

# How do International Students Reconstruct their Identity as Readers when they Transition into Canadian Post-Secondary Education?

Danni Chen and Aubrey Jean Hanson

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## Article abstract

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## *How do International Students Reconstruct their Identity as Readers when they Transition into Canadian Post-Secondary Education?*

DANNI CHEN  
University of Calgary

AUBREY JEAN HANSON  
University of Calgary

### *Abstract*

Recognizing the cultural transitions Chinese international students undergo as readers in the Canadian higher education system, this study explores the difficulties encountered by four Chinese students and uncovers how they experienced, responded to, and transformed in a new cultural reading environment. Focusing on the notion of a reader's identity, this study uses narrative inquiry to show how participants' readers identities are reconstructed in a new cultural reading environment. It concludes that readers' identities reflect readers' different cultural memberships. As international students crossing cultural boundaries, their identities as readers shape how they interpret and understand the meaning of reading materials.

*Keywords:* reader's identity; reconstruction of identity; second language reading; sociocultural reading; Chinese international students; Canadian post-secondary education

### *Introduction*

During Danni's studies at the University of Calgary as a first-year international graduate student, she found that she reconstructed her sense of self as a reader to adapt to a new cultural reading environment. During the transition, Danni's reading habits, and reading motivation were still the same to her. However, she discovered that her attitudes towards English reading changed after she had been reading at the University of Calgary for several months. Danni no longer viewed English reading as an academic tool for mastering knowledge. She began to broaden her understandings of the values and positioning inherent to English reading and to attach more importance to her interactions with English reading materials. From her own reading experiences, Danni realized that reading was much more than a carrier of knowledge.

Instead, Danni noticed that when she first began her studies as an international student, she had a strong sense of her identity as a fluent reader in English, but with a Chinese cultural worldview. How Danni viewed herself as a reader influenced how she approached reading materials with agency as a Chinese international student, constructing

meaning based on her own cultural negotiations rather than a set of prescribed interpretations. Danni's experience sparked the current study into the reconstruction of readers' identity among international students. It was this reading experience from Danni that first inspired the notion of reader's identity reconstruction in this research.

Through reading, readers engage with authors to construct different worlds that exist in different words (Freire & Macedo, 2005). Seeing a link between language and identity is fruitful (Dekeyser, Puschmann, & Agirdag, 2019). When international students are reading in a new language and cultural setting, their perception of both the words and the world can shift, as can their sense of self in relation to these. Most importantly, these changes are not based on reading habits and motivations, but depend heavily on readers' perspectives, on how readers view reading and their sense of self in a new cultural reading environment (Shin & Riazantseva, 2015).

To better understand how to facilitate second language readers, this study uses narrative inquiry to gain insights into the roles that identity plays in how readers construct meaning while reading English materials.

### *Reading as Meaning Construction*

Kintsch's (1988, 1998) construction-integration (CI) model views reading as a process during which readers construct a mental representation of the text. The CI model includes two different representations—text construction and text integration—which leads to two levels of comprehension, a text model and a situation model. In the text model, a reader's background knowledge activates, which helps to understand the propositional structure of the text (Mills & Larson, 2008). The situation model is then constructed, which incorporates information from the text combined with the reader's background knowledge (Zwaan, Langston, & Graesser, 1995). This model is an integration process where some irrelevant propositions formed in the text model are deactivated and others receive higher activation to attain overall coherence. Thus, a reader's representation of the text is constructed both from the text and from their prior background knowledge.

Nassaji (2002) proposes an extension to Kintsch's CI model of text comprehension and the important second level of text representation. Specifically, the extension proposed here posits knowledge as a framework of rigid structures against information obtained from the text as the framework. Nassaji (2002) takes into account L2 readers' diverse linguistic and conceptual knowledge sources consisting of L1 and L2 language and cultural knowledge, as well as cross-cultural knowledge in background knowledge activation. He argues that linguistic and cultural knowledge also have a different effect on the text representation of L2 readers (2002).

Thus, second language reading comprehension is situated in an interactive reading process through reflection, interpretation, and identification of a given story, together with the sense of empathy and sympathy that might be developed (Wang, 2018). In other words, L2 reading comprehension is the interplay between the story and the reader's self. L2 reading is a process during which readers interact with the text, understand the direct meaning of the text, reflect upon their previous knowledge and experiences, and respond to the new integrating knowledge. At the same time, the insights gained from experience

of reading lead this “agentive reader” (Bernstein, 2014, p. 113) to conclude this interactive reading process as ‘sort of comprehension’ of both the readings and self. Namely, the representation of a text, for L2 readers, shape what it means to be a certain type of reader and are a way for readers to position and be positioned within a given cultural context (Hall, 2016). This representation manifests readers’ personal, social, and cultural identities through the stances they take.

### *Reader’s identity in Second Language Learning*

Within sociocultural approaches (Bakhtin, 1986; Lantolf, 2000), identity is viewed as a contingent process including negotiations between individuals and the diversity of worlds and experiences they live in, and which act on them. In this sense, identities are ways of seeing, knowing, behaving in, and understanding the world. Moreover, Teng’s (2019) study reveals that identities are often dynamic, interactive, discursive, or contradictory. They are viewed as the result of the mismatch or disconnection between imaged and practiced communities. Additionally, Stets and Burke (2014) indicate that social groups strongly influence people’s multiple identity constructions. In a word, identity has been theorized as multiple, socially contextualized, fluid, changed over time, and reproduced in social interaction. And it is our culture, beliefs, and values that impact who we are (Smith et al., 2015).

Moving on now to consider this identity change in the area of second language learning, the construction of identity has received much attention (Norton & De Costa, 2017). In the light of Vygotsky’s (1986) and Bakhtin’s (1986) sociocultural language, identity is discursively shaped. Along these lines, language learners re-examine, negotiate, and reframe their beliefs, values, and behaviours in their individual history to accord with the socially shaped discourses they meet in new cultural environments (Shin & Riazantseva, 2015). In other words, language learners attempt to reconstruct and reshape their identity while they experience and explore a new linguistic and cultural environment (Beinhoff, 2013; Norton, 2013). Current identity studies on second language learning and teaching focus on a variety of processes that impact second language learners’ development, including social categories (e.g., gender, age, race, social class, and intersections of the above), social contexts (e.g., digital literacy and postcolonial sites), different populations (e.g., teacher identities, lingua franca speakers, heritage language learners), and the power dynamics related to identity construction during the interaction and crossing of communities and cultures (Norton & Costa, 2017).

However, research in the context of identity reconstruction in second language learning tends to focus on writer’s identity rather than reader’s identity (Gevers, 2018; Marshall & Marr, 2018). These studies emphasize the production and comprehension of written discourse regarding a variety of linguistic and sociocultural writing practices. For example, McKinley (2015) discusses 16 Japanese university students’ construction of writers’ identity in the context of English for Academic Purpose (EAP). He argues that instructors’ expectations predominantly influence the process of writer’s identity construction, along with the contribution of personal beliefs of writers’ self. Teng (2019) conducts a study on three Chinese college English major students. This study focuses on

the factors that influence students' identity and investment in EFL learning. The results show that, during English learning, learners negotiated and constructed their writer's identity over time, in company with the shaped investment in English learning. In the examination, Teng (2019) shows that learner's identity is complex and dynamic, influenced by four factors that include learners' cognitive awareness/ideology, perceptions of affordances in the English learning community, their sense of agency, and mismatches between the practiced community and the imagined community. Similarly, Kalan (2022) explores the role of translanguaging in ESL writing. This study points out that translanguaging as a writing practice helps writers to maintain their writing identities by creating semiotic and semantic continuity in writing trajectories.

Despite a degree of research in ESL and in writer's identity, reader's identity in second language learning has received relatively little attention. Most of the reader's identity research we identified is from English for Foreign Language (EFL) and English Literature courses. For example, Glenn and Ginsberg (2016) examine the disconnect that students perceived between their reading identities and experiences in traditional English classes. Study results suggest that positive support can help students to deconstruct ascribed reading identities in traditional classroom spaces and construct new conceptions of their reading selves in a unique and supportive classroom setting. Similarly, Hall (2016) explores the role of identity in reading comprehension development. In the context of EFL, Wang (2018) conducts research on how EFL teachers are advised to form a readers' club. This club provides teachers with a platform to reflect on their metacognitive reading strategies, to discuss principles about book selection, and to share readings. The research results show that reader's identity among EFL expert reading teachers mediates their teaching practice and related professional development. Shin and Riazantseva (2015) also conduct research on how three Korean EFL adult speakers construct meaning from the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* and how their identities mediate this process. They highlight the concept of second language reader identity, showing how the reading processes that "L2 readers engage in are not only the site of their multiple identities at work, but also a site where multiple competing concepts of the world meet, clash, transform and coexist resulting in narratives that cross cultures, contexts and individuals" (p. 600).

Unlike in the EFL and English literacy classroom, ESL reading tends to encounter a different research purpose. One way in which ESL reader's identity research differs from EFL and English literacy classroom research is in tracing a learner's reader identity transformation across different cultural and linguistic contexts. In other words, the construction of reader's identity in an ESL context also includes sociocultural negotiation across space, which in the process of English reading can resemble receiving sociocultural validation of genre knowledge in cross-cultural encounters (Wang, 2018). However, how ESL learners reconstruct their reader's identity is missing in ESL literature. The apparent overlooking of L2 readers' identity and its interactions with how students navigate their reading practices in a new cultural environment (the change of reading contexts) has resulted in an incomplete picture in the field of L2 education (Lee & Chern, 2011).

Given the awareness of the vital role reading plays in affecting L2 learners' academic development, interaction with different cultures, and cultural representation (Han

& Anderson, 2009, Kramersch, 2001), the reader's identity needs further attention in the context of ESL learning. The focus on the reconstruction of readers' identities could open a new possibility to explore international students' reading experiences in a new cultural environment.

Additionally, sociocultural theory convinces us that what and how we learn is shaped by "our history of lived experience in our communicative environments" (Hall, 2002, p. 66). Identities can be disrupted, reinforced, or shaped based on readers' past and current reading experiences and how they situate themselves within those experiences in a given, new cultural context. For this reason, when readers read English in a new cultural environment, they are also forming how they conceive themselves to be readers. Also, our cultures, beliefs, values, and experiences influence who we are as readers (Smith et al., 2015). In the restructuring and shaping of identity architectures, it is not sufficient for L2 learners to maintain and validate their original beliefs and behaviours to respond to the challenges or differences that they have encountered while adapting to a new cultural environment. In addition, they are required to re-examine, renegotiate, reframe, and reformulate their beliefs and behaviours with the aim of "making sense of their cross-cultural experiences and developing sensitivity to the new cultural realities" (Shin & Riazantseva, 2015, p. 603). This complex process of second language learning posits language as a prominent marker of social practice through which experiences are established and identities are practiced (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 432).

Thus, how ESL readers construct their identity and what factors are included in this transformation process have become eminent issues. In order to underscore L2 learners' identity construction while reading in a new cultural environment, this research conceptualizes reader's identity as the identities emerging from learners' construction and integration of the meaning of English texts. Understandings of reading are co-constructed by the text and the reader who enacts, negotiates, and reformulates their various personal, social, and cultural identities in response to the L2 text with the aim of arriving at a text representation that is coherent within the text and across the various communities to which they belong. During this process, the L2 reader's multiple identities emerge.

In this sense, the construction/reconstruction of readers' identity contains beliefs about what reading is, who is reading and for what purposes, values of reading, evaluations of personal reading ability, and expectations about how one might be a good reader in a new cultural reading environment (Hall, 2012). In this article, we also marked different readers' identities with language, like Chinese reader's identity and English reader's identity, which we mention later. The language as a marker of reader's identity is of vital importance in this study because in an ESL context a language is not simply a way of communication (Khan, 2019). A language is a culture and it is a grouping; different cultural groupings have been found to offer a collective reaction to literature as per their group/cultural membership and to deactivate or accept the text depending on the relationship they build with the text (Damico, Campano, & Harste, 2009).

In order to underscore the reader's identity in L2 reading, the current study explores how international students reconstruct their identities during the reading of L2 literary texts.



Through the exploration, we intend to capture the interplay between between L2 readers' identities work and their meaning construction with L2 texts.

Drawing from participant narratives, we outline responses to this study's core research question: how do international students perceive the relationship between their English reading and themselves as readers in a Canadian post-secondary setting (a new cultural environment)?

### *Research Design*

This study employed a narrative inquiry methodology to examine the reconstruction of reader's identity in four Chinese international students in their first year of studies at the University of Calgary, Canada. Narrative inquiry is a way to understand experience (Jack-Malik & Kuhnke, 2020, p. 45). Narrative inquiry was implemented as a mediational tool that enabled participants to interpret and reinterpret their experiences and to articulate the complexities of English reading (Johnson & Golombek, 2011, p. 487).

According to Bazeley (2013), narrative inquiry "is the study of stories or narratives or descriptions of a series of events" (p. 32) bounded by the assumption that stories account for human experience. His research also indicates that stories are used in the exploration of the process (how this phenomenon come about) as a way of collecting relevant information by avoiding direct "why" questions. This study fits well with Bazeley's criteria because it aims to understand better the process of how international students adapted to and transformed in a new cultural reading environment.

Moreover, according to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998), narratives also provide possibilities for researchers to learn about the inner world of the participants. Their research also believes that, through stories, individual narrators present their lives and their experiences. Throughout life, a person's narrative is created, told, revised, and retold, and the narrative presents one's identity (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 7). Additionally, this study explores L2 learning stories, which are unique and abundant sources of information about the relationship between language and identity in L2 learning and socialization (Norton & Toohey, 2011). In other words, narratives provide this study with access to participants' identities and personalities, and show researchers how they make meaning of their reading events and circumstances. Storied accounts of participants' reading events and experiences are the most suitable way for participants in this study to share what they encountered while reading in English. Those accounts or narratives are more helpful than explanations or simply offering opinions on how to improve their English reading. Furthermore, the exploration of narratives may enhance the depth of the data and tie researchers' understandings more closely to the participants' culture.

In this regard, this inquiry illuminated participants' lived experiences and the ways in which they made sense of their reading experiences. This full study draws from each participant's journal and interview to create a narrative that depicts their story as a reader. To be more specific, this study creates a narrative for each participant by analyzing the data. Further, the study uses that narrative approach to identify key themes from their experiences.

A recruitment letter was posted in two WeChat groups (a Chinese social media like a Facebook group. Material posted within a WeChat group is visible only to group members. Group members are also able to send personal messages to each other, which are not visible to the rest of the group) to look for eligible participants: one group for first-year undergraduate students and one group for first-year graduate students, both of which were for students at the University of Calgary. Willing participants replied to us over WeChat. Then, we verified that the student met the inclusion criteria. Each participant in the research was enrolled as an international student at the University of Calgary. All of them spoke Chinese as their first language and identified English as their second language. Moreover, these participants were studying for the first time in an English-speaking environment. These criteria ensured that they had formed a mature first-language reader's identity in China and were going to practice and reconstruct their reader's identity in a new cultural reading environment. Their degree programs ranged from humanities to natural sciences. To protect the participants' privacy, pseudonyms are used in this study. The four participants are referred to as "A" and "P" (doctoral students), "D" and "E" (master's students).

Table 1  
*Participant Overview*

Participant's pseudonym (and level of study)	Discipline
A (Doctoral degree)	Social Sciences
P (Doctoral degree)	Natural Sciences
D (Master's degree)	Social Sciences
E (Master's degree)	Natural Sciences

Qualitative data collection lasted for a period of five months, from September 2017 to January 2018. This study adopted two primary data collection methods: semi-structured interviews, which were digitally audio recorded; and personal journals that documented participants' first-month reading experiences at the University of Calgary. Multiple data collection methods were used to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' transformation processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Interviews varied in length from approximately 35 minutes to around an hour, and journals, as introductions and complementary data sources, were provided by participants. We added journals to the data collection process as the first stage to explore the relationship between readers and reading materials building across cultures. Associated with both descriptive and interpretive accounts of what participants experienced, journal entries provided us with opportunities



to modify some of my interview questions in seeking a deep comprehension of individual participants' evolving perceptions of adaptation and transformation. The language used during the interviews was Mandarin, as it was the language the participants were most comfortable using to communicate.

We followed a semi-structured format for questions in gathering data from each participant. The interview questions were mostly open-ended and delved into such areas as each participant's educational and linguistic background, challenges they met while reading at the University of Calgary, perceived strengths while reading in Chinese, reflections on adaptation, strategies for language learning, perspectives on factors that influenced their English reading, and goals for academic reading. At the same time, questions for clarification and for promoting depth and further understanding were added to encourage freedom of expression and input (Zhu, 2002). In this article, we quoted excerpts from the narratives.

In this article, we focus on students' narratives of the challenges they encountered and the efforts that they made to read in English. We reveal how participants made sense of their reading experiences—for instance, how they responded to intercultural encounters in reading, how they felt while having discussions on reading materials with English-speaking students, and how their self-perceptions were influenced and satisfied by interacting with others.

#### *Themes Emerging from the Inquiry*

During their reading process, different feelings and perspectives on English reading triggered the reconstruction of students' individual reader's identities. Reading in English was considered as an ability to help them to succeed academically in this new English cultural environment. The findings have heightened our awareness of how contradictory, complementary, and dynamic the reconstruction of reader's identity is as each participant's sense of self as a reader has shifted across time and space. Similar to how L2 writers displayed their identity through writing in a new cultural environment in other research (Weng, 2016), the participants in this study developed their reader's identity while reading in a new cultural environment. However, the reconstruction of reader's identity is complex, and no single theory adequately accounts for the internal and external factors that impact the reconstruction process.

While some aspects of participants' experiences are specific to them, some of their reading stories are similar when it comes to the perspectives of language, culture, academic field, personal traits and so on. All these have led to participants' differential and relational outcomes of reader's identity reconstruction (Bourhis, el-Geledi, & Sachdev, 2007). For instance, while reading in English, A and D took advantage of their majors and were more positive about themselves, while P and E did not. In English reading, P and E continued to feel a little insecure and were sometimes plagued with self-doubt. Although some participants in this study were not so positive while transitioning into a new cultural reading environment, all of them opted to embrace different opportunities to experiment with new expressions and ways of being (Bakhtin, 1986).

The following sections outline the themes that emerged from this narrative inquiry, focusing on the complex dynamics of reader's identity reconstruction. The themes emerging from this inquiry suggest that the notion of reader's identity reconstruction provides a new perspective for describing, understanding, and explaining how L2 readers interpret reading materials when they transition into a new cultural environment. In other words, a shift in reader's identity is a useful framework for us to use to understand participants' experiences in this study.

*Identity as a Chinese reader - The Struggle to Live in English*

From the very beginning of reading in English at University of Calgary, all participants were aware of their identity as a non-native speaker or Chinese international student. They made frequent references to their Chinese identity to make sense of the English materials.

As participant A stated, it was difficult for her to construct the meaning of English reading materials. She made multiple references to the Chinese proverbs in trying to construct the meaning of her English materials. When she read the idiom "every dog has its day" in English materials, she erroneously interpreted it to mean "bad people will eventually have a taste of his own medicine" (A, interview) as Chinese commonly uses the word dog in a pejorative sense.

It is interesting that another participant, P, also made frequent references to his Chinese reader's identity during reading. In one exam, when he came across the sentences, "please prove why utility and constructed function or constraint function had one and only one intersection" (P, Interview), P's Chinese reader's identity was evident when he answered this question. He stated: "when I was back in China, this is a simple question that can be answered by simply words, so I assumed this question was asking for a word explanation. However, after my professor saw my answer, he said please show me solutions with numeric symbols" (P, Interview). He noted this with disappointment: "ok, how I construct the meaning of reading needs to be changed" (P, Interview). In this situation, P's misunderstanding was not only due to language difference, but to the bundle of cultural assumptions, personal experience, and background knowledge that made up his Chinese reader's identity.

Their Chinese reader identities seemed to have posed problems to their English reading. Participants felt pressured and unable to construct the meaning of English materials as they had previously done in Chinese. They found it was hard to maintain who they were as readers. Their participation in and status within this new cultural community was fragile and easily challenged. They were at greater risk of being excluded as they attempted to navigate the new cultural norms which governed the group and shape its identity.

As an international student, E found herself at odds with her peers while reading in English. E expressed views which fell into this fear of being excluded from the cultural group and standing out in a negative way. While reading in a new cultural environment, E noticed that it was hard for her to ask questions like her peers: "as a reader, I felt that I frequently misunderstood the meaning of English materials and I don't know which questions I should ask the professor. If I ask wrong questions or use wrong meaning I got

from the text to ask question, I will feel that I am silly” (E, Interview). All along while reading in English, E’s mind was occupied by uncertainty. This uncertainty was also caused by the Chinese reader’s identity that did not fit with the new cultural reading environment. This experience disrupted how she perceived herself as a capable reader.

Similar beliefs are echoed in A’s reflections on her in-class reading. A felt excluded as an outsider while reading in English. She found that her classmates were ahead of her in reading. During English reading, A appeared to be bothered by her Chinese reader’s identity:

*[Since sometimes I don’t understand some concepts in reading] you [I] would always feel that, for example, while reading some local materials which are written in English by [Westerners], they [local students] have some certain advantages. Although you would get almost the same things from those reading materials, you still have the feeling that they are ahead of you in the reading. (A, Interview)*

Like E, A became skeptical of her capabilities of being a successful reader. A described herself as “an insufficient reader” compared to her English-speaking classmates: “they just know more than me” (A, Interview). As a result, A saw her Chinese reader identity through a deficit lens. A’s Chinese reader identity is viewed as something that she should be embarrassed about since it has negative currency in relation to the representation of the English text and is associated with cultures that do not fit in. A felt compelled to conceal her Chinese reader identity due to the feeling that the current cultural group did not fit with who she was as a reader.

Participants were unsure about their positions and who they were as readers in a new cultural environment, as if they perched precariously on the edge of the Chinese and English cultures. This uncertainty led to a sort of ambivalence about their Chinese reader identities. As a result, the participants’ drives for attachment to their Chinese reader identities came down. They sought to rewrite their reading identities to fit into this new cultural reading environment.

#### *Identity as an English reader - Enhanced Awareness and Appreciation of a Different Cultural Reading Environment*

To respond to and transition into this new cultural environment, the participants urged themselves to reconstruct a new reader identity, which could help them to better fit into this new cultural reading environment, to become English readers. Accompanying all struggles and tension while reading in English, participants experienced the restructuring and shaping of identity architectures (Norton, 2013). Their perception of themselves as readers and their identities had been shifting through their English reading process. Their second reader identity emerged from their state of turmoil.

In other words, where the individual struggled with reading, they also struggled with their identity as a Chinese reader and had to build a new relationship with their readerly self via other means. For example, as a student primarily educated in China, A was sometimes confused about the value of in-class discussions of learning materials. As she discovered more inconsistencies between her opinion and her classmates’ opinion on

this type of meaning-making activity, she began to put more weight on the in-class discussion and gradually concluded that this might have been such a good way to deepen her understanding of the reading materials:

*These discussions have no limiting boundaries, and you can share everything related to discussion topics, which are not restricted on a single subject in the reading materials. This is my most impressive reading experience. This has influenced me a lot. Before discussions, reading experiences in China and Canada are almost the same to me. However, the after-reading discussions make me[you] think deeper and more broadly of materials. For me, the discussions are the major causes of my different reading experiences in China and Canada. (A, Interview)*

Discussing everything she came up with while reading in classes, A said she gained something deeper and broader from the materials in this new cultural reading environment. She showed openness toward in-class discussion of the learning materials. A felt that by doing so, she was less alienated from the people around her: “my way of reading had changed, all I experienced here pushed me to think more while reading and be involved in this group” (A, Interview). She articulated a new sense of self (reader’s identity) in referring to her adaptation in a new cultural reading environment.

In the development of an English reader’s identity, A paid particular attention to what had impacted her change. She believed it was caused by unconscious learning and observation of her peers: “Their ways to approach learning materials have changed my sense of self as a reader” (A, Interview). She noticed that how her classmates raised questions impacted her a lot; “you are going to question yourself like them while reading” (A, Interview).

Similarly, D, who did not commonly like slang while reading in English, began to appreciate the role of slang in English text. In one of her English reading materials, D encountered a situation where a slang term was used to explain a difficult concept in a simple and lively way. However, the meaning of this slang, for D, a Chinese native speaker, was another difficulty in English reading. D tried to respond to this slang by drawing on her previous knowledge of Chinese proverbs. During this period, D experienced cultural barriers. Even if D’s English reading comprehension improved a lot, she found that there was still something invisible in the English reading process making her different from native readers. It evoked D’s repositioning as a reader while reading in English—as an international student who needed to adapt to this new cultural reading environment rather than remaining in her previous identity as a Chinese reader. In order to adapt to reading in English, she developed an English reader’s identity which helped her to read and construct meaning during reading in English. In D’s case, her English reader’s identity was co-created in relationship to interactions with different people and surroundings. Frequent discussions with classmates have boosted D’s willingness to appreciate slang in English. In her interview, she said:

*In classes, my professors and classmates share their opinions about how slang has been used. These opinions influence my knowledge reconstruction. Because the major I am in is a new area for me, to be honest, it is far from knowledge reconstruction. Now, they are helping me to construct the knowledge of being an English reader. (D, Interview)*

Drawing on the support of her classmates, professors, and friends around her, D successfully adapted to a new English cultural reading environment. She broke some cultural barriers and developed a new English reader's identity. As a L2 reader, D not only developed proficiency in the language but also built localized knowledge regarding cultural expectations and conventions conveyed by English reading materials, building foundations for her identity as an English reader. It was not easy to adopt and develop this new reader's identity, but only through these processes could D attempt to position herself in a new reading culture and be a successful reader, consistent with her peers.

Similar English reader's identity reconstruction happened in P's case. In our interview, P admitted that he relied heavily on his Chinese identity, especially from a linguistic perspective, for his English reading at the very beginning. He reflected, "Chinese versions are much easier for me compared to reading the English materials" (P, Interview). When P perceived himself as a reader, he still counted on Chinese language translation to read English materials, which resulted in his heavy reliance on his Chinese reader's identity for academic English reading.

However, after a while, P refused to read those required reading materials in Chinese: "I am afraid to read those versions, although the Chinese versions are much easier for me compared to reading the English materials" (P, Interview). He further explained:

*There are two major reasons [why I do not want to read in Chinese]. First is that from English reading, I could learn some professional expressions, a.k.a. English jargons. The second one is that there are big differences in reading as you read the same content textbooks written in different languages. (P, Interview)*

P found that even though he was reading the same content, there were differences between reading in English and Chinese. He realized that the meanings produced when reading in Chinese have comparatively low value and might cause misunderstanding. In response to this reading challenge, P made attempts to align with the meaning construction by shifting his reading language to English. He no longer viewed himself only as a Chinese reader and he could see the "big differences" between his meaning-making processes across the two cultural contexts, beyond linguistic differences. An English reader's identity became his pursuit while reading in a new cultural environment. With a better grasp on how his English reading materials would be read, P felt that he could better engage in a new cultural reading environment in an appropriate manner—in his words, "to be a good English reader" (P, Interview). In sum, his Chinese reader's identity failed to convert and construct meanings during the English reading. P's awareness of his English reader's identity led to his further English reading, which rendered him able to respond to the requirement of being a good reader.

When reading in a new cultural reading environment, L2 readers enact, comprehend, interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct their reader's identities in response to a new language and cultural text. This reconstruction takes place through experiences with adapting and responding to a new cultural reading environment, and while pursuing coherence within the text and cultural communities. These international students, who were impacted by their newly established English reader's identities, gained precious cross-cultural understandings encouraged by literary texts (Liaw, 2001). While reading, participants' L1 and L2 reader's identities presented them with different linguistic and cultural approaches with which to construct meaning and interpret reading materials.

### *Identity as the Commuter: English and Chinese reader's Identity Alignment and Misalignment*

While reconstructing their new reader's identities, participants in this study found that sometimes their English reader's identity contradicted their Chinese reader's identity. Although their English reader's identity emerged, their Chinese reader's identity did not leave much room for their English one. We are calling this a contradictive stage. In other words, the participants' Chinese reader's identity still strongly influenced the interpretations of the English materials. It is suggested that L2 readers' Chinese reader's identity has emerged not to compensate for their limited English cultural knowledge but rather to inform and enhance the coherence of the representation of a text. One such experience stemmed from the narrative shared by A.

While reading an article in English related to Chinese culture, A felt that she was in a more advantageous position compared to her English-native classmates. During reading, she made frequent comments on the cultural aspects of the text, and it became immediately apparent that she knew exactly what was going on. A believed this experience made her feel it was "easier" to read in English (A, Interview). Compared to her classmates, this familiar Chinese culture made A an insider while reading in English. Recognizing this point, A, through reflecting on her reading experiences, projected an integrated reader's identity based on that newly gained localized knowledge and knowledge marked with her habitual ways of reading as she was entrenched in particular linguistic, social, and cultural origins (Jwa, 2018). In other words, this third new integrated reader's identity combined her partial English reader's identity and some parts of her Chinese reader's identity, and was boosted by background knowledge on the particular topic of the material. Each one held its own sphere of competence during the construction of a new third intercultural reader's identity. Inspired by her achievement in English reading and impacted by a Chinese cultural frame of reference, A maintained who she was as a reader while migrating between cultures and languages.

During this process, the new third reader's identity appeared, which combined her partial second reader's identity and some parts of her Chinese reader's identity. After reading in a new cultural reading environment for several weeks, A was neither a pure Chinese reader nor an English one. To be a high-achieving reader, she relied on both reader's identities. While the identification with an English reading environment helped



her to get around easily, the prominent one (a.k.a. the Chinese reader's identity) provided her with roots when she approached the reading world.

Similarly to A, participant D also experienced the development of this new third reader's identity. Compared to A's focus on cultural perspective, D drew more on linguistic points. During the interview, D mentioned an English reading strategy. She described her English reading experience as "serious and conscientious" (D, Interview). D's revelations about how she combined Chinese while reading in English conveyed her new third identity reconstruction and content:

*When I find a sentence in English which is hard to understand, I always look up these unfamiliar words in the English-Chinese dictionary. Then I write down the Chinese explanations of these words. Using explanations, I can better understand the meaning of this English sentence. (D, Interview)*

By inserting the Chinese explanation of vocabulary, D's English reading presented her past cultural and textual engagement while reading in a new cultural environment. Her lexical translanguaging enabled her to make use of her intellectual legacies. As a social concept aiming to discuss the use of language, translanguaging considers language practices as one linguistic repertoire with features that have been societally constructed as belonging to two separate languages instead of the traditional concept of language speakers who use two or more autonomous language systems (Kasula, 2016). D's unique voice had been displayed through the segment not only in English and the alternating phrases spoken in Chinese. This shows that D had created the space for her multilingual voice to foster unique expressions of identity in these two languages through translanguaging. In sum, D's engagement with translanguaging reading strategies not only enriched her English reading experiences, but also helped her showcase her unique third identity all along her reading journey while crossing cultural borders. More visibly, D's conceptual translanguaging reading strategies created a continuity that connected her reading in Chinese and English languages and cultures. By using both Chinese and English while reading in a new cultural environment, D was able to refer to her cultural roots as a Chinese reader with the new culture that she entered by reading in English.

Inspired by their achievement in English reading and influenced by a Chinese cultural or linguistic frame of reference, L2 readers in this study developed a new third reader's identity in a new cultural environment. This development showcases a great sense of confidence at being a good reader when expressing their original beliefs and cultures while being a good reader in a second language. It also illustrates how this integrated identity could provide L2 readers with opportunities to negotiate meaning of their cultural experience. This newly developed, mixed, hybrid, and complicated third reader's identity not only gave participants a sense of belonging in this new cultural reading environment but also changed how they perceived who they were as readers in a new cultural environment by holding onto their Chinese readers' identity.

This newly developed mixed third reader's identity, intensified by the combination of Chinese reader's identity and English readers' identity, creates space for L2 learners and

readers to maintain and reinsert their traditional linguistic and cultural identity in the process of reading in second language.

It enables them to view their Chinese reader's identity as an intellectual privilege rather than as a deficit. This complexity comes to light in reflecting on the different identities that participants developed and experienced in their English reading (Ileva et al, 2019, p. 88). While the identification with an English reading environment helped them to get around easily, the Chinese reader's identity provided them with roots when they approached the reading world.

### *Conclusion*

This narrative inquiry concentrates on exploring readers' identity reconstruction in four Chinese international students who were reading in a new cultural environment. Narrative inquiry offers insights into participants' unique, personal, and lived experiences to explore their relationships with English reading derived from their reader's identity (Pavlenko, Dans, Blackledge, & Piller, 2001, p.167). In addition, narrative inquiry provides us with a better understanding of the complexity of how participants' reader identity mediated their English reading comprehension and advanced their reading improvement.

As readers in this study worked to enact, comprehend, interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct their identities in response to second language texts, with the goal of adapting to a new cultural reading environment, and pursuing coherence within the L2 text and new cultural community, their English language reader's identity emerged, integrated with their Chinese language identities, and moved to the reconstruction of a third reader's identity. It is this reconstruction process, which exists in how the reader transforms to a new cultural reading environment, that this study explored.

This article concludes that readers' identities reflect readers' different cultural memberships. As Chinese international students cross cultural boundaries, their identities as readers shape how they interpret and understand the meaning of reading materials. When readers apply different reader's identities while reading, they have the potential to interpret reading materials differently. In other words, through the reconstruction of reader's identities, L2 learners are provided with more ways to negotiate and construct meaning in view of new cultural representations. Through this reconstruction, they gain more ways to interact with different cultures; however, in this process, their first reader's identity is still prominent compared to their integrated third one. This finding is also in line with Shin & Riazantseva's (2015) finding that such intercultural encounters allow:

L2 learners to not only assert and enact their identities but also to reevaluate, reconstruct and reformulate their identities in response to new cultural contexts and realities, and even to expand and transform their identities by developing an awareness of the personal and cultural concepts that exist across time and space, exploring similarities and idiosyncrasies that characterize individuals and cultures, and cultivating sensitivity that allows one to successfully communicate across-cultural boundaries." (p. 613)

It is not only proficiency in a new language but a renegotiation of the self that enables readers to thrive in a new cultural environment.

Meanwhile, in the identity reconstruction process, sociocultural, linguistic, and environmental elements, as well as academic fields, played significant roles in the ways in which Chinese international students' reading experiences unfolded. While reading in English, A and D focused their energy on becoming more intercultural and proficient in English reading, while P had difficulties in understanding the social norms of discourse. P's unpleasant experiences reinforced his negative feelings about reading in a new cultural environment. This negative feeling held P back and led him to resist starting the journaling during the first month. However, P later exhibited a very high level of language sensitivity in transition, in keeping with his different learning experiences. This study also points out the importance of individual factors (e.g., personality traits, self-analysis, openness to differences, cultural sensitivity) in L2 reading. Unlike the other three participants, E expressed insecurities while reading in English. This feeling of self-doubt sometimes plagued her reading experiences. A wide range of internal and external factors influenced the participants' reconstruction of a reader's identity.

### *Implications*

From this narrative inquiry research, it can be seen that the reconstruction of reader's identity plays an important role in L2 learners' adaption to a new cultural reading environment. On the one hand, L2 readers aim to showcase that they are good English language readers through constructing an English reader's identity. Such reader's identity can be constructed by obtaining L2 linguistic and cultural capital to establish their membership in a new cultural reading environment. On the other hand, L2 readers interacted with their life experiences and downplayed previous socio-cultural roots to develop their English readers' identity, which helped them to better perceive themselves as readers in a new cultural environment and maintain who they are as readers. Accordingly, discursive transfer (Rowley, 2011) and downplaying their first language reader's identity constitute two key elements for mediating and constructing readers' particular identities while reading in a new cultural environment.

The reconstruction of reader's identity provides a new perspective for describing, understanding, and explaining how L2 readers interpret the meaning of materials when they transition into a new cultural reading environment. Reader's identity is worth considering in L2 reading research. It provides a useful lens through which to view students' adaptation to a new reading environment, as the findings and interpretations of this study suggest.

Moreover, the notion of L2 reader's identity reconstruction provides compelling evidence that the reader's identity is not fixed and static, supporting Norton and Toohey's (2002) depiction of identity as "contradictory, dynamic, and changing over historical time and space" (p. 121). Reader's identity is not an abstract entity. Through gradually practicing reading, L2 readers are able to develop the most suitable reader's identity when transitioning into a new cultural reading environment. The present study may also have an important pedagogical implication for current L2 reading classrooms. Given the vital role

of reader's identity in meaning construction, we recommend that the teaching and learning of L2 should go beyond reading skills, with more emphasis on reader's identity construction and self-exploration. In that sense, L2 readers need to make the most of reading to get a better understanding of self and identity, which are just as important as reading itself. The role of first language in L2 reading also should be recognized. L2 readers can take advantage of their first language reading in their L2 reading process.

While our study focuses on the reconstruction of the reader's identity in L2 reading research, the findings have enabled an analysis of how international students are incited to respond to resistance and willingness while reconstructing their reader's identity. It is not hard to see these Chinese international students' concerns and challenges. Some of the challenges and concerns are related to their English language skills, including vocabulary, grammar, background knowledge, and so on. However, most of their challenges and concerns are on feelings and cultures. While reading in English, they may feel isolated from the reading environment because of cultural misalignments. To adapt to a new cultural reading environment, Chinese international students need to overcome cultural misalignments embroiled in reading English materials between Chinese and English Canadian cultures. They can conquer the cultural barriers that consistently challenge them after reading in a new cultural environment. In this process, an integrated reader's identity has the potential to provide L2 readers with the opportunity to adapt to a new cultural reading environment. To be meaningful, this process must address the challenges (e.g., language barriers, sociocultural differences, detached feelings) that L2 readers face in a new cultural reading environment.

Through the reconstruction of their reader's identities, each participant has become more aware of their sense of self as a reader. This recognition provided participants with more exposure to English language and culture in academic settings, and it stimulated reader's identity expansion in transitioning to a new cultural reading environment. In conclusion, we urge international students to examine their own reading practices critically and reflectively to achieve an adaptable sense of identity as readers in their new cultural reading environments.

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#### *Author Biographies*

**Danni Chen** is a PhD student in Curriculum and Learning at the University of Calgary. As an international student, learning language is always her favorite topic. Her research interests include language learning, cultural studies, and power inequalities within the context of second language education, especially in English as an additional language learning.

**Dr. Aubrey Jean Hanson** is a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta and an Associate Professor in Education at the University of Calgary. Her research spans Indigenous literary studies, curriculum studies, and Indigenous education. Her book *Literatures, Communities, and Learning: Conversations with Indigenous Writers* was published with Wilfrid Laurier University Press in spring 2020.