, supports other previous findings (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rovai, 2002) that showed that an online classroom built on collaborative learning activities enables the development of social presence, i.e., it does provide space for developing a personal relationship. Still, because the development of a social presence in an online environment requires more effort, international students like Cathy may avoid online courses or minimize the number of courses they take at a time if given a choice (Tan,
Nabb, Aagard, & Kim, 2010; Thomson & Ku, 2005). This might be more so for students from collectivistic high-context cultures than for their peers from individualistic low-context cultures: the need for “togetherness” is more prominent for those whose “I” is more often blended with “we” as we see it was for Cathy. This supports Morse’s (2003) findings which reported that online students from high-context cultures (China, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) lamented about not being able to form social relationships with counterparts, which was not the case with students from low-context cultures (the US, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand).

Overall Cathy’s data confirms that “online learning communities are networks of social relationships, where engagement and interaction are critical factors within a constructivist learning environment” (Lock, 2002, p. 396).

**Peers as a cultural entity.** For international students like Cathy establishing personal relationships may mean more than availability of peers’ help with academic matters. Data show that Cathy’s high interest in making American friends was in many ways based on her desire to learn the culture of her peers. Her individual curiosity, as well as her professional interests (majoring in TESOL she would have been taught the importance of learning about target culture) might be the two major sources of her willingness to learn the culture. For Cathy the very possibility to learn the host culture was the major point of attraction for studying on campus:

Being an international student, the biggest motivation for me is that you get into the culture, be assimilated into the culture. So when this aspect is concern, I'd rather say that you should be exposed to the culture by being on campus, being involved in f2f classroom (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).
In her interview she also suggested that face-to-face learning context, unlike an online classroom, tends to stimulate and provoke conversations about so-called “low” culture, i.e., everyday culture associated with common people lives – their hobbies, food, family, etc.:

Because I am not the culture of my peers, so we may not have a lot of things to talk the thing he may be interested in, but I am not. So when you are here [on campus] you kind of motivated to learn the culture, to be engaged with them, you are kind of be pushed to get to know them, like to talk about something else but the course thing, I mean academic. Like talk about the food, or family, or your interests, hobby. Things you would never-ever talk when working online (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).

Data, however, demonstrate that Cathy used the online format often for learning cultural phenomena associated with the American educational system. The online course she took provided a comfortable platform for discussing cultural differences in the system of education: course activities required students to make these cultural differences visible. Therefore Cathy felt it was appropriate to talk about her native culture, as well as directly ask her peers to share their cultural experiences with her. For example, after describing teaching and learning styles in China, she hoped to get similar knowledge from her peers when writing: “It would be great if any of you can explain a little and make some comparison re what I have mentioned above” (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009). Later one may find more of Cathy’s response stimulating sentences such as this: “I am interested to know how you do in US classroom to achieve this goal” (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).
Cathy’s use of the online environment to discuss both her own and the host cultures became even more visible after online course transcripts underwent quantitative analysis with the help of concordancing software. Table 4 below shows the results of frequency counts for words *China/Chinese, U.S./US/USA*, and *America/American*.

**Table 4**

*Frequency of Words (Lemmas) Associated with Cathy’s and Her Peers’ Cultures*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cathy</th>
<th>American Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China (57) +Chinese (27)</td>
<td>.5** (84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US, U.S., USA</td>
<td>.18** (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americ* (American, America)</td>
<td>.12** (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>.8 (134)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Significantly different proportions as compared to the other group (confidence interval >= 99%, p<=0.01, 2-tailed), based on Z-test for two proportions (independent groups).

The table demonstrates that both Cathy and her American peers talked about their cultures quite often: Cathy used these words 134 times (.8%) and her peers 76 times (.1%). However it was Cathy who took an initiative in these discussions and provoked her peers for discussions. The z-test for proportions (confidence interval >= 99%) showed significant differences in the frequency of usage of these words. The total numbers also show that Cathy was 8 times more inclined to discuss the two cultures than her peers (.8% vs. .1%). Clearly this demonstrates how important is the question of culture for Cathy and how much space her native Chinese culture takes in her world picture.
Fortunately for her the course topics included the discussion of culture and apparently Cathy took every opportunity to talk about her own culture, make inquiries about the US culture and compare the two.

The questions of culture will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter in Section IV. However the evidence provided above already shows that for international students peer-to-peer learning may encompass learning each others’ cultures. Such culture exchange might be of no less importance for some international students than acquiring content knowledge and studying US academic writing, presentation conventions and other tools of learning in the US. For Cathy and other international students similar to her, face-to-face interaction with peers provides a better context for learning culture, particularly “low” culture related to students’ everyday personal life. Similar findings are reported in Tan, Nabb, Aagard, and Kim (2010), in which international students from China, Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Russia, and Egypt felt that an online environment was unable to promote cultural understanding as well as a traditional learning format. However data also demonstrate that Cathy’s online course provided ample opportunities for talking about cultural differences in the educational systems of two countries – US and China. Thus, while the online learning environment is currently dominated by Western cultures (Lum, 2009; Smith & Aycrs, 2006), it is not inherently insensitive to cultures of its inhabitants, and online courses may incorporate meaningful and relevant discussions that promote cultural awareness.

Section summary. This section focused on international students’ experiences related to peer-to-peer learning. It demonstrated that international students’ affiliation to their native academic discourses and culture may necessitate a close relationship with
peers they meet in the US courses. This need is grounded in the inadequate command of psychological tools that an international student is required to use when functioning in the US academic discourse. Longing for friendship with American peers could also be explained by students’ high interest in learning host culture in its broad sense. Thus peers become invaluable mediators of knowledge for international students who seek peer assistance to compensate for the lack of culture-specific knowledge and skills and to satisfy their interest in host culture. In online context, students may receive peer assistance in collaborative activities set up by their instructors. While the survey participants did not show the overwhelming approval of all collaborative activities, follow-up interviews with selected survey participants and in-depth analysis of Cathy’s case data demonstrated important advantages of constructivist activities where American students are able to perform as more capable others and take international students “under their wings and [mentor] them along” (Cathy’s online instructor, online interview, August 2009). In Vygotsky’s terms, international students work within their zone of proximate development (ZPD) supported by American peers. An important element of this finding is that the instructor is the one who sets up peer support groups when designing collaborative course activities, and this process may matter a great deal to how international students are included in such work.

Cathy’s case data also demonstrated the significance of social relationships that students, especially those that come from collectivistic high-context cultures, may seek in any format of learning – online or traditional. Developing personal relationships with peers was reported to be highly desirable for ensuring peers’ assistance and for satisfying Cathy’s interest in the host culture. Cathy’s data suggest that students like her may
perceive an online environment as less social and therefore may prefer the traditional format of learning.

II. Instructor as a Knowledge Mediator

A role of the instructor in a student’s learning experience could not be overestimated. By his/her very status, it is the instructor who is seen as a primary more capable other responsible for assisting students. It is the instructor who sets up and orchestrates the course functions determining how the members of the learning community interact with each other, if at all. The instructor acts according to the rules accepted by the academic discourse that she or he belongs to. As such, the roles that she/he plays in the classroom are culture specific and may differ from culture to culture in a significant way thus complicating learning experiences of international students as was demonstrated in previous studies (Shattuck, 2005; Thomson & Ku, 2005; Wang, 2007).

In this section the roles of the instructor in the US will be described and compared to the roles that instructors may play in other countries, particularly in China where Cathy, the key informant of this study, was born and raised. This section will continue describing and analyzing Cathy’s learning experiences while involving survey and follow-up interview data coming from other students thus providing a broader understanding of the impact of international students native culture on learning in the US.

The section will focus on the following questions:

1. What roles might an instructor play in the learning experiences of international students, specifically a student from China?
2. How might student-to-instructor relationship within the US academic discourse differ from that a student expects to find in the Chinese academic discourse?
3. How might the format of learning – online or face-to-face – affect a Chinese student’s relationship with an instructor within the US academic discourse?

The structure of this section is visualized in Figure 8.

Figure 8. The structure of Section II in Chapter 4

The role of the instructor in the US. Cathy’s online instructor. Research data indicate that Cathy’s online instructor played the role of a course developer, facilitator and that of an active participant. The choice of the course activities indicates that she adhered to constructivist philosophy as she chose to design a variety of student-centered activities: whole-group and small-group discussions, team projects and pair activities. In her online interview she also indicated that she valued the human dimension of online learning and therefore considered “generative discussions and teamwork” as most important and public exchange of ideas as most beneficial for all parties. In her course, students were required to participate in discussions, posts assignments to class, and comment on classmates’ posts and assignments.
Not only did she set up activities that generated rich peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, but she also actively contributed to the co-construction of knowledge. When taking part in class discussions, Cathy’s online instructor assumed the role of an *equal participant* as well as of an *expert*. She posted messages that not only commented on the students’ posts but more often than not asked students to elaborate on their ideas and think more deeply and broadly. Often these messages provided additional information and offered extra resources for enriching students’ understanding of the topic:

> Please say more about your vision of pedagogical applications for the facial recognition software! Please! (Cathy’s online instructor, online course logs, January-May 2009).

For those of you for whom ELLs and technology is a novel notion, I'm attaching a study that portrays optimal integrations and uses. Also, here is a link to a video that shows ELLs and their ESOL teacher learning around computers (ibid.).

Cathy’s online instructor also publicly commented on students’ assignments posted for class review. In her comments she did not just evaluate the work but rather asked students additional questions that required students to think further about the topic or to provide more examples as seen in this post:

> A very nicely composed essay overall. Your articulation of the differences between instructional delivery and instructional conversation was of special interest to our topic at hand. Can you provide examples from your teaching of Spanish that exemplify good instructional conversation? Many of us may know enough Spanish, but for those who do not, can you translate also into English? (ibid.).
The online professor also performed as a coach when reminding students of assignments’ deadlines and contacting those who did not submit an assignment by the deadline. She took her time to provide a detailed evaluation of Cathy’s performance in the first part of the course and offered a number of strategies to improve the quality of her discussion posts. Specifically, she recommended to Cathy the following:

- comment on the group product of all groups, not just yours or one other;
- restrict congratulatory comment;
- try to move the discussion forward through clarification questions or thought questions that inspire further consideration of the topic;
- share personal experiences that can serve to reinforce or expand the information (ibid.).

These recommendations show that Cathy’s instructor saw the need to provide her international student with direct instructions on how to make Cathy’s posts fit into the US academic discourse. One may see that this would require Cathy to partly give up her native Chinese discourse where using congratulatory comments is a part of facework that precedes the direct discussion of the main topic in inductive discourse pattern generally practiced by representatives of Asian cultures (Scollon & Scollon, 2001) and where being too direct is considered impolite and rude (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2007).

Cathy’s reaction to her instructor’s recommendation could be described as appreciative and accepting. The message below demonstrates Cathy’s determination to follow the instructor’s suggestions:

Thank you so much for your detailed midterm evaluation. I find it inspiring and beneficial for my following study, especially the suggestions for improvement. I
think I need to well reflect upon it before I start my next part of study. I want to improve my poor performance in the following modules. As a new international student, this is quite challenging but rewarding experience to learn online from you and my foreign classmates. I value this chance and appreciate suggestions for my interests. To be honest, I find it extremely different to learn in China than in US in that there is a much heavier load of work in [name of the US city]. I am going to try my best to adapt myself and learn to be more competitive rather than to be obedient, which is the idea I draw from the module 4 re the cross-cultural view of learning and teaching (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

Starting with words of gratitude, she goes on assuring the instructor of her willingness to do her best. Within such a context, Cathy’s remarks about heavy workload sound not as much as a complaint but rather as an apology. She certainly does not link her failures to the instructor but takes the responsibility on herself and shows her readiness to improve. The content and form of this message indicates that the student considers the instructor an authoritative figure, which aligns with a great number of previous studies that indicate that in China and many other Asian cultures the student-teacher relationship is based on unequal power distribution (Scollon, 1999; Pan, 2003; Thomson & Ku, 2005).

Cathy’s online professor also chose to be flexible with assignments and deadlines. She offered Cathy an alternative plan for the assignment submission when Cathy asked to do so due to her traveling needs. This shows that the instructor chose not to exercise her authoritative power as some strict professors might do, but rather preferred to negotiate
terms of meeting course requirements without sacrificing the course learning outcomes as well as the students’ responsibilities outside of school.

The research data suggest that Cathy appreciated efforts of her online instructor. Evidently the first part of the course was extremely challenging for Cathy and the instructor’s support was of significant importance. Cathy felt comfortable enough to contact her instructor on several occasions. Among 13 messages addressed to the instructor, 9 were private messages and 4 were replies within whole-class discussions. The private messages to the instructor were related to missed deadlines, misunderstood assignments, and the like. The posts below demonstrate that Cathy perceived the instructor and her graduate assistant as approachable and understanding and that she thankfully accepted their reminders about assignments:

Professor [instructor’s surname], I am afraid I have just missed this part. Give me some time to think it over and participate in it. Thank you for your kind reminder (ibid.).

Dear professor [surnames of the instructor and her graduate assistant], Below is my late assignment due to my business trip. Please kindly check. Thank you. (ibid.).

Cathy’s other posts to the instructor within the whole-class discussions illustrated her appreciation of the instructor’s attention to her ideas and her desire to further clarify the question under discussion:

Professor [instructor’s surname], It sounds like “blended learning” is centered on f2f conversation with an extension of online class. Do I make it right? We have no this kind of class in China now, with our technology use in education still lagging
behind. I am wondering if it has already been widespread in US, does it work better compared with full online courses or f2f class format (ibid.).

This post also shows that for Cathy an instructor was an important *source of knowledge about US culture* and particularly US education. Not knowing much about the system of education in the US and seeing her instructor’s engagement in the conversation with her, Cathy took an opportunity to clarify the term “blended learning” and further satisfy her hunger for learning about Americans and their life.

Thus, just as peers offer information about the host culture, for international students like Cathy the instructor may also play the *role of a culture intermediary*. Engaging in conversations about culture – be it with peers or instructor – might be highly desirable in a multicultural classroom (Banks & Banks, 2010), and Cathy was lucky enough to have an instructor who understood this and provided space for sharing culturally specific knowledge. In the interview, Cathy’s professor explained that in her classes she purposefully sets up activities that enable “international students to have a voice. . . to be the experts, to present other ways of being and knowing the world” (Cathy’s online instructor, online interview, August 2009).and that it is critical in her teaching. Cathy’s online course proved that. Concordancing results for words related to culture (*American, US, China, Chinese*) presented in the previous section of this chapter in Table 4 demonstrated the very high frequency of these words thus suggesting that students were indeed provided opportunities to talk about their culture.

No doubt Cathy appreciated such a culture-rich learning environment. Cathy's posts demonstrate that she is a strong proponent of a culturally sensitive learning environment in which an instructor takes a responsibility of a cultural intermediary and
expert. In a conversation with a peer, when discussing a situation with a student who exhibited behavior inappropriate in a given culture, she wrote:

From my point of view, the more we get to know each other on racial and cultural level, the more possible that conflicts and misunderstandings amongst class could be avoided. This is to say to be a good teacher who can successfully accommodate this foreign student, I would firstly try to establish personal friendship with him by showing trust upon him. We would patiently listen to his talking about his hometown and daily routines from which I can draw the picture of what his culture is like. Besides, to create a welcoming and cozy class environment, I’d like to advocate class discussion within class of culture diversity by making comparison between the main culture and the foreign. It is only through adequate debating aroused from doubts and unknowns that students can learn from each culture and thus misunderstand and disrespect could be avoided (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

Clearly, Cathy sees the instructor's role in avoiding cultural conflicts as critical and regards class discussions about cultures as essential for classrooms that care about cultural minorities. Thus, courses that have a cultural component integrated into the curriculum seem to have more chances to appeal and actively involve international students. This idea is supported by Cathy’s online instructor who pointed out that “a cross-cultural dimension to the content and assignments” was one of the factors that helped an international student fit well into the course (Cathy’s online instructor, online interview, August 2009).
Summing up, Cathy’s online instructor performed a variety of roles including that of an expert, advisor, coach, equal course participant, and culture intermediary. Her presence in the course was visible and her direct involvement in the class discussions and course management matters obviously kept her busy throughout the course. Cathy clearly appreciated and took benefits of such active involvement of her professor.

**Online instructors of other international students.** While the survey and follow-up interviews with survey participants did not allow the research to closely observe instructors in other online classrooms, they provided a broad perspective on the instructors’ role in other courses taken by international students who answered the survey questions and participated in online interviews.

The instructor’s role in the international students’ learning experiences was the topic of four survey questions. Overall more often than not survey participants expressed their satisfaction with their online instructors. Among six respondents who believed that American online instructors know how to help international students (Question 20), two expressed their strong opinion by selecting “strongly agree”. Three participants did not think that American instructors knew how to assist them well. See Figure 9.

![Question 20 Results](image)

*Figure 9. Question 20 results.*

Q20. American online instructors usually know how to help their international students.

- Strongly agree: 2
- Agree: 4
- Disagree: 3
- Strongly disagree: 0
- I don't know: 2

0 0.5 1 1.5 2 2.5 3 3.5 4 4.5
0 1 2 3 4 5
HS’s explanation of his dissatisfaction with the instructor in an Advanced Excel class was related to the instructor’s inability to find a fair way to provide scaffolding for a task without giving a direct answer:

The instructor seems to not know what our difficulty is. We had a group project. It was really difficult, we cannot figure out how to code in Excel to run that function. One of my group members suggest we ask the professor. We did not expect the professor to tell us the code directly. He is really kind and willing to help. But as far as I know, few students went to his office to ask for help (HS, follow-up interview, March 2009).

The fact that few students seek instructor’s help might indicate that it was the inability to do well as a more capable other was what prevented the instructor to serve well his students. This problem seemed to have nothing to do with who the students were – international or US. In support of that, Amanda said that she saw no difference in how instructors treat international and local students. The two respondents who were unable to decide, apparently also had no opportunity to see how American online instructors were able to respond to specific needs of international students.

Question 21 probed how easy it was for international students to establish online interaction with their online instructors. All but one of the 11 respondents who completed this survey item agreed with the statement “If I need, I have no problems emailing my online instructors and ask for help or discuss my problems”; 5 of these respondents selected the 'strongly agree’ option (see Figure 10). Interviewed students indicated that they contacted instructors on several occasions. Moi, for example, revealed that he emailed the instructor 3-4 times a week at the beginning of the semester and less often
when the course progressed. While the question focused on students’ online behavior, the results seem to suggest that instructors of the study participants were able to communicate their availability for discussions, readiness to help and accommodate students’ needs, i.e., they were perceived as experts in the field and as approachable advisors and coaches.

Figure 10. Question 21 results.

As seen in Figure 11: Question 23 results, nine of the participants expressed their approval of the instructor's teaching efforts and three of them revealed their strong satisfaction. Only one did not like how her instructor taught the course and one student could not decide on the answer and selected “I don't know”.

Figure 11. Question 23 results
CJ explained her approval of the instructor's teaching by appreciating her help with understanding course topics and the textbook. The respondent was aware that the instructor “had lots of experience about international students” (CJ, follow-up interview, February, 2009) and apparently it made her more comfortable with emailing the instructor on several occasions. CJ also recalled being frustrated when it took a lot of time to get help from another professor, thus suggesting that she was satisfied with quick responses of her online instructor.

On the other hand, Amanda, who disagreed with the statement “I usually liked how my instructor(s) taught online courses”, attributed her feelings not that much to the instructor's personal qualities but rather to the nature of the online learning environment. She found the course “emotionless” and lacking qualities of face-to-face communication, which clearly indicated her dissatisfaction with peer and teacher presence in the course. In the follow-up interview Amanda directly expressed frustration with the lack of instructor’s involvement: “There is not so many communication and the teacher just ask us to read text-book and do assignment, there is no more he did to teach us” (Amanda, follow-up interview, June 2009). When asked what would have made the course more satisfactory, she wrote: “He could at least make some PPT or tell us what is the most important things to learn in a class” (Amanda, follow-up interview, June 2009). Even the fact that by her own words, her professor was “very kind”, “usually answer[ed] in a day or only 2 hours”, was “very responsible and happy to help his students”, and provided reminding memos and examples, Amanda still expressed the need for more guidance and scaffolding and for more personal forms of communication. This aligns with Cathy’s perception of online courses as less “human” that was described in the previous section of
this chapter. Other studies also reported that international students might perceive lack of visible instructor’s involvement as inadequate fulfillment of one’s teaching responsibilities (Shattuck, 2005; Thomson & Ku, 2005).

Cathy’s case demonstrated that international students may have difficulties with keeping up with deadlines and understanding course assignments, and that the instructor’s involvement might be necessary to ensure these issues do not result in the student’s failure. Research data from the survey questions 24-26 and follow-up interviews demonstrated that Cathy is not alone and that other students may also benefit from direct instructor’s involvement in students’ affairs related to the course assignments.

As seen in Figure 12, five students agreed, while six students disagreed with the statement “Sometimes I did not submit discussion postings and assignments on time because I forgot about them or thought I could post later” (Question 24). Two of those agreeing had a strong opinion on that, which shows that they might have failed keeping up with deadlines on several occasions. Among those failing keeping up with deadlines, four respondents also had difficulties understanding how assignments and tests are evaluated (graded) (Question #25). Evaluation criteria were also problematic for one more respondent who was able to submit all assignments on time. See Figure 13.

![Figure 12](image)

**Figure 12.** Question 24 results.
Q25. Sometimes I had difficulty understanding how assignments and tests are evaluated (graded).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't know</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 13:** Question 25 results.

While at least half of the respondents had difficulties with deadlines, evaluation criteria or both, only 3 of 11 students agreed with the statement “I think American online instructors have to be less strict when grading international students.” (Question 26, Figure 14), while 5 students also felt they should have been given more time to complete some assignments and tests (Question 27, Figure 15). The reasons for special conditions might be multiple. Amanda, for example, attributed the need for extra time for completing assignments to the fact that the course was in a foreign language: “It costs me more time to understand the textbook and the class information. It also costs me more time to describe my idea in English, a foreign language to me” (Amanda, follow-up interview, June 2009). CJ also felt that as “a second language user” she needed more time to complete course work. Cathy, on the other hand, felt that she needed extra time to get “adjusted to a completely new learning style, requirement, evaluation, etc.” (Cathy, follow-up interview, May 2009). Thus the lack of adequate *psychological tools* (language and US academic discourse conventions) once again surfaces as the impediment for learning.
Q26. I think American online instructors have to be less strict when grading international students.

![Bar chart for Q26 results]

Figure 14: Question 26 results.

Q27. I felt I should have been given more time to complete some assignments and tests than my American classmates.

![Bar chart for Q27 results]

Figure 15: Question 27 results.

Summing up, the results indicate that many international students do expect to meet challenges in a new learning environment and are willing to do their best to keep up with their American classmates. However, some students may require additional explanation of the course policies especially at the beginning of the course, more guidance and scaffolding when they work on the assignments and a chance for a second (or third) time to (re)submit assignments. This seems to necessitate that instructors’ assume the role of a coach and advisor who is approachable, friendly, understanding and flexible. While these qualities will not hurt for any instructor to possess, those who work
with international students might need to be first in the line. Literature suggests that international students are in the at-risk group due to the lack of previous experience studying in the US education system and therefore they might need additional help to function in the American academic discourse (Zhang, 2010; Zhao, 2008; Wang, 2007). Fortunately most international students who participated in this study did find the required qualities in their online instructors and expressed their satisfaction with instructors. However, Amanda’s comments remind us that some international students might be looking for more visible and direct involvement of instructors in the learning process than that practiced in some student-centered online courses.

**Comparing instructors in online and face-to-face courses.** Cathy’s unique experience as first a novice fully online student living in her home country and then a face-to-face student studying in a US university campus provided her with an interesting perspective on the role of an instructor in both learning environments. Here is an insightful quote from her interview that is worth discussing:

I found that actually, the professor, well, they actually talk a lot in the classes, but the content period is to help you explain further what they have assigned to you to read in the previous class. Only based on your reading that you can make sense of the words that the professor says to you in the class. I would say that if it is online, this job is totally yours. I mean if you just can't understand the reading, you have to read it again yourself and if your fail, you can check with the professor and tell her or him “Professor, I don't understand, this point, doesn't make sense to me”, and ask him or her to help you with this specific point (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).
Here Cathy clearly differentiates the *more active and leading role* of her on-campus instructors and the *guiding backstage role* of her online professor. Even though Cathy’s online instructor actively participated in discussions, she was still not perceived as doing as much active teaching as her on-campus colleagues. While in both environments instructors were not ‘lecturing’, i.e., not giving previously processed information, and required students to do home readings before coming to class or/and doing assignments, the on-campus instructor was seen as doing the “job” that in online environment was “totally yours”. As shown earlier, similar perceptions of online instructors seen as not doing all the teaching job were also voiced by Amanda and international students in some other studies (Shattuck, 2005; Thomson & Ku, 2005).

Besides perceiving online instructors as doing less work, some international students may consider them less approachable than on-campus professors. When asked to compare approachability of online and on-campus instructors, three of the survey respondents in this study preferred contacting online instructors (Question 22), five participants favored on-campus professors, and one of these five selected the “strongly disagree” option indicating that he/she would much rather prefers contacting on-campus professors. Two participants could not decide who might be easier to ask for help. See Figure 16.
Q22. It is easier for me to ask help from my online instructor than from instructors who teach on campus.

**Figure 16**: Question 22 results.

CJ, one of the respondents who preferred contacting online instructors, wrote that “it is easier for international students to ask question through online or email when they have less confidence about their speaking” (CJ, follow-up interview, February 2009) thus referring to benefits of online communication for non-native speakers. She also talked about the importance of being able to consult with the instructor and get a quick reply to questions: “No matter instructors teach either online or offline, I believe they should be available to their students when their learners have a difficulty about understanding the lecture” (CJ, follow-up interview, February 2009). This suggests that some international students may prefer to contact instructors via email even when they can set up a face-to-face appointment. Others, on the other hand, would rather seek a personal meeting even with online instructors. Apparently instructors’ approachability has little to do with the form of learning but rather depends on individual preferences of students and individual qualities of instructors who might be perceived as approachable or not no matter where they teach – online or on campus.

To sum up, data suggests that some international students do notice the difference between the instructor’s role in online and face-to-face environments. Online professors
might be perceived as doing less teaching work due to their limited involvement in the course activities. Survey data showed that some international students might perceive online instructors as less approachable when one needs to ask for help. However, interviews also speak to the fact that the format of teaching/learning might be not as important as personal and professional qualities of instructors that determine their relationship with students.

Overall, current research demonstrates that international students are generally satisfied with their US instructors and see them as performing a variety of roles. American instructors, both online and on-campus, tend to promote a student-centered learning environment and place emphasis on activities that encourage students’ independent thinking, sharing of ideas and co-construction of knowledge. This is evident in the high frequency of group activities, discussions, and open-ended projects, as well as in instructors’ tendency to minimize their dominance in the learning process and to give the leading role to students themselves. In Cathy’s words, a good US teacher is the one who recognizes and responds to each student’s learning needs and “facilitates learning in collaborative student centered environments” (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009). The research shows that international students who participated in the study were able to reap benefits of student-centered classrooms. While they might have not always appreciated limited teacher presence in their learning, they seem to approve teaching strategies that their instructors selected.

The role of the instructor in China. While this research focuses on the US academic discourse, data related to native discourses of international students may provide valuable insight into the perception of American instructors by those students
who have had none or little previous experience in the US education system. Thanks to the discussion topics set by her instructor, Cathy was able to reflect on and compare Chinese and US educational systems. Her posts provided ample data to understand Cathy’s view of the roles of instructors and teacher-student relationships in both settings.

In her discussion posts Cathy describes the Chinese classroom as teacher-centered and result-driven:

As a Chinese, I find classroom teaching is more teacher-centered, where students play a rather passive role who are used to accept whatever knowledge teachers endow with and they seldom challenge so called “authority” As a controller of the whole class, the teacher pays more attention to the tight time schedule they have to stick to within which a certain amount of teaching tasks have to be covered… Under such circumstance, doubts or challenges from students are not exactly welcome. In fact, what teachers endeavor to achieve is the harmony and obedience. The result, the class is more like a one-way lecture delivering rather than an all-round open seminar where any individual view point is extremely welcome (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

When reflecting upon the qualities that a good teacher in China should posses, Cathy wrote:

A good teacher is supposed to be an effective deliverer of knowledge through whose lectures students can understand the text content very well. She/He is helpful in all means and is always ready to help students in need. With a good sense of management, she/he delivers class in an organized way so that students
can follow her threads all the time. On the other hand, they seldom borrow trouble by encouraging students to make doubts about the contents of her/his class (ibid.). This observation is complemented by the description of qualities that a good student in China should have:

A good student is, on the other hand, required to be obedient to school/class rules set by adults. They are excellent in performing well on score tests and they play an active role in classroom when being asked by teachers to answer questions. However, they seldom express their individual/opposing view to those of teachers, ‘cause it would be regarded by common perception as being stubborn and thus barriers to the creation of school harmony (ibid.).

One may see that Cathy portrays the role of the instructor in China as that of an *expert authority*, who pre-selects the content (based on curriculum requirements) and delivers this pre-packaged knowledge in the form of a lecture. Students’ active involvement is very limited, ruled by the instructor and might be prohibited when seen as disruptive to the harmony of the group and as not in the interest of students who need to cover a large amount of information.

Cathy explains the adherence to teacher-centered instruction in the Chinese classroom by large class sizes and the assessment system: “Students here are exam-oriented and they are forced to do a large amount of written homework everyday in order to be able to perform well in the final college/middle school entrance examination” (ibid.).
Because “exams historically drove the educational system of the Chinese Empire” (Suen & Yu, 2006, p. 46), it comes at no surprise that teachers feel responsible for training students for these tests.\textsuperscript{12}

Chinese classrooms, however, seem not to be organized only as lectures. While describing the Chinese classroom as teacher-centered, Cathy also mentions activities that involve teacher-student and student-student interactions:

In the Chinese classroom, students are mandatory required to receive a lot of input and take examinations, and at the same time, they are also encouraged by teachers to produce communicative ideas by carrying out interaction between the instructor and the student or among all the individuals. Besides, teachers would also choose to do pair or group work as an alternative (ibid.).

When describing a good teacher in China, Cathy also mentions his ability to “stimulate students’ curiosity and creativity by using a good variety of teaching methods and interactive activities in class” (ibid.), which does not quite fit into an earlier description of the Chinese classroom as based just on lectures.

The juxtaposition of these data indicates that group work and class discussions are \textit{not} non-existent in the Chinese classroom but they are very limited: they might occupy very little time in the duration of classes, or be used only in classrooms conducive of group activities such as language courses, or be in a repertoire of only a few teachers.

According to Cathy, the content of the courses in China is often theory-driven, which differs from practice-oriented courses in the US: “American students are in frequent contact with hand-on experiences while in China, we endow students with more

\textsuperscript{12}The history of high stakes exams in China could be traced back as far as to the year of 606 when Chinese emperors started using tests to select people for highest administrative positions including ministers and governors (Suen & Yu, 2006).
abstract theories and reinforce it by assigning to them heavy loads of homework everyday” (ibid.). Not surprisingly, in such theory-based courses “teachers spend a lot of time in explaining details of certain points at the sacrifice of group works, projects or experiments” (ibid.).

Cathy sees the benefits of both approaches:

[In US class] teachers endeavor to create a learning environment which is most close to the real outside word so that once the student gets a chance to practice it by himself/herself; he/she won’t feel clumsy at all. However, in China, China, teachers spend a lot of time in explaining details of certain points at the sacrifice of group works, projects or experiments which could serve to build up students’ all-round perspective of the related topics (ibid.).

Thus, Cathy acknowledges the benefits of acquiring knowledge and skills through practical training but she also sees the need for obtaining broad perspective on a topic through learning abstract theories.

Overall, Cathy sees both benefits and drawbacks of teacher-centered, exam-driven and often theory-based instruction in Chinese classrooms. She is most dissatisfied with the authoritarian role of the instructor, which in her own words “is in its greatest need of change, given that it could hinder the development of students’ creation, imagination and independent thinking which are all crucial elements for their future academic growth” (ibid.). However, she realizes that such a change may not happen very quickly due to deeply-rooted Chinese traditions in education and the scale of reforms. While agreeing with her classmates that the educational system in China needs to be changed, she writes:

It is far easier to say than to do, considering we have such a big country with a
tremendously large number of students, poor and rich, along with our 5000-year traditional convention and wisdom. I would rather advocate that every teacher take on their moral responsibility and do their tiny part, while the government strives to come up with positive policy that could gradually improve the current classroom environment (ibid.).

Thus, Cathy advocates that Chinese instructors assume the role of reformers and start the bottom-up process of “tremendous ideological transfer” from purely teacher-centered learning environment to more “individual-centered”. In this process Cathy would not like to completely abandon the instructor’s role as the knowledge expert and a peacekeeper because she believes that a good teacher in her home country should act “as a captain who is in command of skills of keeping the whole class in harmony and order while encouraging individual imagination” (ibid.). According to Cathy, keeping the control in one’s hands will enable the instructor to avoid students’ “endless and distractive talking” that may result from spontaneous class discussions in a student-centered classroom as Cathy was able to observe in her American on-campus classes. Reforms, in Cathy’s vision, should not go at the expense of the solid content knowledge.

Comparison of instructional epistemologies and approaches: Socratic and Confucian discourses. The data analysis shows significant differences in instructional epistemologies and approaches practiced in the US and Cathy’s home country of China. As became evident in previous sections, the role of the instructor in the US in many aspects does not correspond to the role that a Chinese instructor usually assumes. If in an American classroom the instructor tends to assume the role of an equal participant who encourages students’ active involvement in the collective construction of knowledge, in
China she/he plays the role of an expert authority or a “captain” whose expertise and orders are not to be questioned and challenged. Thus the data in this research clearly lines up with differences between the two educational systems suggested elsewhere. In the literature these differences are generally described as that existing between Socratic and Confucian instructional approaches.

According to Tweed and Lehman (2002),

Socrates, a Western exemplar, valued private and public questioning of widely accepted knowledge and expected students to evaluate others’ beliefs and to generate and express their own hypotheses. Confucius, an Eastern exemplar, valued effortful, respectful, and pragmatic acquisition of essential knowledge as well as behavioral reform (p. 89).

The father of Western philosophy Socrates practiced an instructional method in which his teaching role was to help his students to ask the right question, evoke doubts, and eventually self-generate the knowledge. Confucius believed that success is based on efforts rather than abilities, that education should result in virtuous behavior and skills useful not only to the individual but to the society, and that students must acquire the essential knowledge through respect and obedience to their teachers. Thus the Socratic method is based on questioning and generating knowledge, while the Confucian method focuses on knowledge acquisition, observing, and following the models of virtue (ibid). Socrates thought of a teacher as a midwife who helps a student to generate great ideas by questioning, while for Confucius a teacher was “a messenger who transmits the wisdom of the ancients” (Scollon, 1999, p. 19).
Cathy’s adherence to a Confucian approach was evident in her posts she addressed to her instructor and her classmates as illustrated above. The fact that she was raised in the Confucian discourse was also emphasized in her online and face-to-face interviews. When asked if she could describe herself as a follower of Confucianism, she replied:

I have to say yes, though to some degree I am unconscious about it myself. I was born and grew up in China, and am strongly influenced by Confucian learning style which stresses more of obedience to instructor or authority than initiative. Perhaps, it is why at the very beginning, I felt quite uncomfortable to be the HOST of the class online. After all, I have been so long used to being a receiver rather than a creator or a commenter (Cathy, online interview, second round, September 2009).

Apparently the major difference she saw between the American (i.e., Socratic) learning practices and the Confucian approach to learning is related to the role a student plays in the classroom – that of a host who actively explores knowledge and constructs it or that of a guest who quietly receives the knowledge pre-selected by a teacher-host. Clearly Cathy sensed the difference in teacher-students distribution of power and responsibilities in the classroom. Her feelings and thoughts align with numerous studies that describe a Chinese teacher as a highly respected authority and a Chinese student as a hard-working, modest, and patient learner who shows respect and does not question her/his teacher or the knowledge being presented (Hu, 2002; Thomson & Ku, 2005; Wang, 2007).
When considered in the Vygotskian framework, a role that a mediator (teacher and/or peer) plays in the development of a learner will come forward in the discussion of Socratic versus Confucian approaches. Vygotsky would probably not reject either of the approaches, however, would value both types of mediators for different reasons. In his definition of ZPD, he describes the development process as the one that involves “problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). Problem-solving and collaborative activities point in the direction of the Socratic approach; a Socratic teacher who poses questions and organizes team projects would probably be approved by Vygotsky. No wonder that Vygotsky’s notion of ZPD has found so many followers among American educators.

On the other hand, Vygotsky placed high value on learner’s ability to follow (imitate) models as he believed that imitation is a sign of learning (Vygotsky, 1991). In the Chinese (Confucian) classroom where a “teacher selects points of knowledge from authoritative sources…, interprets, analyses and elaborates on these points for the students…, and delivers a carefully sequenced and optimally mediated dose of knowledge for the students to memorise, repeat, and understand” (Hu, 2002, p.98), imitation is an expected behavior of a learner that shows her/his acquisition of knowledge.

While Socratic and Confucian approaches might both be seen as legitimate ways of learner development in the Vygotskian theory of learning, these approaches do not coincide in the goal of learning. Western education based on the Socratic approach “manifests itself in the emphasis on developing critical-thinking and problem-solving skills as the highest priority educational outcome” (Greenholtz, 2003, pp.122-123). In its
turn, the Confucian approach emphasizes acquisition (accumulation) of content knowledge coming from “authoritative sources (usually textbooks and classics)” (Hu, 2002, p. 98). Differences in epistemological beliefs might be so prominent that “if students come from educational tradition that does not emphasize the process of generating knowledge (but rather, the product), they may not recognize what is happening in a Socratic classroom as legitimate pedagogy” (Greenholtz, 2003, p. 123). Greenholtz (2003) observed this with Japanese students who studied in Canada. Several other studies also reported international students’ dissatisfaction with instructional methods practiced by their American professors (Pan, 2003; Shattuck, 2005; Wang, 2007). However, in this study Cathy’s case demonstrated that a Confucian learner may find benefits in the Socratic approach, alter her epistemological beliefs and actively promote critical-thinking skills in herself. More about how Cathy performed in cross-cutting discourse systems (Scollon & Scollon, 2001) will be discussed in the fourth section of this chapter.

Section summary. The current research shows that while some international students might come from cultures that hold epistemological beliefs and instructional practices different from that that an American online classroom often offers, this does not necessarily detrimentally affect learning experiences of these students. Most students who participated in this study demonstrated their satisfaction with instructors who were generally perceived as approachable and helpful. Participants also showed their readiness to perform activities on a par with their American classmates and not to expect special treatment.
However, data from this research also demonstrated that culturally determined beliefs about teaching and learning do affect instructional and learning practices. American instructors develop the learning environment that values the Socratic method of questioning, generating ideas and co-construction of knowledge. In such an environment critical-thinking and problem-solving skills come forward. These skills might not be well-developed among those international students who were educated in cultures that adhere to Confucian philosophy where accumulation of knowledge from authoritative sources by means of listening and memorization is a goal of learning that molds learners’ morals and prepares them to serve the needs of the group they belong to. Lack of expected learning skills (or psychological tools in Vygotsky’s terms) may significantly complicate learning experiences of a student, as it was evident in Cathy’s case at the beginning of the course she took. Direct instructor involvement in such cases is crucial to ensure that a student is provided enough scaffolding to avoid failure. Once a student understands and learns the tools of the host culture discourse, she/he may become its avid follower and promoter.

III. Language as a Mediating Tool

Language in this study is viewed as a knowledge-mediating tool and a crucial part of culture. Vygotsky emphasized the significance of language in a child's cognitive development. In his theoretical framework, most psychological tools a child learns when growing are language-based (Bodrova & Leong, 2003) and therefore switching to a foreign language when learning in another country might not come easily for international students.
This section will focus on how learning in English might have affected learning experiences of study participants. As seen in Figure 17, first the section will describe self-reported language proficiency of the survey participants and will pay special attention to how students perceived the online communication context versus traditional face-to-face context of communication. Then I will turn to the case study data and employing a corpus-based approach to the text study, I will compare online posts written by Cathy to those posted by her American peers. This comparison will focus on the following questions:

1. How might language and communication strategies used by a Chinese student in an online course differ from the language and communication strategies of her American peers?
2. Do these differences, if any, have any effect on learning experiences of the international student?

![Figure 17. The structure of Section III in Chapter 4](image)

Survey and focus group results. Self-reported language proficiency. Five survey questions (Questions 12, 13, 16, 18, and 19) were asked to find out if study participants experienced language difficulties when communicating with peers and
instructors and if online interaction was perceived as having any advantages over face-to-face communication. While study participants reported their overall high language proficiency, the survey and focus group interviews showed that they also encountered some difficulties communicating in English. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement “Sometimes I had difficulty understanding my instructor and/or my American classmates because she/he/they used words and phrases I do not know” (Question 12), participants split into two equal parts: five students seemed to have difficulties understanding words and phrases of their peers and instructors while the other half had not (Figure 18).

![Figure 18: Question 12 results.](image)

Besides purely linguistic problems, the majority of participants reported having difficulties understanding and talking about phenomena related to American culture. For Question 13 “Sometimes I had difficulties understanding my instructor and/or my American classmates because he/she/they talked about American phenomena, such as American science, politics, holidays, movies, education, etc.,” six students agreed and one strongly agreed with the statement. At the same time four participants seemed to be up to date with what was happening in the US and expressed their strong disagreement...
with the statement (see Figure 19). Answering follow-up questions, participants provided examples of difficult-for-comprehension phenomena such as local business units, American brands, Facebook, or such a phrase as a “chat speak”. These findings support previous research that reported that international students might have linguistic and culture-related difficulties communicating in English in American classrooms (Ciano, 2003; Shattuck, 2005; Zhang & Kenny, 2010).

**Figure 19.** Question 13 results.

**Figure 20.** Question 19 results.

While some participants experienced difficulties understanding English words, phrases and cultural references, most of them did not see this as an obstacle for online discussions. When asked to express their opinion on Question 19 “I do not like
participating in online discussions because of my poor English,” seven participants strongly disagreed, 3 disagreed and only one participant agreed with the statement (Figure 20). Apparently, just as Cathy who clarified her answer to this survey item, most respondents felt their language proficiency was satisfactory for participating in online discussions.

Language in online and face-to-face communication. The survey also aimed at comparing international students' experiences in two educational formats – face-to-face and online. I was particularly interested in finding out which learning environment was perceived as requiring better English. Responses for Question 18 revealed that only four of the participants agreed that online discussions require better English than face-to-face discussions held on campus, while 7 respondents seemed to perceive a face-to-face communication context as more linguistically demanding for non-native speakers (see Figure 21).

At first glance responses sounded paradoxical for Question 16, “For me it is easier to participate in online discussions than in face-to-face discussions”. Only four respondents found it easier to participate in online discussions, while six students seemed
to favor face-to-face discussions (Figure 22). Thus while most respondents thought that online discussions are less linguistically demanding, they were not perceived as easier to participate in, which seems to imply that other non-linguistic factors might make online discussions challenging for international students.

![Figure 22](image)

**Figure 22. Question 16 results.**

To get a better understanding of these results, some survey participants were asked to clarify their choices. Recalling her face-to-face classes HS wrote: “I felt lost when my American classmates speak too fast… Moreover, sometimes I cannot understand the jokes American instructor told, while other classmates are laughing” (HS, follow-up interview, March 2009).

Amanda also complained about fast-paced conversations of her on-campus peers she was unable to follow, while CJ confessed that the written mode of communication in online discussions was easier because it enabled him to organize words and provided time to look up a word or phrase in a dictionary. Even so, when asked what advice he would give to other international students, CJ wrote: “First of all, I guess English writing and reading abilities are vital to take online courses. I would like to advise them to be
well prepared with their second language, English, even before taking an online class” (CJ, follow-up interview, February 2009).

Thus the survey and follow-up interviews show that the online learning mode alleviates some language related communication problems that non-native speakers may have in oral face-to-face interactions. Specifically, asynchronous written discussions provide international students with time to decode meaning and write their responses. The written form of communication also diminishes the high anxiety level associated with speaking in a foreign language (Lee, 2007) and the necessity to have very good listening comprehension skills. These results correspond to some previous studies where international students took benefits of the delayed nature of asynchronous online discussions and showed larger language output in comparison to face-to-face communication (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2003; Thomson & Ku, 2005).

On the other hand, online asynchronous discussions, while being less linguistically demanding, might still be challenging. Amanda, who was among those who found participation in online discussions more difficult than in face-to-face discussions, reported: “On line discussion needs to express my idea in several words or sentences which should be very accurate and communicative, while face to face enable me to use gesture, eye contact and also interaction with my classmates, which makes the communication easier” (Amanda, follow-up interview, June 2009).

Clearly Amanda points out the important limitation of online asynchronous communication – lack of nonverbal cues and immediate feedback from peers. In online asynchronous discussions written words become the only source of information thus limiting conversational partners’ ability to derive meaning from non-textual cues.
Amanda’s words echo Cathy’s thoughts about online communication that she expressed in numerous cases:

... the online environment ... encourages more complete and precise thought or response... (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

Words can not explain everything. Sometimes you need the expression of face, a body language to help to understand. ... (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).

F2F way of communication should be more “real” and thus more effective in explaining definition, especially those with “shade” meaning (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

I personally still stick to the F2F way of interaction within class. I think it is very effective with students exchanging their views through not only oral words, but body language and expression. ... It could be very harmful if we communicate all behind the screen. We still need eye-contacting, smiling, etc. ... (ibid.).

Both Cathy and Amanda emphasize the significance of nonverbal communication in human interactions. In nonverbal communication messages could be “sent through body motions; vocal qualities; and the use of time, space, artifacts, dress, and even smell” (Neuliep, 2009, p.247). Nonverbal cues that enable conversational partners to “read” the context are of primary importance in high-context cultures (ibid., p. 276), and not surprisingly Amanda and Cathy, both being from such a culture, accentuated the value of nonverbal communication for successful interaction. In the absence of traditional nonverbal cues, representatives of high-context cultures may feel handicapped in text-based online communication (Hart, 1998). Studies (Faiola & Matei, 2005; Wurtz, 2005)
show that to compensate for the loss of such nonverbal cues, web designers in high-context cultures enhance text information with animated and sound effects, graphics, and colors that are much more prominent than on web sites created for low-context cultures, such as the USA. Thus international online students are left to deal with information that is presented in a foreign language and in the environment that does not support comprehension with nonverbal cues.

Besides limitations related to nonverbal cues, online asynchronous communication by its very nature involves time lapse between conversational parts, and not each post necessarily results in response, even when the post’s author expects such a response. This might be very frustrating for some students, such as HS who wrote “The difficulty is that I cannot get response directly. Maybe I have to wait for days or even no one responded. I don’t like asynchronous discussions” (HS, follow-up interview, February 2010). HS’s aggravation with the lack of response might be related not only to natural human’s desire to get feedback for her/his efforts, but also to the meaning attached to the silence. In Asian high-context countries such as Japan, China and South Korea, silence is generally viewed positively and might be associated with wisdom, politeness, and harmony (Franks, 2000). However, in high-context cultures silence could also be a conflict resolution strategy (Chua & Gudykunst, 1987), and therefore a speaker\writer might interpret silence as disapproval and reluctance to continue a relationship. In European-American culture, silence is often associated with passivity and weakness and is generally avoided (Franks, 2000). In case of online course discussions, it would probably be safe to argue that silence indicates reluctance to be involved in the communication (due to time constrains, lack of interest, etc.), and as such it does not
contribute to the development of personal relationships that in the first section of this chapter were shown to be of primary importance for some international students.

Thus, while most participants did not see the language as a barrier for their learning, as non-native speakers of English, they were sometimes at a disadvantage and had to invest more time and effort to keep up with discussions. Some study participants found the delayed nature of online discussions helpful for compensating language (and culture) deficiencies as it enabled them to use dictionaries and other resources to support their comprehension and compose well-developed posts in the foreign language. However, limited ability to negotiate meaning in written discussions, to get immediate (or even delayed) feedback and “read” contextual cues from nonverbal messages were seen by some participants as significant drawbacks of online discussions.

**Language in Cathy’s online course.** Online and face-to-face interviews with Cathy demonstrated her high proficiency in English. She, herself, also felt that her English was adequate for learning in an English-only environment as was evident from her survey and follow-up interviews. However, to enrich data sources, triangulate findings, and get a deeper understanding of Cathy’s language performance in class, Cathy’s online course posts and that of her American classmates were collected and analyzed.

**Comparison of word frequency between Cathy’s texts and that of her American classmates.** Table 5 below demonstrates the Top 20 most frequently used words in texts posted by Cathy as opposed to texts posted by 7 of her American classmates. This list indicates many similarities in the use of vocabulary: 16 words out of 20 are the same.

---

13 This claim is not backed up by official assessment of Cathy’s language proficiency. However the author of this study has been teaching English as a foreign language for more than a decade and is experienced in assessing language proficiency.
Four positions in this Top 20 list are taken by personal pronouns (I, my, you, they, we, us, etc.) and their high frequency comes at no surprise considering the genre of the texts included in the corpuses under investigation. These are discussion posts written in a semi-formal or informal style where authors exchange their ideas, share their experiences, and comment on each others’ posts. In such texts where interlocutors directly address each other, the use of personal pronouns is expected. The significance of high frequency of personal pronouns for creating social presence, as well as the differences in their usage in individualistic and collectivistic cultures, were discussed earlier in the first section of this chapter.

Another group of words that made it to the top 20 list has also come at no surprise. They are indicative of the program – education, and a course topic - literacy and technology. These are 10 words (lemmas): teach, learn, class, study, read, culture, technology, literacy, text, and language. The z-test for proportions indicates that four out of 10 words in this group are used in the same frequency rate by Cathy and her American peers: these are teach, class, literacy, and read. However, results show significant difference (confidence interval >= 99%) in the usage of the following words (lemmas): technology, text, and language. When the confidence interval was lowered to 95%, z-test for proportions also showed significant difference in the usage of the words study, learn and culture. Five words out of 6 that showed significant difference in frequency, were used more often by Americans, while only one – the word learn - was used more often by Cathy. The results might be indicative of the fact that Americans are better versed in educational topics carried out in the US educational setting and that they might have a set of expressions and clichés readily available to them. However the fact that 80% (16 out
of 20 words) of Cathy's top vocabulary was the same as the words most frequently used by her American peers speaks for her high language proficiency level and ability to keep up conversations on course topics with native speakers.

Table 5

*Top 20 Frequently Used Words (Lemmas) in the Texts Posted by Cathy and Her 7 American Classmates*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words (Lemmas)</th>
<th>Cathy</th>
<th>American Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I (my, me, mine)</td>
<td>2.27** (378)</td>
<td>2.92** (2075)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We (us, our, ours)</td>
<td>1.55** (259)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study (student, students, studying)</td>
<td>1.13* (188)</td>
<td>1.33* (939)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They (their, them, themselves)</td>
<td>1.0** (167)</td>
<td>1.25** (887)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You (your)</td>
<td>.89** (149)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach (teacher(s), teaching, taught)</td>
<td>.85 (141)</td>
<td>.84 (595)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn* (learn, learns, learning, learner)</td>
<td>.74* (123)</td>
<td>.81** (573)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very</td>
<td>.53** (88)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China (Chinese)</td>
<td>.5** (84)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>.44** (73)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New (newly, new-tech)</td>
<td>.42* (70)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategies of involvement and independence in Cathy’s posts. To get a better understanding of how Cathy interacted online, I have employed discourse analysis techniques put forward by Scollon and Scollon (2001) to analyze online course logs that belonged to Cathy. Overall data shows that Cathy used a variety of involvement
strategies that might demonstrate that she felt herself to be a legitimate member of the
learning community of the online course she registered for. Her involvement was evident
when Cathy:

1) paid attention and showed strong interest in other participants’ affairs:

What would you think of it?

I like your idea and I would like to choose video conferencing as the field I devote
to. Is it Ok?

2) pointed out common in-group membership:

It is a demanding job to me but I do feel quite enjoy the whole journey of
exploration with you!

I am so proud of being a member of this family.

Happy to learn from. We are No.1!!!

3) claimed a common point of view, attitude, knowledge, empathy:

Personally, I feel quite the same way as I comfortably accommodate myself to the
environment which keeps changing all the time.

I agree with you that the “chat speak” works as a link bridging different cultures.

In China, we share the same problem, even to a greater extend.

4) assumed or asserted reciprocity:

As you said, we have to keep in mind the strengths of new literacies, stressing its
prominent role in global communication and sharing.

5) was optimistic:

Let’s take the responsibility of adults and hope for the best for our children’s
future.
I feel so happy that we see eye to eye on it. I hope we could work together towards it. :)

From my perspective, I firmly believe that we can hope for better/promising future with the development of new technology and the trend of global collaboration.

6) used first names:

Hi Barb.

Besides the indicated strategies of involvement, Cathy exhibited volubility and naturally talked in the other participants’ native language – English, thus engaging two more strategies of involvement described in Scollon and Scollon (2001).

*Strategies of independence* were also present in Cathy’s discussion posts. However, they seemed to be less prominent, and some were not found in her conversations. Employing strategies of independence, Cathy:

- made minimal assumptions about the wants, needs or interests of others:
  
  If you have any ideas about our assignment, it is very welcome.

- minimized threat:
  
  I’d very like to add my input in your PPT, the problem is however is that I can not open the website you posted in my email. Are you sure it is correct or it could be the problem of my computer.
  
  Thank you. . . . but it seems I did not receive your invitation. Can you try again.

- apologized:
  
  I don’t know why but I failed to open the google docs website again and this happened several times these days which left me half-finished my portion of the
PPT. I am very upset about it but will try later. Very Sorry for the inconvenience I caused to the group.

- was pessimistic:
  
  I am not quite sure if I interpret your problem in a right way.

- used family names and titles (only when referring to the instructor)

Dear Professor [surname].

Other strategies of independence were not found in Cathy’s conversations with peers. Among independence strategies that did not appear were dissociating the hearer from the discourse, the exhibition of non-communication or taciturnity, and use of native language.

In the context of this section, the most prominent politeness strategy that is worth discussing is the use of native or non-native language. Scollon and Scollon (2001) argue that

if the negotiations go on in the native language of one of the participants (or group of participants) that will tip the balance of involvement toward their side. It will give the other participants a sense of having their own independence limited, perhaps even unduly (p. 50).

In a course offered by a US university, Americans speak in their native language while international students in a foreign language. This should naturally “tip the balance of involvement” towards native English speakers – the Americans, while limiting involvement of non-native speakers.

On the other hand, international students know that they sign up for an American course that is English-based (unless it is a foreign language class). Thus the choice of
language is not made by either of the communication partners; rather it is embedded into the communication context from the very beginning. Moreover, for some international students an English-speaking course environment might be perceived as a space for improving their language proficiency, an outcome that is often considered desirable knowledge worth acquiring. Cathy is most probably not alone in her thoughts when writing: “Honestly, as a foreign speaker, I am not very confident about my English literacy. I hope I can learn from you day by day” (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

Therefore international students may not feel being unduly disadvantaged. The research data shows no evidence that participants resisted communicating in English or felt their language proficiency prevented them from involvement in course discussions. As indicated earlier, none of the 11 survey participants agreed with the statement “I do not like participating in online discussions because of my poor English” (Question #19). Cathy’s posts also show that she preferred to employ strategies of involvement rather than strategies of independence, thus demonstrating her willingness to be affiliated with the learning community.

*Other communication strategies employed by Cathy.* Besides the politeness strategies indicated above, the data shows other interesting communication strategies that Cathy uses on a regular basis when communicating online with her peers and the instructor. First of all her posts are full of very polite requests that may sound *too polite and too formal* in a given context, such as:

Can you kindly let me know your usual “meeting hours” so that I can check if I can be available online.
Can you kindly recommend some interactive language programs that you think will be better used by Asian students.

Please kindly advise. Thank you very much.

Second, Cathy often employs adjectives showing admiration, enthusiasm, exaltation and an overall positive attitude toward her classmates and the learning process:

Your personal experience and lovely case of Jane’s mother throw light on the fact that…

This is a terrific situation when you mentioned what came through as a result of too early application of new technology among elementary students.

It is fascinating to me that these multi-modes of semiotic representations could be used throughout grade levels though in different ways.

Wonderful class with wonderful professor and dear classmates!

The overuse of such very polite and flattering expressions and adjectives, which one does not expect to find in such a communication context, might be explained by Cathy’s cultural background. She seems to carry over patterns of expressing politeness from her native discourse to the host discourse, and such a transfer has a potential for misunderstanding. “People putting on their best cultural manners might be misjudged as being insincere or fawning” (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008, p.141). This illustrates differences in pragmatic functions of these expressions in two discourses. It also illustrates that non-native speakers of English, while communicating in perfect (or near perfect) English, may employ their native face-saving devices that at their best may be interpreted as strange and at their worse as inappropriate and disingenuous.
The third communication strategy that made Cathy stand out from the crowd of her American classmates is *humbling oneself while praising others*. In numerous cases Cathy expressed her high appraisal of peers’ work while modestly minimizing the value of her own work:

I bet you all have more much better ideas re this interesting and worth-talking question.

I quite enjoy the way you follow the thread of connecting all 5 articles which is much much better than that of mine. Happy to learn from.

This strategy is evident not only in her posts addressed to her peers but also in the reflection journal submitted to the instructor. In the following sentence, for example, she reprimands herself for the inability to effectively interact with peers but immediately shows her willingness to do a better job in the future:

I am partially satisfied with the quality of my posts on relevance and truism, but very disappointed with my interaction with my peers in class and my skills for moving the discussion forward. This is the aspect that I need to work hard upon in the following modules.

One more peculiar communication strategy that Cathy exhibits is the *overuse of agreement phrases* where she shows her total agreement with the conversational partner and in some cases openly demonstrates how happy she is to agree:

I feel so happy that we see eye to eye on it.

I cannot agree with you more on that proper “CONTROL” is needed when it comes to the problem of net-using by children.

... I strongly support your idea that the curriculum and text books we are using...
now are overloaded with grammar, vocabulary and language structure. . .

All these examples demonstrate *politeness strategies* (Gu, 1990; Scollon & Scollon, 2001) that Cathy uses to negotiate *face* with her classmates. Positive appreciation and admiration of others, as well as modesty and self-denigration, are in the essence of face-work exercised by representatives of Asian cultures (Gu, 1990). Agreeing with and complementing others while denigrating oneself, as well as avoiding confrontations and maintaining social harmony, are politeness strategies that enable an Asian to *give* and *safe face* thus negotiating one’s *social* prestige (ibid.). Humbleness is also considered one of the top cultural values in Cathy’s native Chinese culture (The Chinese Culture Connection, 1987 as cited in Neuliepe, 2009, p. 59). One does not expect to find this value in an individualistic US mainstream culture that has a reputation of placing high value on self-interest and self-gratification (Hsu, 1970 as cited in Neuliepe, 2009, p. 58), i.e., values that contradict humbleness and modesty.

Clearly Cathy’s communication behavior exhibits her affiliation with Chinese culture where these communication strategies are a way to give and save face, i.e., to negotiate one’s social status. However Cathy also states that she needs to develop “skills for moving the discussion forward” showing her desire to fit the American academic discourse and meet expectations of the social group she became a part of. Behaving (speaking, looking) in a socially-approved manner is also one of the politeness strategies aiming at *not losing face* (Gu, 1990). Thus we see how Cathy’s Asian notions of face find their place within the US academic discourse. Evidently, Cathy is able to maintain her native values while learning communication skills promoted in the host culture. The interplay of native and host discourses will be discussed in more detail in the next section.
Section summary. The study revealed that while international students that took part in this research might have experienced language-related difficulties communicating in English, it did not jeopardize their learning. Some students did struggle understanding words, phrases and culture-specific references, but most of them did not see this as a serious obstacle for participation in online discussions.

The majority of respondents perceived online discussions as less linguistically demanding but not easier to participate in as compared to face-to-face discussions. While the written form of communication in asynchronous online discussions provided non-native speakers of English with more time to decode meaning and compose their own posts, it restricted the use of nonverbal cues, something that was perceived as a significant disadvantage of online communication by representatives of high-context cultures, Cathy and Amanda.

The close analysis of Cathy’s language use demonstrated her capability to carry out conversations on the course topics on par with her American peers. Eighty per cent of the top 20 words she utilized in her discussion posts matched the most frequent vocabulary of Cathy’s American classmates. The communication strategies Cathy used showed her high involvement in the learning community, but at the same time revealed her adherence to native face-saving devices that may bear different pragmatic functions in the American academic discourse and therefore might be misinterpreted.

All in all, international students who participated in this research illustrated that studying in a foreign language complicates learning but does not create an insurmountable impediment for it. This conclusion, however, could be generalized only
to those international students whose language proficiency matches the skills of these study participants. Previous research demonstrated that language proficiency may be the “most restricting condition for the participants” (Zhang & Kenny, 2010, p.27), and that it may surpass the affect of cultural differences (ibid; Lee, 2007). Because this study was conducted in English, it might have attracted only international students with a high language proficiency level. Their mastery of English might have been particularly helpful in integrating into the host discourse and establishing membership in the new learning community as we saw happened in the Cathy’s case. Thus language served as a mediating tool that connected students with the knowledge through their successful communication with peers, instructors and the course content.

IV. Balancing Multiple Discourses

Previous sections of Chapter 4 described and analyzed how international students’ affiliations to their native academic discourse and culture might affect their US learning experiences related to student-to-student and student-to-instructor relationships. Section III took a close look at linguistic and communication aspects of these relationships. This last section will take the question of culture in the classroom to a new level by a) accentuating the conflicts of identity that an international student might face in the US (online) classroom and b) showing how newly adapted affiliation to the US academic discourse might affect student’s views on her native academic discourse. This section will in many ways summarize previous three sections and will reveal the essence of culture impact on learning experiences of an international student.
The structure of this section is outlined in Figure 23 below. First, the results of the survey and follow-up interviews will demonstrate participants’ views of the visibility of their native cultures within online courses they took. This will show whether international cultures are given any space in the context of the US academic discourse. Such a broad view of the visibility of non-US national cultures within the US academic discourse will help to set up a scene for a more in-depth analysis of Cathy’s case. The rich data that was collected from a face-to-face and online interviews, Cathy’s journals and online course logs will bring to light how Cathy managed multiple memberships in two discourse systems and what new vision of teaching and learning she formed as a result of it.

![Figure 23. The structure of Section IV in Chapter 4.](image)

**International students’ culture in the US classroom.** Unless a course is created specifically for a global audience (multicultural groups or a culture group other than a host culture), it is created for local (within culture) consumption and reflects the dominant culture of the country where it was designed (DeBry, 2001). Participants of this study took courses created for local use, i.e., for Americans. Therefore I was interested to learn if these international students felt their cultures were recognized, valued and
appreciated by their American peers and instructors, i.e., if the US academic discourse allowed the integration of other cultures within the dominant American culture.

The survey overall showed that most international students felt that their culture was not ignored by the online learning community of their course (Question 10). Out of 11 participants seven agreed that their classmates showed interest in their cultural background, with one selecting “strongly agree”. Only two participants disagreed and two others selected the 'I don't know option” (see Figure 24). These results were confirmed with results to Question 14: only three participants agreed with the statement “I usually felt no one in the online course cares about my cultural and educational background” (see Figure 25).

![Figure 24. Question 10 results.](image)
Q14. I usually felt no one in the online course cares about my cultural and educational background.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>I don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 25.** Question 14 results.

Follow-up interviews clarified students’ choices. Their explanations made it apparent that interest in other cultures or lack of it depends on whether the course *creates opportunities for expressing such interest.* Courses that make use of open-ended discussions often do provide a space for cross-cultural exchange of ideas. Two participants – Cathy and CJ, who took a course in the field of education, found it appropriate to talk about educational systems and educational values of their home countries and felt that their American classmates appreciated learning about that. For example, Cathy wrote: “I was also amazed by the fact that my peers in America or other countries are all very curious to learn from me regarding the very different educational forms in China” (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

Similar interest in the culture of their peer was demonstrated by Moi’s classmates in a course on health behavior: class discussions revealed many similarities in how people in the US and Nigeria react to illness symptoms. On the other hand two respondents (Amanda and HS) who took a course in Microsoft Excel had little opportunity to manifest their culture, nor did they expect it:
The online course is ‘Advanced Excel’. It is not a social science course but a more ‘technical’ course. . . To my point of view, how to use excel has no difference in culture. When I was in China, I also used Excel to draw charts and make tables. In this class, I don’t think my classmates should have shown more interest in my culture. If my major is social science like history or politics etc, they should have shown more interest because of culture difference. As for Excel…every country is using Microsoft Office (HS, follow-up interview, March 2009).

While some international students do not expect courses to provide a space for their culture appreciation, others may still want to feel that their culture is recognized and valued. In fact instructions that show appreciation for students’ culture may expect better learning outcomes. “Those instructors who are willing to know about and understand my culture and educational background make me more comfortable to focus on my study and bring about ideas and thoughts” (CJ, follow-up interview, February 2009), wrote CJ.

Cultures may not only differ but also be similar in an unexpected way, and the discovery of this unexpected similarity may be beneficial for all parties involved. Moi, a student majoring in public health, wrote:

Their [classmates’] interests stemmed from discovering/realizing that despite our different cultural backgrounds, when it comes to health behaviors, we’re quite similar. For example, instead of going for medical care at the onset of an illness, most people will wait to see if their symptoms will resolve on their own, and sometimes see if they could find a remedy for the symptoms themselves (Moi, follow-up interview, June 2009).
This unexpected discovery of cultures' similarity happened only because Moi's course provided a space for such a discussion to happen, and because Moi, even being a cultural minority, did not feel uncomfortable to bring up such a discussion. This student from Nigeria and his classmates mutually helped each other learn thus serving as *more capable others* to each other.

In spite of several optimistic examples, it is important to point out that the *online environment was not perceived as a place where one can easily talk about one's culture* by most participants. In response to Question 11 “It is easier to talk about my culture and my country in an online course rather than in a regular course taught on campus”, seven participants indicated that online courses are less appropriate for expressing cultural identity (see Figure 26). However one participant strongly agreed with the statement supported by three students who selected “agree” thus showing that for some international students the online environment offers more comfortable conditions for talking about one's culture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q11. It is easier to talk about my culture and my country in an online course rather than in a regular course taught on campus.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 26. Question 11 results.*

This result could be first of all explained by the nature of computer-mediated discussions that is, according to Cathy, more topic-oriented, “*precise*”, and leaves little
space for *ad hoc* discussions of cultural or other issues not directly related to the class topic. Moreover, as was discussed earlier in the first section of this chapter, in a traditional learning environment cultural moments often happen not during face-to-face activities in class but rather between classes and during breaks. Thus online courses are more content-oriented, or, as Cathy puts it, “less human” than on-campus study, and provide fewer opportunities for talking about culture. The difficulty to express one’s culture online might also be related to language issues discussed in the third section of this chapter.

Overall, findings suggest that foreign cultures might be made visible within American courses. It shows that the *US academic discourse does give space to other cultures* and that US online courses enable creation of learning communities that are ready to learn about similarities and differences between cultures. This seems to reflect the larger American culture that is relatively open and tolerant to other cultures (subcultures), which is supported by recent polls that show that Americans are getting more accepting towards traditionally unpopular cultural groups (Schafer & Shaw, 2009). However, the visibility of national cultures within US academic discourse does not necessarily mean that US courses become multicultural: a true multicultural curriculum requires much more than *ad hoc* integration of cultural components into the course content (Banks & Banks, 2010). Moreover, previous research shows that not all international students feel that their culture is at all welcomed in the US courses (Shattuck, 2005) or that online learning promotes cultural understanding between students (Tan, Nabb, Aagard & Kim, 2010; Thomson & Ku, 2005).
Learning in the midst of cross-cutting discourses: Cathy’s case. Applying Scollon and Scollon’s (2001) framework, US academic discourse could be described as a voluntary professional discourse of a large organization – US academia or more specifically a particular US university. On the other hand, each international student belongs to his/her own native discourse, which is the involuntary discourse system of the culture in which he/she grew up and was educated. An international student, even if she moves out of her native country, continues being a member of the native discourse. Moreover international students carry the baggage of previous education experiences they acquired when studying in their home country, and these experiences have a lasting effect that impacts their schooling in other countries as confirmed in numerous empirical research (June & Park, 2003; Pan et al., 2003; Shattuck, 2005; Thomson & Ku, 2005). Thus, an international student finds herself in the midst of at least two cross-cutting discourse systems: the US academic discourse and the native discourse, the latter including the academic discourse of the native country.

In their study, Scollon and Scollon (2001) identify four areas where multiple membership may be problematic: ideology, socialization, forms of discourse, and face systems (pp. 207-217). Applying Scollon and Scollon’s research method, this section will examine Cathy’s case data and explore how membership in multiple discourse systems affected learning experiences of one particular international student.

Ideology. Scollon and Scollon argue that multiple membership in discourse systems may result in conflicting ideologies, when “the purpose of the two (or more) systems pull the person towards different goals, and as he or she places a value on both sets of goals, it becomes a recurring problem to decide in any particular case which set of
goals to emphasize” (ibid., p. 217). If the purpose of education is in preparing young people to take their place in society, as advocated in Arendt (1968) and supported in Greenholtz (2003), then the question arises: which society an international student prepares to serve?

For Cathy the answer was straightforward: she studied in the US in order to apply her newly acquired knowledge in her native country of China. However, it became evident that what she learned in the School of Education in one of American universities was sometimes not what might be appreciated and welcomed in the educational system of her native country. The student-centered learning philosophy promoted in each of the courses she took online and on campus and the communicative approach to language teaching that she was taught in one of her on-campus TESOL classes were not teaching and learning approaches that Cathy previously experienced before taking American courses, nor were these approaches that, according to Cathy, would be readily embraced and integrated into the Chinese classroom. How did Cathy handle such a situation?

In her journals, interviews and online course posts she shows her high interest in and approval of a student-centered learning environment:

From my perspective, the mode in America is more inspiring and productive, since it is more individual-centered and a qualified American teacher is required to able to encourage creative and challenging ideas from his/her students (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

I really like this way, which is US way which is open and I think students will benefit more, so I think it is better (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).
The data show that Cathy sees the discrepancies in the educational systems practiced and promoted in the US and her native country. She seems to be so enchanted with the “American way” that she sees flaws of her native academic discourse and criticizes it numerous times:

Personally, I should say the authoritarian role of Chinese teachers is in its greatest need of change, given that it could hinder the development of students’ creation, imagination and independent thinking which are all crucial elements for their future academic growth (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009). Students [in China] fail to think for themselves; instead they are driven to be diligent (work very hard) to keep up with the rest of his/her class (ibid).

However, Cathy also uncovers why the Chinese classroom might be set up the way it is:

In China, . . . we always have classes more than 40. To ensure the quantity of information required by standard curriculum in each class, we sometimes have to sacrifice quality for it. After all within the very limited time of 40-45 minutes, it is beyond possibility to provide each student with an opportunity to express his/her idea freely to cultivate independent thinking (ibid).

Moreover, Cathy is able to identify flaws that a student-centered classroom may have:

I noticed that teacher in our class allowed us spontaneous class discussion anytime we want, which always resulted in the endless and distractive talking. . . It is good that we can talk whenever we feel inspired or puzzled, the problem is that it could leave the main task of the class unfinished/unlectured. Personally, I
argue that teacher should sometimes stop-and-state to “drive” the class in a more organized manner (Cathy, reflective journal, 2009).

Thus Cathy does not just unthinkably embrace the student-centered learning/teaching philosophy but carefully weighs its benefits and drawbacks in the context of her native discourse. While understanding all its potential advantages for Chinese students, she understands that its integration would require “a tremendous ideological transfer from conventional wisdom” (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009) that has been embedded into the system of education in China for centuries and which roots lie in the Confucian approach with its emphasis on the accumulation of knowledge coming from the authoritative sources (Hu, 2002). Cathy believes that while Socratic classroom activities that develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills might be more engaging and less “plain”, Chinese classrooms “could be more harmonious and rich in content” (ibid.).

The data shows that the most acute consequences of the conflict of ideologies may surface after Cathy changes her status from a US student to the alumni of a US university and tries to apply the newly acquired knowledge and skills in her home country. The acuteness of the possible conflicts is probably best illustrated in the following face-to-face interview excerpt:

I am Chinese and I come from country where Confucius culture is quite valued where people are supposed to be very modest, to be even shy, always obey the rules set by authority and respect the elders, senior people who are at the higher status over you. And you are supposed to be a good listener in the classroom setting. If I get back home and work with other Chinese teachers, it could be a
problem for me to always have my own ideas, which are different from theirs. They will probably think of me as a kind of aggressive person and I could be isolated. I don't know... If you behave in a different way from the rest of the group. I mean you are in minority and there is a majority you have to get into, you have to be with and you behave in a way they don't appreciate, it could be a problem... (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).

Cathy’s data also illustrate the conflict of identity related to her membership in smaller professional discourse systems – the discourse system of ESL teachers in the US and the system of EFL teachers in China. In the following quote she describes the real dilemma she expects to face if she tries to apply a context-based approach to teaching a foreign language (that emphasizes communication skills) to the Chinese classroom where language teachers focus on the form (grammar rules and vocabulary) rather than function:

Here comes my big concern. As I want to be an EFL teacher working back in China, I figure I will face up to a lot of practical problems in teaching my students, one of which concerns about the assessment system in China, a system that focus mainly on students’ declarative language knowledge rather than procedural knowledge. If I were to start from the very basic question which is “What I want my students to get out of the class/unit?” and use context-based materials, instructional strategies and evaluations, students will be very likely to fail in their final exam which is crucial in deciding whether they will be academically allowed for their higher level study. I feel frustrated by it, because if I serve around the national assessment and set goals based on it, English learning could only end up as endless grammar drills and it is a real killer of students’
interest in English and their future language learning development will became
dim (Cathy, reflective journal, 2009).

Clearly, goals set up for the language classroom by two educational systems –
Chinese and the US – seem to be incompatible. Cathy is caught in the midst of
conflicting ideologies she has to deal with on her own. She anticipates that she will face
serious obstacles if she tries to practice “the American way” but she is still determined to
do so:

I'll do it, I'll do it. Just what I did in my clinic class, I just did it American way. I
asked my students to sit in circle and talk and question peers when they are
presenting the knowledge of their culture. . . I think I would like to do that even
back in China. The problem is that I have different audience. Students here in the
US have a very different learning styles comparing with learning styles Chinese
students have. They are not very comfortable if you teach the US way. They will
think that you are just a crazy teacher (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November
2009).

While being labeled “a crazy teacher” does not scare Cathy, behind her courage
lies the acuteness of the problem she will most probably face when practicing US
teaching approaches within her native discourse.

Socialization. Besides conflicting ideologies, multiple membership in discourse
systems may result in fragmentation of socialization and experience. In Scollon and
Scollon’s (2001) framework, socialization refers to the process of learning culture and
has to do with experiences that a person acquires in the process of informal learning
(informal interaction with family members, peers, etc.) and formal education (p. 163-
164). They argue that a feeling of fragmentation may happen when “a person must select from among his or her total experience as a human just those aspects each discourse system values” (ibid., p.217). In Cathy’s case, one may expect that some experience that she acquires in the US may not be valued in China, while some of her previous Chinese experience may not be valued in the US.

Some evidence that Cathy had all chances to experience fragmentation of socialization have been already provided earlier as I discussed the conflicting ideology of two educational systems in the section above and in the discussion of instructional epistemologies and approaches in the second section of this chapter. In essence, Cathy, having been socialized in Confucian society and experienced Confucian approach to teaching and learning, was well prepared to diligently accumulate words of wisdom from authoritative books and her teacher whom she was taught to respect and obey. However, when joining the US academic discourse, she was faced with the fact that the western student-centered approach, rooted in Socratic methods of learning, valued critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, encouraged questioning of authoritative sources and self-generation of ideas, and perceived the instructor as a facilitator and equal partner in the creation of knowledge. Moreover, when signing up to her first American course, Cathy had faulty expectations of the amount of workload she might have in a graduate course. As a result, the beginning of the course was rough for Cathy: she fell behind with readings, failed to follow instructions for the written assignment and was unable to keep up with the work done by her group members and the rest of the class. However, because the US academic discourse dominated within the courses that Cathy took as a student, she had to learn values of this new discourse and practice the behavior that fitted into its
value paradigm.

*The acquisition of the new value system was neither short-term nor easy.* The following excerpt from the face-to-face interview demonstrates that Cathy was *distressed* when she had to alter, sometimes radically, her perception of acceptable and approved learning strategies and classroom behavior:

To be honest at the very beginning I felt very uncomfortable with this kind of learning style in the US because in China what we do is listen to lectures and we never ever try to challenge him whenever we want… But in the US I found that students always raise hands whenever they want, just cut and jump and do everything but it's crazy to me. [Laughing]. But I am learning it. I actually did it. [Laughing again]. I thought it was impolite at the very beginning of the semester. Why can you do that? Cause, I know that being a teacher he or she has some flow of ideas that he wants to express but if you are very rudely cut in and say your words, it could be a problem for him. I don't want to do this rude thing but everyone did that (ibid.).

We see that initially Cathy perceived the situation as “crazy” and her classmates’ behavior as “rude” and “aggressive” because what she experienced in the US classroom clashed with the values of her native discourse. However she gradually came to the realization of the acceptability and usefulness of such behavior:

But gradually I found out that this is very interesting interaction process and I found that professors actually prefer this, they like this. They really want you to have some response or interaction with them, so they like the challenge, to make the topic go further even beyond the frame that is expected. And it is very helpful
when you can get into it by challenging your professor or even your peers questions and you can actually get into this, this whole process. Yeah, I think it is good (ibid.).

In her interviews Cathy proudly mentioned that she also practiced jumping in to ask a question, express an opinion, and challenge the instructor’s or classmates’ ideas. She said that she gradually started perceiving such a behavior as “normal” and “natural”.

However, the analysis of her discussion posts and messages to the instructor reveal that Cathy was unable to fully disassociate herself from her native discourse even though the contextual factors were favorable for that. As described earlier in this chapter, Cathy used communication strategies that one does not expect to find in the US academic discourse such as the use of very polite and too formal request phrases and overabundance of adjectives showing admiration, enthusiasm and exaltation. Moreover, in several cases one was able to observe how Cathy humbled herself when praising others (see examples in Section III of this chapter). While Cathy did not observe silence in relation to her instructor (which is expected from a Chinese student), her messages were polite, respectful and grateful of the help she received. The following excerpt from the face-to-face interview also demonstrates that listening to others and agreeing with them remained in the Cathy’s repertoire even after she finished her online course and half of her on-campus semester in the United States:

I tend to agree with [communication partners]. I think there are always some points in whatever they say. Students in my class come from different background and it is reasonable that we enjoy diversity. It is wiser to listen and analyze reasons behind it (ibid.).
Thus Cathy's behavior in the US classroom reflected the values she acquired in the process of socialization (formal and informal learning) both in her native country and in the US. Industry, harmony with others, humbleness, loyalty to superior, solidarity with others, and non-competitiveness are among the most valued characteristics of a Chinese person (The Chinese Cultural Connection, 1987 as cited in Neuliep, 2009) learned not only in school but also at home and other public places. The American classroom, in its turn, reflects American values such as self-interest, self-expression, self-gratification, and independence (Hsu, 1969 as cited in Neuliep, 2009). The data shows that Cathy had to learn to be more competitive, openly express herself, and critique the authoritative sources. However, she felt impossible to do so without striving for group harmony and presenting herself as a humble and respectful person. This seems to show that Cathy was unable to avoid fragmentation of socialization and experience.

*Forms of discourse.* The third problem that Scollon and Scollon (2001) expect to arise in the situation of cross-cutting discourses is “dilemmas in the choosing the most appropriate forms of discourse: each of the multiple systems favors different forms of discourse, and difficult selections must sometimes be made” (p.217). This may concern the choice of language and language forms including the choice of a genre or style. Scollons illustrate this by recalling situations when ESL teachers criticize the language of a research proposal in the meeting of a faculty research committee instead of focusing on the content of the proposal.

In Cathy's case the selection of the language seems not to be problematic: in the American classroom she speaks and writes in English, while when she communicates with her Chinese relatives or friends, she speaks in Chinese. However, the most difficult
choices that Cathy might have had to make concerned the choices of English forms. Here it is appropriate to talk not about purely linguistic choices related to vocabulary and grammar, but rather the *choices related to language pragmatics*, i.e., contextually appropriate use of language. Being raised and educated in Confucian society she seemed to be inclined to select forms that made her English sound too polite, formal, and powerless. The examples of such sentences were provided in Section III of this chapter, but I would like to repeat one illustrative phrase that shows Cathy's adherence to the fundamental Chinese value of humbleness:

> I quite enjoy the way you follow the thread of connecting all 5 articles which is much much better than that of mine (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

This example demonstrates how Cathy transfers a pragmatic form appropriate in her native discourse to the US academic discourse. Such influence of the native culture on the use of English as a foreign or second language is well known to ESL and EFL teachers and documented in many research studies (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008; Kachru, 1982).

Another clash of forms of cross-cutting discourses might be anticipated when Cathy starts applying knowledge she acquired in her American TESOL classes to a Chinese EFL classroom. As it became apparent in the discussion of ideologies, Cathy might experience misunderstanding and criticism from her colleagues if she adapts the context-based language teaching approach that emphasizes functions of language forms and involves students in communicative activities. The discourse forms of a CLT (communicative language teaching) follower might be incomprehensible to language
teachers that design test-driven language classrooms that focus on form and offer students list of words and grammar rules for rote learning and drilling. As a proponent of the CLT approach, Cathy may speak in a different language than her colleagues do when designing curriculum, discussing the choice of activities, drafting learning materials, offering assessment, etc., and this may result in conflicts with her colleagues.

**Face systems.** Scollon and Scollon (2001) argue that in the situation of cross-cutting discourse systems, a person might have to assume two or more sets of face relationships, thus feeling “two-faced”. (p. 217). As described in Chapter Two, Scollons distinguish three types of politeness (face) systems:

a) *difference politeness system* when participants consider each other to be on the same social level but are distant and use independent strategies (for example, university professors who have only met recently);

b) *solidarity politeness system* when both sides feel equal in social status and feel close and use involvement strategies (for example, two close friends);

c) *hierarchical politeness system* when participants see each other to be on different social status levels and the one of higher status uses involvement strategies while the one of lower status uses independence face strategies (for example, a boss and a low-rank employee).

While one may probably find all three of these face systems in the US academic discourse, student-centered learning environment is generally described as horizontal, i.e “characterized by informal student-student and student-teacher interactions without much emphasis on hierarchical relationships” (Lee, 2007, p. 30). In the Scollon and Scollon’s framework horizontal relationships are found in difference and solidarity politeness
systems. The Scollons also show that developing close and equal relationships with students and colleagues is not unusual for ESL teachers who practice a communicative language approach.

On the other hand, a traditional educational system is hierarchical in nature as it is based on a strict vertical relationship between a teacher and a student. In the Chinese classroom, as described earlier, this hierarchy is very tangible, and therefore one does not expect to find here a face system other than hierarchical.

For Cathy, membership in the US academic discourse system, as well as her affiliation with the ESL/EFL professional discourse that espouses communicative language teaching, requires her to engage in horizontal relationships with peers and instructor. As demonstrated in the third section of this chapter, Cathy more often than not utilized involvement politeness strategies, including 1) paying attention and showing strong interest in others participant’s affairs, 2) pointing out common in-group membership, 3) claiming a common point of view, 4) assuming or asserting reciprocity, 5) being optimistic, 6) using first names. This seems to show that Cathy made attempts to fit into the solidarity politeness system where one expects to find a high concentration of involvement politeness strategies (ibid.).

On the other hand, Cathy’s journals and interviews showed that she initially felt discomfort speaking up, interrupting her professors and classmates and critiquing authoritative sources. Moreover, independent politeness strategies, which one expects to find in either hierarchical or difference politeness systems, were not absent in Cathy’s post. In her conversations with peers and instructors she used phrases where she 1) made minimum assumptions about wants, needs or interests of others, 2) minimized threat, 3)
apologized, 4) was pessimistic, 5) used family names and titles (see examples in section three of this chapter).

Thus, data suggest that it was problematic for Cathy to adhere to a single face system and that maintaining both face relationships was not easy for her.

Cathy’s attempts to marry multiple face systems are demonstrated in using two first names for herself – her native Chinese and American:

My name is Lian Wang. You can also call me Cathy Wang.

What is interesting, Cathy uses several ways of naming herself: “Cathy Wang”, “Cathy” and “Lian Wang.” However, “Cathy Wang” was used most frequently, which seems to illustrate her desire to combine two discourse systems, two cultures – American and Chinese.

This desire also surfaces when Cathy mixes “we” that refers to her American peers/colleagues and “we” that refers to Chinese people:

We can’t let it happen that our students lose their will and their ability of reading.

In Chinese colleges and universities, we have book clubs joined by members of students.

However, it is more important that we teachers remind ourselves from time to time of what on earth is our final goal of teaching. Is it for the dispersion of knowledge or the general application of hand-me-down tech tools. In China, we share the same problem, even to a greater extend (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

Summing up, Cathy’s case confirms Scollon and Scollon’s (2001) observations that membership in cross-cutting discourse systems results in the conflicts of identity.

14 The name was changed to protect participant’s identity.
For Cathy these conflicts are most prominent in the differences of teaching and learning philosophies and approaches that exist in the US academic discourse and in the Chinese (academic) discourse based on Confucianism.

**New vision of teaching and learning.** Cathy’s data reveals that studying in the US classroom, while being highly beneficial for her, brought many questions about how to teach within her native culture. She was faced with the need to find ways to marry two worlds, i.e., to find a consensus between values advocated and promoted within the US academic discourse and those established in the Chinese academic discourse. Multiple interviews, journals and online course logs revealed that Cathy formed a new vision of how learning and teaching might and should to be done. These new visions concern the roles of a student, instructor, and technology.

**Role of a student.** Research data provide evidence demonstrating that Cathy reevaluated her role as a student and adopted new learning behavior that is *more active, reflective and critical*. When asked to describe how she changed over the online course period, Cathy wrote:

> I did try to be more competitive from the midterm point. I spent more time reading, reflecting upon and posting in a positive and early way. I focused more on others’ posts and learn to agree or debate after deep thinking. Besides, I began to ask whenever I felt doubtful upon certain point of view (Cathy, online interview, second round, September 2009).

So, it's kind of not only changed my knowledge, my thinking about teaching but my way of dealing with people and talking, and interacting, the role I am supposed to play within the group or pair work. Rather than being shy or inactive,
or receiver you should probably be open and contributor, to be contributor to
others' work. Also, you can even be a little aggressive when you have different
ideas with others. To build on your better understanding upon the point that you
are supposed to learn (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).

Clearly Cathy learned that sharing with peers and learning from them is a valuable
ingredient of the learning process. She started understanding the power of small group
work that enables evaluating and reevaluating one’s ideas and enriching the course
content. She also found public display of completed assignments to be beneficial for
encouraging students to produce high quality work:

In China we almost never make assignments open for public … we only hand in
the assignments to the instructor. But the American way of sharing is inspiring. It
stimulates students to spend more time reflecting and polishing their work,
because it would be displayed and everyone can see and talk about (Cathy, online
interview, second round, September 2009).

Having learned how students could be actively involved in the knowledge
creation process, Cathy started suggesting her own ideas for student-centered activities:

It would be interesting to build up co-construction discussion among peers by
synthesizing information to encourage thinking and responses. It is a kind of self-
conscious strategy which needs students’ spontaneouss (Cathy, online course

Even though Cathy’s ideas might not be well formulated yet, they show that she
would like to apply them in her teaching. The clinic class she took on campus provided
her with the testing ground for practicing student-centered activities in the language
classroom. As demonstrated earlier, she was also determined to promote her new vision of the student’s role in her home country.

**An instructor’s role.** Thanks to the US courses in education, Cathy clearly understood that the change in the students’ role in the classroom was directly related to the change in the instructor’s role. She saw that the instructor’s role transformed from the deliverer of knowledge to that of the *co-creator of knowledge* who orchestrates the “flow” of ideas in the classroom. In her journal that she kept after arriving to the US she wrote:

I like the idea that knowledge should not be “stored” within any individual student but “flow” among all to create more. I can clearly perceive that almost every of my instructors in [name of the city] try every means possible to make the flow of knowledge and ideas possible. Instead of the traditional “one to all” pattern of knowledge delivery from the teacher to students, now we have the network formula, in which everyone is both the giver and receiver, and thus, even the teacher can learn from students (Cathy, reflective journal, 2009).

As a future educator, Cathy exhibited a high interest in discussing the role of the instructor in a student-centered classroom. She brought up this topic in her online discussions, as well as in her journals and interviews. She did not overlook the opportunity to make further inquiries about this matter in the discussion with her online instructor:

Professor [instructor’s last name], I like the idea that “in-class learning was complemented by online group problem solving”. However, I am also interested to know what the role we teachers should play during this process. Should we be
engaged in the online groupwork as an active participant, or rather we are facilitators or guides by implementing various instructional conversation strategies and do not have comments upon any of their thoughts and responses from students? (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

Cathy also seemed to be completely amazed by the fact that an instructor may ask students what they would like to learn:

Prof. [instructor’s surname] kept asking us what we actually want to learn from this course to maximize our benefits. She said she can adjust the way she teaches during the process by learning about our diverse background and personal needs on the other hand (Cathy, reflective journal, 2009).

These examples suggest that Cathy acutely felt the change in face relationship between an instructor and a student. This is further confirmed in Cathy’s messages to her online instructor where she assumed a casual and informal tone. In the quote below, while addressing her instructor quite formally, she maintained a very informal style and even used an emoticon:

Professor [instructor’s surname], It is my final draft. Sorry for the confusion I made. :) Cathy (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

Such a writing style might indicate the recent tendency to use more colloquial and informal language in email messages that students address to instructors (Stephens, Houser, & Cowan, 2009), but it also seems to signal Cathy’s attempt to fit into the US academic discourse that is based on horizontal rather than hierarchical face relationships.

**Role of technology in teaching and learning.** The research data suggests that Cathy discovered for herself a very prominent role of information-communication
technologies in teaching and learning. Because Cathy took an online US course before actually coming to the US, she was able to experience one of the most important advantages of online learning – its independence of geographical place. What is more, Cathy took this experience as exciting, “real” and worthwhile:

For me, it is really exciting that I can take the “REAL” class of [name of a US city] at home in China! (ibid.).

It [online learning] is convenient because you don't have to be in the class in that particular time and you can contact a person anytime you want, so its good, really good for many courses (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).

Moreover, Cathy went beyond perceiving technology just as a convenient tool for distance learning. Thinking in the line of social constructivism, she started looking at technology as a tool for global exchange of ideas, i.e., she discovered for herself its transformational role in educational process:

It [online learning] makes it possible that people all over the world can gather together to share minds at one particular virtual spot regardless of factors such as different time zones and physical distance. It is a speed way of communication which makes the flow of thoughts move without obstacles (Cathy, reflective journal, January, 2010).

In her perception, educational technologies became associated with a student-centered learning environment that leaves little space for traditional one-way interaction and boring lectures:

Under technological circumstance like this, classroom education is no more a merely one-way act, but two-way interaction through which both parties could be
instructed and inspired. I appreciate it so much, given that technology allows more vivid forms of teaching and learning that would make study no longer boring as would traditional lectures do (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).

Even though Cathy favored face-to-face learning environments for building personal relationships, in her interview she pointed out the technology capability to help people get on friendly terms. Particularly she praised web conferencing via Skype without which she felt she could have not built a personal relationship with one of her group members.

It's like with [name of a group member]. The reason why, is that I can have more personal relationship with her that we could have a talk online by the Skype. It's really important cause without it, I can't say that we could have built relationship like that (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).

Cathy became so excited with online learning advantages that she even proposed to set up a cross-cultural collaboration between her American classmates and graduate students in Shanghai.

I am thinking about the possibility that we initiate a cross-cultural online conference with the help of Skype between American teachers and Chinese graduate students majoring in English Teaching from [name of the university] University in Shanghai. . . I figure it would be very REAL and LIVE if we can get to each other and learn in this way. . . (Cathy, online course logs, January-May 2009).
The fact that she capitalized words “real” and “live” seems to suggest that when taking an online course, Cathy perceived online communication and learning via technology as comparable in the level of reality to face-to-face communication. While after coming to the US and taking face-to-face courses Cathy was not so excited about the reality level of online interaction (as was demonstrated in Section I of this chapter), the data show that Cathy was very much satisfied with learning outcomes of the online course. Cathy did not only learn the content of the course, but she was able to gain knowledge of the US academic discourse that helped her successfully continue her program on campus. In her interview she confessed:

I would say that learning experience online last semester really help me a lot. I had almost no transition period that I would have to go if I hadn't had that online experience when (compared) to a student who would be suddenly exposed to American culture without any prior experience in a foreign country before. They have to overcome a lot of difficulties like cultural differences. . . They may lose confidence, if they feel everything is very different from the situation they have back at home. For me, I had this experience online before and I know how Americans actually learn and teach and exchange in the classroom. . . When I actually come here, in the classroom I know why the thing is the way it is. So I can very easily fit myself into this in a more easier way than people that never experienced the online study before (Cathy, face-to-face interview, November 2009).

This quote demonstrates that the course that Cathy took completely via ICTs enabled her to get adequate understanding of the US course format, teaching approach,
expected learning behavior, anticipated interaction patterns, etc., thus enabling Cathy to gain membership in the US academic discourse.

To sum up, in the process of online learning Cathy discovered for herself the significant positive impact of technology on the accessibility and quality of education. Thanks to the online course in educational technology that she took while residing in her home country, she was able to gain first-hand experience in how technology could be used to design a student-centered learning environment that erases geographical borders and enables global exchange of ideas. An online course was found to be appropriate for joining the US academic discourse as a legitimate member.

Chapter Summary

The research data demonstrates that international students like Cathy who find themselves in the context of the US academic discourse carry with them the baggage of their previous learning experiences. The affiliation to the native academic discourse and culture affects students’ experiences related to peer-to-peer and student-to-instructor relationships and surfaces in students’ use of language. International students who lack knowledge of host culture seek assistance from human knowledge mediators – peers and instructors. American peers become most prominent more capable others for their international classmates, and group activities, which are often integrated into online US courses, support peer-to-peer learning.

As Cathy’s case demonstrated, the simultaneous affiliation to native and host academic discourses may result in the conflict of identity in four dimensions identified by Scollon and Scollon (2001) – ideology, socialization, forms of discourse, and face
systems. Evidently, for Cathy these conflicts were most significant in the differences that exist between teaching and learning philosophies and approaches endorsed in the student-centered US academic discourse and in the Chinese (academic) discourse based on Confucianism.

Cathy’s case also demonstrated that newly acquired affiliation with the US academic discourse may result in reevaluation of previous beliefs and lead to the development of a new vision that may potentially impact student’s future actions. Cathy reevaluated her vision of how learning and teaching might and should be done. Particularly she reevaluated the roles of a student, an instructor, and educational technology. She became a proponent of student-centered learning and discovered the many benefits of technology-enhanced teaching. However she predicted that it would be overly problematic to apply her newly adopted vision in the context of her native Chinese academic culture. While no data was collected to confirm Cathy’s predictions, they seem to show how acute the conflicts of identity might be for an international student who finds herself in the midst of cross-cutting discourse systems.

Thus the study shows that international students like Cathy may be faced with the need to balance multiple discourses, and this task might not be easy to achieve. However, very favorable evaluation of her learning experiences with taking an online course and her overall study in the US seem to confirm Scollon and Scollon’s believe that such a task might be “interesting and rewarding, if at times stressful, experience” (ibid, p.217).
Chapter Five: Conclusion and Implications

Summary of the Study

This study aimed at exploring learning experiences of international students in fully online courses designed by American instructors for students studying in a US university. The primary goal was to examine the interplay of host and native cultures in an online learning environment and study its effect on international students’ learning experiences, specifically on learning experiences of a student from China. The study drew on theoretical and empirical studies related to intercultural communication, (cross-) cultural studies, cultural anthropology, and the like. The sociocultural framework, particularly ideas put forward by Russian psychologists L. Vygotsky and American scholars R. Scollon and S. W. Scollon formed the theoretical basis of the research, while so-called nationally-driven constructs developed independently by G. Hofstede’s and E. Hall’s also proved valuable for the design, data collection and data analysis phases of this research.

The study was designed as a two-stage mixed methods study. The first stage involved 12 international students who participated in the survey that was used to obtain information on trends and gain an initial pool of participants. Five of the survey participants took part in follow-up online interviews. Stage 1 data provided a general picture of learning experiences of international students and enabled the research to collect background information on Cathy, a graduate female student from China who became the key informant of the case study carried out on the second research stage. Besides Cathy, the case study involved her American peers and an instructor who were all a part of the online course that Cathy took while residing in her home city of
Shanghai. Face-to-face and online interviews with Cathy, Cathy’s reflective journals, an online interview with Cathy’s instructor, as well as archived online course logs, provided rich data for the case study. The cumulative data from both research stages was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively in order to answer the following research questions:

1. How might international students’ affiliations to their native academic discourse and culture affect their learning experiences in an online course in the United States and how, specifically, is one student affected over time?

2. What were the experiences of a Chinese student in integrating previous learning experiences within the Chinese academic discourse on her learning experiences within the academic discourses she encountered in the United States?

Summary of Findings

During the course of the study, it became evident that international students’ experiences in US online courses could be shortly described as requiring efforts for balancing membership in cross-cutting discourses of the host and native academic cultures. The Scollon and Scollon’s (2001) concept of multiple discourses enabled this research to show that international students’ behavior in the classroom is guided by the necessity to balance multiple discourses, i.e., to follow expectations and requirements of two or more discourse systems. This necessity affects students’ interaction with peers and instructors and manifests itself in communication strategies and linguistic choices. The study also revealed that the complex interaction and interplay of the cross-cutting discourses might result in a shift of learner’s epistemologies as was the case with the main informant of the study, Cathy.
These study findings have been visualized in Figure 27 below. Using this map, let us now revisit these findings in more detail and discuss their implications for research and practice.

**Figure 27.** Mind map for research findings: Balancing multiple discourses.

**Host academic discourse. Individualistic, low power distance and low context culture.** In this research the host academic discourse revealed itself as reflecting the characteristics of individualistic, low power distance and low-context culture of the US mainstream society. The individualism manifested itself in the high value of independent thinking that students were encouraged to demonstrate. This was most evident in the choice of course activities where students were able to publicly express their personal views over readings relying on their individual experiences.

The low power distance aspect of the US academic discourse surfaced in the relationships between a student and an instructor, as well as in peer-to-peer interactions. Cathy’s online instructor in this study assumed the role of an equal and active participant rather than an authority, thus shifting power relationships from traditional vertical to horizontal. Peers, on the other hand, not only demonstrated partnership, but also
performed the role of a *more capable other* and knowledge mediators whose assistance was as important as an instructor’s help.

The characteristics of low-context culture were evident in the relatively high value of the explicit code – words – and low value of contextual (particularly sociorelational) factors that students were supposed to demonstrate when communicating. The study showed that online course activities required explicit, frequent and prolific verbalization of one's thoughts in whole class discussions and small group projects. There was no indication that sociorelational features, such as students' age, gender or social status, were taken into consideration when instructors set up communication activities. While it would be inappropriate to say that no contextual factors affected communication, clearly asynchronous written communication that was practiced in Cathy's online course supported low-context communication: written communication with delayed feedback required explicit verbal codes for successful communication to occur.

**Learner-centered pedagogical practices.** Individualistic characteristics of the US academic discourse, coupled with low power distance traits, were well manifested in learner-centered pedagogical practices as was seen in the data based on Cathy’s online and on-campus learning experiences. (See Figure 28 representing learner-centered pedagogical practices). Cathy’s professors built classrooms based on constructivist teaching aligned with the Socratic instructional approach that “valued private and public questioning of widely accepted knowledge and expected students to evaluate other’s beliefs and to generate and express their own hypotheses” (Tweed & Lehman, 2002, p.89). In these classrooms public discussions and group projects were highly regarded as activities intended to enable co-construction of knowledge. Knowledge and ways of
acquiring knowledge were not rigid but rather negotiable: it came as a surprise for Cathy that one of her on-campus instructors asked students to contribute to the planning of course content. She was also able to negotiate course requirements with her online instructor.

The data also provided ample evidence suggesting that peers played very significant roles as knowledge mediators and as important *more capable others*, while instructors assumed a facilitating role frequently performing as equal participants of the learning process. Critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, emphasized in the western education based on the Socratic approach (Greenholtz, 2003), were practiced and tested in Cathy’s online and on-campus courses. The research also demonstrated that for students like Cathy a US instructor may play a role of culture intermediary who readily shares one’s expertise in the US culture in general and US academic discourse in particular.

*Figure 28*. Mind map for learner-centered pedagogical practices.
Data collected here also suggest that learner-centered pedagogical practices can be very well accepted by students like Cathy. Peer assistance was highly valued and appreciated by most study participants. This was evident from survey results showing that most study participants liked collaborative activities, while seeing independent projects as most difficult. Interviews clarified that peer assistance was valued not only for supporting content learning but also for compensating for gaps in the knowledge of the host academic discourse such as teachers’ expectations for well-done assignments or procedures for performing course tasks. In Vygotskian terms, peer assistance supported quick learning of important psychological tools that were practiced in the host academic discourse and that had not been previously exploited in students’ home cultures.

Besides co-learning course content, collaborative activities were extremely important for developing personal relationships and for exchanging knowledge about cultures of the students. While online learning was perceived as less “human” (Cathy’s words), data demonstrated that group projects set up by the instructor might promote the development of virtual friendships that had potential for becoming friendships off line as well. Cathy’s case showed that she developed a close personal relationship with one of her group mates with whom she performed several collaborative projects. Her case also demonstrated that peers may serve as valuable sources of culture-specific knowledge and become engaging conversational partners interested in learning about cultures of their international peers.

Mainstream-centric but open to multicultural content. The US academic discourse was found to be generally open to cultures other than mainstream American: most survey participants felt their peers and instructors were interested in their cultures.
However, Cathy’s case showed that this openness might be limited to the culture-specific content knowledge that international students were encouraged to occasionally bring to class by instructors or peers. Such occasional sprinkles of culture into the course content seemed not to radically change the classroom from the mainstream-centric to truly multicultural as advocated in related literature (see, for example, Banks & Banks, 2010).

The discourse of online courses was found to be lacking features that support so-called ‘low’ or ‘popular’ (Ommagio Hadley, 1993) culture related to everyday life. The data suggest that while students were able to incorporate cultural knowledge related to the course content, they found very little backing for their interest in learning about everyday culture of their peers. This aligns with previously reported findings that online learning does not satisfy international students’ desire to integrate host popular culture into their studies (Tan, Nabb, Aagard & Kim, 2010; Shattuck, 2005). This does not mean, however, that online instructors are unable to include course materials and activities that would address students' interest in 'low' culture. But instructors would have to make an effort to do so, while in face-to-face environments interpersonal and intercultural exchange often happens without any instructor's involvement thanks to the physical presence of a student immersed in that culture every day.

Native academic discourse (Cathy’s case). Collectivistic, high power distance and high context culture. The study demonstrated that international students’ native academic discourse might significantly differ from what they find when joining a US course. These differences become most prominent in cases that involve students from non-western cultures that bear characteristics of collectivistic, high power distance, and
high context cultures such as Chinese, the native culture of the main informant of this study.

Cathy’s adherence to collectivistic traits was most visible in her need for affiliation and ingroup relationship, which are behavioral traits associated with collectivism (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). In her interviews, reflective journals and discussion posts, she demonstrated how much she valued personal relationships in the learning process. The limited ability to form such relationships in online environment was mentioned as the most significant drawback of online learning not only by Cathy but also by several other international students who completed the survey and follow-up online interviews.

Behavioral characteristics associated with high power distance seemed not to be very prominent in Cathy’s communication with peers and instructors. She did not display reticence or constant agreement with the ideas of others, as might have been expected from a person with lower status in high power distance cultures (Neuliep, 2009). However, Cathy always used formal ways of addressing her instructors (not only in messages addressed to her online instructor but also when talking about her instructors in reflective journals) and was always polite, respectful and grateful for the feedback (even when it was unfavorable) that she received from her online instructor. She also tended to agree with classmates and demonstrated great care in those rare cases when she expressed a view dissimilar to that of her conversation partner. Moreover the analysis of her online posts revealed that Cathy actively utilized phrases that made her sound very polite, overly formal and self-denigrating: her posts were full of adjectives showing admiration of others and phrases that belittled her own work. Such communication behavior “might be
misjudged as being insincere or fawning” (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008, p. 141). However it seems more likely that these responses illustrated Cathy’s affiliation to Chinese culture where complementing others, avoiding confrontation and showing modesty makes up the essence of facework (Gu, 1990; Neuliep, 2009).

Evidence of Cathy’s affiliation to high context culture surfaced in her critique of online communication. She and Amanda (another participant in the follow-up interviews) complained about the lack of nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions and body language, in online courses. These female students, both from China, expressed their dissatisfaction with text-only communication that left little space for “reading” a message from contextual factors, so important for representatives of high context cultures (Hall, 1976). Interviews and online course posts seem to suggest that sociorelational and perceptual contextual features (Neuliep, 2009), were the contexts that Cathy missed most in her online course. Cathy believed that “words can not explain everything” and longed for personal face-to-face communication, while partly compensating for its absence with the help of web conferencing technology (that she used to communicate with group members) and communication strategies where she showed her involvement with and appreciation of peers and instructor.

**Teacher-centered pedagogical practices.** While the current study did not allow observing pedagogical practices in the native academic discourses of international students, Cathy’s course posts and interviews provided ample data to picture such practices and compare them to those practiced in the US academic discourse. Cathy’s Chinese classroom cultures had apparently dominated by teacher-centered pedagogical practices heavily influenced by Confucian philosophy. According to Cathy, the
Confucian instructional method, which is focused on knowledge acquisition, passive observation and virtuous behavior (Tweed & Lehman 2002), requires students to listen to and memorize large volumes of abstract content knowledge, take numerous tests, show respect and obedience to the instructor and strive to achieve harmony when communicating with peers. A Chinese instructor, in his/her turn, is supposed to select content from respected authoritative sources, deliver this content generally in the form of a lecture, follow approved curriculum, prepare students for high stake exams, work with a very large student body, and enforce rules of behavior that promote students’ obedience and respect for authorities.

While Cathy exhibited strong preference for learner-centered pedagogical practices and criticized instructional approaches practiced in her native academic discourse, she also found pitfalls in American classrooms. Particularly, Cathy cast doubt on the value of some spontaneous (face-to-face) class discussions classifying them as “endless and destructive talking”. She also demonstrated objective reasons for practicing teacher-centered methods in Chinese classrooms such as a teacher-student ratio, exam-based system of promotion, and, of course, deeply rooted history of Confucianism in the Chinese society.

International learner. Experiencing conflicts of identity. The situation when a learner is placed in an academic discourse, which significantly differs, if not opposes, a familiar native academic discourse, could be modestly described as complicated. The Cathy’s description “crazy”, however, seems to be more illuminating. This study showed that an international student that finds herself/himself in the midst of cross-cutting discourses may experience conflicts of identity. Following the Scollon and Scollon’s
(2001) approach to the analysis of multiple discourse membership, I was able to find evidence demonstrating conflicts of identity in the areas of ideology, socialization, forms of discourse, and face systems. In Cathy’s case, conflicts of identity were most palpable in the differences of teaching and learning approaches and philosophies that exist between US and Chinese academic discourses.

**Gaining membership in a new discourse.** While and international student’s learning experiences might be complicated by conflicting discourses, data suggests that it does not necessarily prevent one from gaining membership in a host academic discourse. Analysis of online course posts, as well as several interviews and reflective journals, showed that Cathy felt included into the learning community and took advantage of this inclusion. She tended to use communicative strategies of involvement in her communication with peers and her face saving strategies helped her establish friendly and productive relationship with others. Throughout the study, Cathy emphasized the significance of personal relationship that clearly contributed to the positive evaluation of her learning experiences.

**Acquiring new content knowledge, skills and psychological tools.** While an international student may come to class with educational and cultural baggage that differs significantly from that of her/his American classmates, she/he has all chances to acquire knowledge and skills that might match or even surpass those acquired by peers. Cathy’s case demonstrated that while she had not expected a US graduate course to be so heavy in workload, require extensive reading and active involvement in class and group activities, she was able to overcome initial difficulties and successfully complete the course. The survey results and interviews with focus group participants also showed that most
participants were satisfied with their online learning experience and would recommend an online course taught in the US to other international students.

Learning in a new academic discourse not only resulted in the acquisition of new content knowledge and skills, but also enabled Cathy to gain important psychological tools, such as linguistic devices for critical analyses of texts and peers’ ideas, communicative strategies for working in virtual and real teams, presentation skills for demonstrating group projects, etc.

The crucial roles in the acquisition of content knowledge, skills and especially new psychological tools were performed by Cathy’s peers and instructor. While Cathy and some other survey participants came to class with faulty expectations and evidently lacked understanding of the US academic discourse and some content knowledge background, they relied on these human mediators of knowledge to help them do much more than they might have done without such mediation. This, however, did not diminish the role of individual efforts in academic success. Cathy’s data demonstrated her high intellectual and linguistic abilities, as well as her hard-working, persistent, friendly and curious nature; without these qualities no peers’ and instructor’s assistance would probably have been helpful enough for her to succeed. This seems to suggest that the support of peers and instructors in Cathy’s case were appropriate for her individual zone of proximal development. For other international students or even for some American students such support might not have been as productive, an idea which is supported by Cathy’s online instructor who reported that some US students might be “more needy in terms of individual directions” than their international peers.
Learning in a non-native language. This study demonstrated that even though performing course activities in a non-native language might significantly complicate learning experiences for international students (Ciano, 2003; Lee, 2007; Zhang & Kenny, 2010), it does not necessarily create an insurmountable impediment for successful learning. The survey and interviews revealed that some participants in the study experienced difficulties understanding some English words, phrases and culture-specific references to the US culture, but this seemed not to be perceived as a significant barrier to learning.

Cathy’s high English language proficiency enabled her to perform on par with her American peers. The comparative analysis of Cathy’s and her American classmates’ online posts showed that they used very similar vocabulary: 80 percent of the most frequently used words in both groups of texts (Cathy’s and Americans’) were the same. While Cathy’s communicative strategies sometimes reflected her adherence to Asian cultures, where avoiding confrontation, admiration of others and self-denigration are common face-saving strategies (Gu, 1990), she demonstrated her linguistic-pragmatic maturity in constructing texts appropriate for the US academic discourse. She tended to use politeness strategies of involvement that enabled her to create the solidarity politeness system (Scollon & Scollon, 2001) that seemed to be most appropriate for learner-centered classroom.

The research data also enabled the comparison of language in online and face-to-face discussions. The majority of the study participants perceived online discussions as less linguistically demanding that face-to-face discussions: the asynchronous written form of communication offered more time to decode meaning and compose well-
developed posts, a feature which was appreciated by non-native language speakers. However online discussions were not described as easier for communication than face-to-face discussions. This suggests that the students’ inability to see and hear their conversational partners face to face deprived participants of important contextual cues, so important for high-context cultures (Neuliep, 2009).

**Learning online and on campus.** Cathy’s unique learning experiences first as an online global learner and later as an on-campus student provided excellent opportunities to compare these environments as learning spaces. The benefits and drawbacks of both environments as reported in the survey, follow-up interviews and Cathy’s data are summarized in Figure 29 below. In essence, international students in this study found online US courses to be legitimate spaces for quality learning. However overwhelming evidence in the current study supports previous studies that reported that some international students, especially those coming from high-context cultures, might feel that an online environment is unable to rival face-to-face classroom in providing truly social experience (Morse, 2003, Tan, Nabb, Aagard & Kim, 2010; Thomson & Ku, 2005).

![Figure 29. Mind map for benefits and drawbacks of online learning.](image-url)
Shifting epistemologies. The study revealed that the situation of learning in the midst of conflicting academic discourses may result in the shift of students’ epistemologies (see Figure 30 below). Online course transcripts, interviews and reflective journals provided evidence showing that Cathy reevaluated the nature and sources of knowledge. Her immersion into the learner-centered pedagogical practices rooted in the Socratic teaching approach brought her to the realization that the existing knowledge could be critically deconstructed while new knowledge could be co-created by students and instructors in the active, collaborative, critical and equal process of knowledge building. Having been engaged in online learning, Cathy also opened herself up to the educational value of information-communication technology as a tool for global learning and a legitimate space for knowledge creation.

Figure 30. Shift in epistemologies.

This shift in epistemologies seems to signal true changes in Cathy’s development as an individual. Apparently she acquired new psychological tools and new conceptual frames for further studies. These changes, however, might be a source of new conflicts that she might face when bringing her new vision of teaching and learning back to her
native discourse, i.e., to Chinese classroom. In her interviews Cathy anticipated that her Chinese students might perceive her as a “crazy teacher”, while her colleagues might see her as “aggressive”.

Optimists would probably argue that Cathy’s strong determination to create learner-centered environment in her classroom and her strong belief in the necessity to reform education in her native country might yield viable fruit and eventually result in shifts of epistemologies and changes in instructional practices of those around her. Cathy and her confederates, whom she will most probably find among other Chinese alumnae of the US universities, may serve as innovators and early adopters (Rogers, 2003) who will inspire and ignite others for educational reforms. However, caution should be taken to expect any quick reforms in such a large and conservative system as Chinese education. Moreover integration of learner-centered pedagogical practices might be problematic and challenging in cultures that value modesty, obedience to authorities (including teachers) and where “silence is gold” (Yang, 2010). External factors, such as very large student body,\(^\text{15}\) the nature of the assessment system and extensive syllabus to cover, might also prevent teachers from introducing learner-centered course activities (Dautermann, 2005; Jacobson, So, Teo, Lee, Pathak, and Lossman, 2010; Yang, 2010).

**Implications for Theory and Practice**

Overall the research findings suggest that learning experiences of international students are complicated by their simultaneous membership in two cultures, two discourses – native and host. The study also showed that while international students may feel included into the US academic discourse, the level of inclusion seems to depend on

\(^{15}\) Young (2010) reports that English language classrooms in China may have as many as 60-70 students or even over one hundred students in a class.
types of activities and tasks selected by an individual course developer/instructor. In Cathy’s case, the online course provided her with ample opportunities for reflecting on differences between host and native academic cultures and for peer-to-peer learning, and this seems to be one reason for her quick grasp of new learning practices and favorable perception of the course. However, some previous research (Shattuck, 2005, Thomson & Ku, 2005) seems to suggest that Cathy’s case might be an exception rather than common. If so, our data on Cathy have several important implications for research and practice.

First, the study suggests that research exploring learning experience of international online students will benefit from more studies that involve complex set of qualitative and quantitative data and include in-depth study of students’ learning environments. Without extensive interviews, reflective journals and the study of course logs this study might have come to the conclusion that Cathy’s experiences were nothing but a constant and frustrating struggle with the dominated American academic culture. However, extensive analysis of qualitative and quantitative data revealed that while Cathy did have to go through a difficult period of learning the system and did have to discover how to learn ‘the American way’, her experiences were neither frustrating, nor ‘war-like’. This seems to provide evidence in support of case studies and multi-method studies that focus on contextual factors and rely not only on students’ individual subjective perceptions of their learning experiences (as it was the case with Shattuck’s (2005) study) but also on the analysis of online course logs and interviews with other stakeholders – instructors and peers. Such studies may avoid blaming US online programs for imposing cultural imperialism, colonialism and hegemony (which Moore (2006) shows to be inappropriate and useless for understanding the problem) and help
researchers and practitioners gain a clearer and more balanced picture of how international students learn and feel in online US courses.

Second, this study enabled extension of the applicability of sociocultural theories, particularly Vygotsky’s concepts of mediation and psychological tool, as well as Scollon and Scollon’s (2001) contextual approach to the discourse analysis of intercultural communication. Vygotskian ideas that were originally meant to study child development proved useful in the study of adult learners. The Scollons’ methods of studying politeness strategies and analyzing cross-cutting discourses were found to be very relevant to the study of international students’ behavior in a US online classroom. Specifically, it was Scollons’ approach to the study of multiple discourses that enabled this study to show that the identity conflicts that Cathy experienced were not destructive but rather had formative and constructive effect on her growth as a student and individual. Thus, these sociocultural concepts may be recommended as useful and insightful for the study of learning experiences of diverse culture groups.

Practical implications of this research call for designing culturally sensitive online courses that are inclusive of international students’ cultures. While such a call has been already voiced in a substantial number of previous studies (Moore, 2006; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009; Shattuck, 2005, Thomson & Ku, 2005; Tierney, 2006; Zhao & McDougall, 2008, etc.), this study adds new insights into why this is important and how it could be done. These insights are of practical significance for online course developers and instructors, as well as for those involved in professional development of these practitioners.
First of all, the current study demonstrates that the culture of a US course might be in conflict with the native culture of a student, but this does not necessarily create a barrier for successful learning. In fact the differences may co-exist and help a learner grow, and it is the job of a course instructor to identify these differences and offer appropriate learning activities and tools for managing these differences. To make a course culturally sensitive one does not necessarily need to internationalize it. Evidently, many international students do not want to make American courses ‘non-American’. They may object to the internationalization of the courses for the very reason that they want to experience the American way of learning and maximize their opportunities for learning about American culture.

Instructors need to be aware of scaffolding methods appropriate for the needs of international students. Learner-centered teaching activities such as whole class and small group discussions, group projects, and pair work should be recommended as appropriate for compensating for the lack of experience completing and presenting US school projects. Individual tasks should always include detailed descriptions and be accompanied by sample work. A teacher may need to take the initiative in assigning study groups, peer reviews and early draft reviews. All these scaffolding methods will minimize international students’ difficulties with learning rules and requirements of the US academic discourse.

Online courses that involve international students like Cathy need to strive to maximize social presence. As this and other studies showed, many international students long for developing personal relationship with American peers and are highly interested in learning ‘popular’ American culture. To satisfy international (and some domestic)
students’ need for socializing and learning culture, instructors may be trained to design group and pair projects, enhance asynchronous discussions with synchronous forms of communication, as well as assign tasks that would incorporate everyday culture into the course content. While instructors can not force students to become friends, they can maximize opportunities for such relationship to develop when students perform collaborative activities.

When designing a course, developers need to keep in mind that what they teach in the US classroom may need to be transferred to and applied in native cultures of international students. This understanding should affect the design of some course activities. While it would be impossible and probably counterproductive to offer only content directly applicable to international students’ native discourses, instructors may select tasks that would ask students to reflect on the applicability of the content knowledge in their cultures and to suggest ways of re-constructing the content and skills making them applicable in the native context. Public discussions of these issues might not only help all students increase their cultural awareness (as students will have to learn other contexts) but also foster a deeper understanding of the subject matter and develop critical analysis skills as such tasks will require higher order cognitive operations - applying, evaluating and creating (Anderson & Krathworthl, 2001).

Finally, a cross-cultural communication component needs to become a common part of online courses as cultural awareness benefits all involved parties. Such components are now technically easy to introduce due to the growing availability of low-cost technologies. However the task of designing globally networked learning environments brings a whole new set of questions and issues while also offering a myriad
of scenarios for “cross-boundary knowledge making” (Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008). Online program and course developers need to be aware of these opportunities and issues and take appropriate steps to ensure that a cross-cultural component enriches experiences of all students – international and domestic.

Chapter Summary

While recognizing that no individual’s learning experience is identical, this study provided insight into what international students, specifically a student from China, may experience when joining an online US course, and how their affiliation to native academic discourse and culture might affect these learning experiences. After starting out as a survey of several international online students, the research went deeper and investigated the case of Cathy, a female graduate student from Shanghai. The rich data, analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively, demonstrated that learning experiences of international students like Cathy are indeed affected by students’ simultaneous membership in host and native academic discourses. The need to attend to expectations and rules of both discourses might significantly complicate learner’s experiences while also enriching them. It may also have a long-lasting effect on student’s epistemological beliefs. The research findings suggest that learner-centered teaching practices that place emphasis on peer-to-peer learning, as well as course designer’s conscious efforts in providing a space for students’ cultures, may help an international student to balance multiple discourses and successfully complete the course.

Implications for further research include the use of the sociocultural framework for the study of international students’ learning experiences, as well as the need to conduct more case studies and multi-method inquiries that will extend the research
beyond unhelpful discussions of cultural imperialism within the US classroom. Practical implications revolve around ways of designing online courses where international students’ interests and needs are acknowledged and attended to.
References


(Eds.), *Vygotsky's educational theory in cultural context* (pp.99-118). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


Oren, A., Mioduser, D., & Nachmias, R. (2002). The development of social climate in virtual learning discussion groups. *International Review of Research in Open and


Zhao, N., & McDougall, D. (2008). Cultural influences on Chinese students' asynchronous online learning in a Canadian university. *Journal of Distance Education*
Appendices

Appendix A: Survey

Survey

I. General questions

1. What country are you from?
2. What is your native language?
3. What is your level of study?
   Undergraduate
   Graduate (Master)
   Graduate (Doctoral)
   Non-matriculated
4. How long did you live in the U.S. before taking your first online course?
   5 and more years
   3-4 years
   1-2 years
   6-12 months
   1-5 months
   None
5. How many fully online courses have you taken?
   I am taking my first online course now
   1
   2
   3
   4
   5 or more
6. Why did you take your first online course?
   I had no choice and I had to take an online course.
   I wanted to have flexible schedule and/or didn’t want to travel to campus.
   I wanted to live in my home country while taking online course.
   I wanted to try.
   Other (please, explain)
7. What online course activities did you like most? (You may choose several answers)
   Reading course textbooks
   Reading lectures
   Listening typed lectures
   Viewing lectures
   Whole class discussions
   Small group discussions
Chats (real time communication)
Quizzes and tests
Essays
Journals
Team projects
Individual projects
Other (Please, explain)

8. What online course activities did you dislike most? (You may choose several answers).
Reading course textbooks
Reading online lectures
Listening typed lectures
Viewing lectures
Class discussions
Small group discussions
Chats (real time communication)
Quizzes and tests
Essays
Journals
Team projects
Individual projects
Other (please, explain)

9. What online course activities did you find most difficult? (You may choose several answers).
Reading course textbooks
Reading lectures
Listening typed lectures
Viewing lectures
Class discussions
Small group discussions
Chats (real time communication)
Quizzes and tests
Essays
Journals
Team projects
Individual projects
Other (please, explain)

AGREE or DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS

10. When I took an online course, I felt my classmates showed interest in my cultural background.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
11. It is easier to talk about my culture and my country in an online course rather than in a regular course taught on campus.

12. Sometimes I had difficulty understanding my instructor and/or my American classmates because she/he/they used words and phrases I do not know.

13. Sometimes I had difficulty understanding my instructor and/or my American classmates because she/he/they talked about American phenomena, such as American science, politics, holidays, movies, education, etc.

14. I usually felt no one in the online course cares about my cultural and educational background.

15. Some assignments and tests were unfair and/or too difficult because they asked for skills one can learn only when living and studying in the U.S.A. for a long time.

16. For me it is easier to participate in online discussions than in face-to-face discussions.

17. I prefer not to participate in online discussions when I do not have to do it.

18. Online discussions require better English than face-to-face discussions held on campus.

19. I do not like participating in online discussions because of my poor English.

20. American online instructors usually know how to help their international students.

21. If I need, I have no problems emailing my online instructors and ask for help or discuss my problems.

22. It is easier for me to ask help from my online instructor than from instructor who teach on campus.

23. I usually liked how my instructor(s) taught online courses.

24. Sometimes I did not submit discussion postings and assignments on time because I forgot about them or thought I could post later.

25. Sometimes I had difficulty understanding how assignments and tests are evaluated (graded).

26. I think American online instructors have to be less strict when grading international students.

27. I felt I should have been given more time to complete some assignments and tests than my American classmates.
28. I prefer working in a team with international students rather than with Americans.

29. I am usually more active when working in a team with other international students than with American team members.

30. I had difficulties completing an online course because I did not have appropriate computer skills.

31. I had had very different expectations from my first online course before I took it.

32. I think I was not well prepared to take my first online course.

33. I would recommend online courses taught in the U.S. to other international students.

34. Overall I am satisfied with my online learning experience.

35. If you would like to add something regarding your experience taking an online course, please write in the box below.

36. If you wish to be contacted for follow-up online interviews, please write a pseudonym (a nickname) here so that the researcher could know that it is your survey. Then go to http://www.albany.edu/~gs2129/X and read carefully an Informed Consent form. You will need to download the Informed Consent document, sign and date it and email it to gs2129 @ albany.edu. If you are selected to be interviewed, upon the completion of the study, you will receive a gift card from Amazon.com for $25. Please do not write anything here if you do not want to be interviewed.
## Appendix B. Matching Survey Items to Factors and Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTOR/CATEGORY</th>
<th>SURVEY QUESTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Background**                   | 1. What country are you from?  
2. What is your native language?  
3. What is your level of study?  
4. How long did you live in the U.S. before taking your first online course?  
5. How many fully online courses have you taken? |
| **Motivation**                   | 6. Why did you take your first online course?                                                                                                   |
| **Interaction with course content** | 7. What online course activities did you like most?  
8. What online course activities did you dislike most?  
9. What online course activities did you find most difficult? |
| **Interaction with peers/instructor** | 10. When I took an online course, I felt my classmates showed interest in my cultural background.  
11. It is easier to talk about my culture and my country in an online course rather than in a regular course taught on campus  
12. Sometimes I had difficulty understanding my instructor and/or my American classmates because she/he/they used words and phrases I do not know.  
13. Sometimes I had difficulty understanding my instructor and/or my American classmates because she/he/they talked about American phenomena, such as American science, politics, holidays, movies, education, etc.  
14. I usually felt no one in the online course cares about my cultural and educational background. |
| **Online discussion**            | 16. For me it is easier to participate in online discussions than in face-to-face discussions.  
17. I prefer not to participate in online discussions when I do not have to do it.  
18. Online discussions require better English than face-to-face discussions held on campus.  
I do not like participating in online discussions because of my poor English. |
| **Interaction with instructor**   | 20. American online instructors usually know how to help their international students.  
21. If I need, I have no problems emailing my online instructors and ask for help or discuss my problems.  
22. It is easier for me to ask help from my online instructor than from instructor who teach on campus.  
23. I usually liked how my instructor(s) taught online courses. |
| Course policies (deadlines, evaluation, requirements) | 24. Sometimes I did not submit discussion postings and assignments on time because I forgot about them or thought I could post later.  
25. Sometimes I had difficulty understanding how assignments and tests are evaluated (graded).  
26. I think American online instructors have to be less strict when grading international students.  
27. I felt I should have been given more time to complete some assignments and tests than my American classmates. |
| --- | --- |
| Team work | 28. I prefer working in a team with international students rather than with Americans.  
29. I am usually more active when working in a team with other international students than with American team members. |
| Prior knowledge | 15. Some assignments and tests were unfair and/or too difficult because they asked for skills one can learn only when living and studying in the U.S.A. for a long time.  
27. I felt I should have been given more time to complete some assignments and tests than my American classmates.  
30. I had difficulties completing an online course because I did not have appropriate computer skills.  
31. I had had very different expectations from my first online course before I took it.  
32. I think I was not well prepared to take my first online course. |
| Overall satisfaction | 33. I would recommend online courses taught in the U.S. to other international students.  
34. Overall I am satisfied with my online learning experience. |
Appendix C: Interview Questions for Amanda

1. In several sentences please write about your individual culture? What do you think makes you different or similar to other people? You may want to talk about your family, education, religion, race/ethnicity, gender, age, traveling experience, etc.

2. You said you had not been in the U.S. before taking the course. Had you lived in the U.S. before that?

3. Have you ever lived in any other foreign country? If yes, where and for how long?

4. What is your major now? What is your undergraduate degree in? Where did you get your previous education (before entering the master program at SUNY-Albany)?

5. You wrote you had no choice and had to take an online course. Why is that? Was it a required course?

6. Please explain why you selected the following activities as your favorite – reading course textbooks?

7. Why didn’t you like individual projects? What was difficult about them?

8. It seems that nobody cared about your cultural background in online course? Why do you think so? Do you feel your classmates should have shown more interest in your culture?

9. Were there any assignments in the online course you took where you could share your culture with others? For example, was there any discussion topic where you could write about your culture?

10. You seemed to have difficulties understanding your classmates or instructor (their phrases and topics). Can you recall and share with me two-three of these difficulties?

11. Why is it more difficult for you to participate in online discussions than in on-campus (face-to-face) discussions? Do you like participating in face-to-face discussions?

12. You disagreed with the statement “American online instructors usually know how to help their international students”. Why is that? Please describe the situation (or situations) when the instructor was not able to help you.

13. Why didn’t you like how your instructor taught an online course?

14. Why did you have to be given more time to complete some assignments than your American classmates? Give an example.

15. Why do you prefer working in a team with other international students? Is it true that you are less active when in a team with other international students?

16. You wrote that it was your first online course and that you took it right after arriving to the U.S. What helped you to be prepared for the course? How did you know what to expect from the course?

17. Why were you not satisfied with the course?

18. What advice would you give to an international student who is going to take his/her first online course in an American university?

THANK YOU SO MUCH!
Appendix D: Online Interview Questions for Cathy (Second Round)

1. What did you learn from your online classmates?
2. I see that you often praised the works of your classmates. Why do you think you need to do that? Is it common in your home culture?
3. Sometimes you stress the negative sides of your own work when introducing it to your classmates. Why do you think you need to do that? Is it common in your home culture?
4. Do you think you picked up some words, phrases, communication behavior (for example, how to start a conversation, introduce a topic, praise someone’s work, offer change in someone’s works, etc.) from your American classmates? If yes, what exactly?
5. It seems that in your group work there were some logistic difficulties (like meeting online at the same time) due to the fact that you were in China. How did you feel about that?
6. How did you usually compose your postings? Were you very careful in selecting words, checking spelling and grammar? Did you ever proofread your messages? If not, did you want them to be proofread? Did you worry about being misunderstood?
7. Do you tend to agree with your communication partners or you will not hesitate to disagree or correct a person if you feel this way?
8. Did you always understand your classmates’ ideas?
9. Did you always understand your instructor and a teaching assistant?
10. In the feedback that your instructor provided for the case study assignment, she wrote: “Your case study would have been greatly improved had you taken advantage of our consultation on your drafts throughout. Unfortunately the work you submitted reflects no consultation nor editing, nor polishing.” Why didn’t you make any changes suggested by the instructor?
11. For the case study assignment when you interview a girl about her interaction with media texts & technology, it seems that you did not completely understood the task as you wrote “to be continued” but did not continue it. Please explain what was confusing about the task.
12. What did you learn about a group work when taking an online course?
13. Please describe pair/group work in China. How often do Chinese students work in groups, what type of activities do they do in groups (homework projects, in-class discussions, etc.). How are roles distributed(by instructor, by team members, spontaneously, etc)?
14. It seems that in your group work one of your teammates (Jane) often took initiative and drafted the summaries. How do you feel about that?
15. In the group work you had the instructor assigned the group leader (designated members’ roles). What do you think about that? Do you think it is a good way to plan team work? Do you think such planning worked well in your group? Would you like to be a group leader?
16. How did you feel about posting all your assignments for your classmates to see and comment? Is it common in your home country to make assignments open for public or you used to hand in the assignments to the instructor only?
17. What helped you get adjusted to the course - your own efforts, help of your peers, your instructor, course readings or something else?
18. You once mentioned a TV series “Prison Breaker”. Is it a Chinese show?
19. Please explain this expression: “I see eye to eye with you…”
20. It seems that you have developed a personal relation with Jane. Is that true? How does this influence your learning outcomes and satisfaction from the course? Were there other people with who you developed friendship?
21. In one of your posts you wrote” [I am] very disappointed with my interaction with my peers in class and my skills for moving the discussion forward.” Please explain what you meant by that.
22. In your reply to midterm evaluation you wrote that you would “learn to be more competitive rather than to be obedient”. Do you think you did learn how to be more competitive by the end of your online course? How did you change your online behavior to achieve competitiveness?
23. Can you describe yourself as a follower of Confucianism? If yes, how does this affect your learning style and your interaction with classmates and teachers?
Appendix E: Interview Questions for Cathy's Online Instructor

1. What do you think is the best way to teach online? Consider the importance you place on different online activities (discussions, quizzes, lectures, team work, etc.), assessment criteria, deadline policies, feedback provision, personal interaction with students, etc.
2. How many international students have you had in the last course you taught online? What countries were they from?
3. Describe your overall impression from your international students. How well do you think they fitted into your class?
4. Do you think your international students had any significant difficulties with understanding the course topic, participation in discussions, completing class assignments, participation in team work, keeping up with deadlines? Please, explain.
5. Do you think your international students had adequate preparation for the course? Consider their language and computer skills, familiarity with the U.S. system of education and culture, etc.
6. How often did your international students contact you? What was the reason?
7. Did you make any adjustments in the course content, assignments, requirements, evaluation criteria, and grading for international students? If yes, what kind? If not, why not?
8. Did you have to alter your writing style/language when communicating with international students?
9. Do you feel international students need more attention and help than their American classmates when they take your online course(s)?
10. Have you learned anything about the country/culture of your international students when teaching your last online course?
11. What is your native language? Do you speak well any foreign language?
12. Have you lived in a foreign country? Do you have extensive traveling experience?
13. In a few words, please describe your individual culture? (Consider the influence of social and ethnic background, education, religion, etc.).
14. Have you ever had professional development that addressed issues related to teaching to international students? Do you think you need such training?
Appendix F: Guiding Questions for the Face-to-Face Interview with Cathy

1) student-to-student interaction
How different was your group work experience in the courses you took in SUNY-Albany from that you had taken in your home country? How different/similar was your interaction with your American classmates in two learning environments – online and face-to-face?

2) student-to-instructor interaction
How different was the teaching role of your U.S. instructors from that of your instructors that had taught you in your home country? How different/similar was your interaction with your American instructors in two learning environments – online and face-to-face?

3) student-to-course interaction
How did you like the course content and design of the face-to-face courses you have taken in the U.S.? (Talk about course readings, activities, evaluation criteria, etc.) How different are the courses in the U.S. from that in your home country?.

4) student-to-environment
When comparing online and face-to-face courses you have taken in the U.S., which one did you benefit and enjoy more and why? In what environment did your interaction with classmates, instructors and the course content more benefit your learning? Which environment suits better to international students like you and why?