Teaching ESL to Elderly Chinese Learners in Canada

by

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Abstract

With an increasing number of Chinese immigrants arriving in Canada, more and more elderly Chinese immigrants who cannot speak English are being sponsored by their children when coming to Canada. In order to help this group of immigrants better integrate into mainstream society and culture, this research aims to improve their communicative competence by analyzing different learning factors. The research focuses on the five factors affecting elderly second language (L2) learners in SLA: L2 learning orientation and motivation, age and L2 ultimate attainment, the transfer of L1 to L2, fossilization, and pre-migration educational background. The findings indicate that elderly Chinese immigrants have overlapping orientations when learning English, such as intrinsic, integrative and instrumental orientations; the decline of cognitive ability with advanced age makes it difficult for this group of immigrants to remember what they learned; the negative transfer of L1 and the occurrence of fossilization make it impossible for them to achieve a native-like communicative competence.

Keywords: English as a second language (ESL), second language acquisition (SLA), elderly Chinese learners, orientation, communicative competence
Introduction

Leaving my home in China and traveling abroad to complete my Masters in Curriculum and Instruction at the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria has been one of the most valuable experiences of my life. Both my personal and academic abilities have been developed immeasurably from my studies with this international cohort of professors and students. As an international student, with Mandarin as my primary language and English as a second language, I found that one of the best ways to familiarize myself with and integrate into Canadian culture and society was to volunteer at local community organizations, where I had the chance to meet many Canadians of different cultural backgrounds. There are hundreds of volunteers and non-profit community organizations in Canada dedicated to assisting immigrants, children, elderly people and the infirmed to learn English and become full, active members of Canadian society.

My research outlined in this paper looks specifically at teaching English to elderly Chinese immigrants who are over 55 years old and are also Mandarin speakers learning English as a second language (ESL) in Canada. According to Durst’s (2005) research, elderly immigrants are composed of two different types, one is individuals who immigrated in the 70s and have regarded Canada as their “home,” and the other ones are recent immigrants who were sponsored by their children at an advanced age. In this project, I will focus on the latter type of elderly immigrants, as these elderly immigrants, particularly Asian immigrants, are unable to speak English or French so they depend on their children socially and economically while living in Canada (Durst, 2005). As a matter of fact, they can be easily isolated. Therefore, I pay more
attention to this special group—elderly Chinese immigrants who need more help and concern. I was lucky to be a volunteer in community organizations and it was my teaching experience at Gordon Head SpeakWell Program, where I had the chance to learn more about elderly Chinese immigrants and was motivated to pay attention to their needs. In the class, most elderly Chinese learners were at least 55-year-old immigrants sponsored by their children and they never learned English prior to immigrating to Canada. This aroused my interest in studying this special group’s Second Language Acquisition (SLA). In order to have direct contact with more elderly Chinese immigrants who are second language (L2) learners, I taught ESL to a group of them in an organization called Richmond Multicultural Community Services (RMCS). This non-profit community organization provides a seniors’ program for elderly Chinese immigrants. Even though some elderly students have been in Canada for more than ten years now, they immigrated to Canada at an advanced age and were sponsored by their children. Therefore, these elderly Chinese immigrants spent most of their years in China, which led to the long-term exposure of their L1. From this experience, I gained both knowledge and inspiration for my project. My teaching experience has been significantly impacted by my understanding of ESL teaching to senior L2 learners. Generally speaking, elderly people refers to individuals over 65 years old. However, as most ESL programs provided for elderly Chinese immigrants that are at least 55 years of age, in this project, I expanded the age range of elderly Chinese learners to those over 55 years of age.

In recent years, Chinese immigrants have gradually become one of the main groups of immigrants in Canada. According to a report on Chinese Immigrants in Canada (2015), the
number of immigrants from China grew 63.9% from 332,825 in 2001 to 545,535 in 2011, making Chinese the second largest foreign-born group in Canada. Interestingly, Chinese immigrants to Canada are relatively young. Statistics Canada (2011) reported that, in 2011, 58.6% of people who came to Canada since 2006 were in the core working age group between 25 and 54, whereas the elderly group of 55 to 64 years of age accounted for only 4.4% of the total. It may be that because there are such a small number of elderly Chinese immigrants in Canada only a few research studies have focused on this special groups’ quality of SLA. The relatively small number of research articles does not diminish the importance of enhancing their English proficiency. I also found that it was a great challenge to enhance their English language proficiency, especially their oral English. Researchers like Derwing, Thomson and Munro (2006) claim that having the ability to interact with native speakers will, to some degree, decide an adult immigrants’ success in their integration into a new culture. For elderly Chinese immigrants, improving their English communicative competence should, therefore, facilitate involvement in the new community and in their new English speaking country. That is why this project focuses on ESL speaking instructions for elderly Chinese immigrants.

Compared with adult learners that are younger than 55 years old, there are a number of factors that negatively influence elderly L2 learners’ likelihood to learn and use English. However, English is still essential for functioning within their new immigrant context, especially for communication with native English speakers in daily life. Teaching oral English to elderly Chinese immigrants presents a very complex challenge. In an attempt to gain a deeper
understanding of ESL speaking instructions to elderly Chinese immigrants in Canada, the present study was set up to research the following questions:

a. What are the factors affecting elderly Chinese immigrants’ learning of oral English?

b. What pedagogical practices have been identified in the literature for use in developing elderly Chinese immigrants’ oral English proficiency?

c. How should we implement proven pedagogical approaches into practice to assist elderly Chinese immigrants in improving their English speaking proficiency?

This research focuses on factors affecting elderly Chinese L2 learners’ ESL learning. It is believed that this will help ESL teachers to effectively assist adult learners by enhancing their English language proficiency, especially by helping elderly Chinese immigrants develop their abilities to communicate in English. Most importantly, this research will provide Canadian ESL teachers with some effective teaching methods for teaching oral English to this group of students. This review may also assist in identifying gaps in the literature that can guide future research related to ESL speaking instruction, and further promote the development and improvement of adult ESL education in Canada. The results of the research will not only have implications for adult Chinese immigrant L2 learners and ESL teachers in Canada, but it will also have implications for future research.

To develop a deeper understanding of this topic, I identified 53 articles to review mainly through UVic’s library and through Google’s Scholar Database. As my project is to research teaching ESL to elderly Chinese learners in Canada, I initially decided the key search terms as “ESL AND SLA AND elderly Chinese learners AND Canada,” however, there were only 1,810
results appearing in Google’s Scholar database, and most of them were related to children’s ESL learning in Canada instead of elderly learners. Noticing that there were few studies related to elderly Chinese learners’ ESL learning, I expanded the key search terms to “ESL AND SLA AND adult L2 learners AND Canada,” which resulted in more relevant articles. Since learning factors are one of the most important aspects considered in ESL teaching, I started to search “learning factors AND SLA” to deepen the research on this aspect of my topic. There are a large number of papers discussing factors related to SLA, such as research by Piske, MacKay and Flege (2001), from which I was directed to several main factors affecting adult ESL learning, including motivation, age of learning, formal instruction and language learning aptitudes. Since this research focuses on oral English instruction to elderly Chinese immigrants in Canada, I continued to narrow down the search terms to “oral English AND adult L2 learners AND learning factors.” At this point, I found that some researchers regarded motivation as the most significant factor in their research, followed by age, first language (L1) and pre-migration educational background.

When I researched the motivation factor more deeply, I found that most current L2 motivation models are based on Gardner’s (1985) model of motivation. Even though this model was very old, I chose to start the review of motivation from Gardner’s model as it was a basis for later developed models. After Gardner’s (1985) model, amendments and elaborations in more current models, including Dörnyei’s (1998) and Shenk’s (2011), were reviewed.

Another major factor for this paper is age. This factor is connected with several related aspects, such as the immigrants’ age of arrival, age of learning, fossilization and the like. I
decided to focus on the theory of fossilization because it is a special characteristic that arises in adult SLA research as a factor that negatively influences an adult’s ability to learn a new language. I also began by reviewing an old reference of Selinker (1972), who first introduced the term fossilization because later researchers, Long (2003), Wei (2008) and Han (2013) who looked back on 40 years of the use of the term of fossilization, all relied on Selinker’s original proposal for their own contributions to the development of the notion of fossilization.

This introduction is a sketch of my personal motivation and interest in the topic of ESL teaching to elderly Chinese immigrants, and presents the three main research questions and highlights the significance of my research focus. The main body of the review is organized into the five factors that influence language acquisition for older adults: L2 learning orientation and motivation, age and L2 ultimate attainment, the transfer of L1 to L2 in SLA, fossilization in SLA, and pre-migration educational background. The review of the scholarly literature on teaching and learning for older adults includes a consideration of methods for teaching speaking to Chinese adults along with a reflection on my own personal classroom learning experience as a volunteer ESL teacher. Based on the review of literature and my own experience, I recommend practices for ESL speaking instruction for this group of students. Finally, the limitations and new questions arising from the review are proposed.
Factors Impacting Elderly Chinese Learners’ Oral English Learning

Most studies in SLA have shown that differences exist in the L2 learning process between children and young adults. Little empirical work has specifically focused on elderly learners as an independent learning group. It has been suggested that elderly learners’ experience decreased their overall abilities such as degraded memory and this imposes a negative influence on L2 learning like difficulty remembering new words (Mackey & Sachs, 2012). They further explain that elderly adult learners’ many cognitive abilities gradually and systematically erode over their life span so that it is hard for them to learn a new language. Advanced age, to some degree, hinders elderly Chinese immigrants from learning English and differentiates them from children and young adult L2 learners in SLA. Besides that, there are other factors affecting elderly Chinese learners in SLA. In this section, I focus on five of the most significant and most often reported factors impacting elderly Chinese immigrants’ oral English learning: L2 learning orientation and motivation; age and L2 ultimate attainment; the transfer of L1 to L2 in SLA; fossilization in SLA; and pre-migration educational background.

L2 Learning Orientation and Motivation

L2 learning orientation has been widely considered by researchers as one of the main determining factors of success in SLA. In contemporary literature (e.g. Shenk, 2011), the term orientation is sometimes used rather than motivation. Motivation has been defined as learning reasons by Dörnyei (1990), such as for travel, friendship, acquiring knowledge and for instrumental purposes. Later, Belmechri and Hummel (1998) defined orientation as long-term goals and attitudes that maintain and support learners’ motivation to learn a second language.
Both of them consider that orientation is students’ purpose for L2 learning; however, Belmechri and Hummel related orientation with motivation and said that if learners have their own orientations, they will be more motivated to learn an L2.

In terms of motivation, Dörnyei (1998) claims that motivation stimulates learners to start learning the L2 and later it is the driving force that maintains the learning process, and all the other factors affecting the success in SLA, to some extent, presuppose motivation. Crookes and Schmidt’s (1991) research found that motivation plays an essential role in students’ learning achievements, those L2 learners with strong motivation often achieve a higher level of second language proficiency than those who have less or no motivation. Evidently, motivation is the foundation for SLA, which will sustain students’ passion and interest in learning a new language for a long time. It is impossible for students to achieve long-term goals without motivation in SLA.

The difference between motivation and orientation is that a student perhaps has a specific orientation but is not be motivated to make that goal a reality (Gardner & Tremblay, 1994). That is to say, even though a learner has a goal in a second language learning context, she or he might be motivated or unmotivated to attain that goal. Therefore, there exists an interrelationship between orientation and motivation, more specifically, motivation is the power to achieve the goal reflected in the orientation (Belmechri & Hummel, 1998), and it is the orientation that sustains students’ motivation in SLA. It is because of the interrelationship between orientation and motivation that Belmechri and Hummel (1998) state, “many researchers have used the same terminology (i.e. integrative and instrumental) for motivation as well as for orientation” (p. 220).
Nonetheless, the term of motivation is still used extensively in a lot of research papers but with a change of meaning that is more like orientation. To some degree, this mixed use of orientation and motivation presents the complexity and uncertainty of L2 motivation. Dörnyei (1998) also emphasizes in his research that L2 motivation is a complex and diverse construct, and there is no absolute, direct and explicit concept of motivation. In order to gain a deeper understanding of L2 motivation, it is important to consider research on different models and their effects for learning a second language.

Orientation in general is regarded as essential for learning a second language and researchers have proposed different points of view to describe types of orientation. Among the earliest models, Gardner (1985) distinguished L2 learning motivation into two types from a social psychological perspective, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. An individual who is integratively motivated has a desire to identify with the other language community; and, instrumental motivation is related to the potential pragmatic gains, such as achieving an academic goal or getting a better job. That is to say, students who are integratively motivated will be interested in learning an L2 and be willing to integrate into a different culture and community. As for instrumental motivation, it is more utilitarian in that it is a means for the L2 learners to obtain some practical results. Research by Toni and Rostami (2012) has shown that integrative motivation is associated with positive attitudes towards the L2 learning and, more importantly, the learners who are integratively motivated have a desire to integrate into the target language community and have a positive attitude towards the learning situation.
When it comes to the effects of integrative and instrumental orientation, researchers hold the view that the two types of motivation have different impacts on L2 learners. According to Gardner (1985), integrative motivation would play a more significant role in achieving eventual language proficiency in SLA than instrumental motivation, and if learners are integratively motivated, they will make greater efforts to learn an L2 and have greater success in their SLA. Whereas, those who are instrumentally oriented in their L2 learning, may work efficiently in the short term but are unlikely to sustain their motivation to be more effective and successful in their L2 learning in the long run (Zhao, 2012). Both integrative and instrumental orientations will help adult L2 learners in the success of SLA, however, learners who are integratively oriented study longer than those who are instrumentally oriented. More specifically, what differentiates the two types is that learners with an integrative orientation are more willing to spend their time on studying and are interested in learning an L2, whereas learners with an instrumental orientation will perhaps give up continuing to learn once there are no external rewards or there isn’t any practical purpose for them.

In spite of the distinctions between integrative and instrumental orientations, more and more current research points out that they are not two opposite orientations, but rather a combination with each other. Shenk (2011) claims that integrative and instrumental orientations are not separate factors; instead, the difference between the two orientations is always blurry. In other words, integrative and instrumental orientations are overlapping. Moreover, Toni and Rostami (2012) point out that integrative and instrumental orientations are correlated, both of which are able to maintain learning. For example, some international students in Canada learn
English for academic purposes, meanwhile, they hope to communicate with the natives and integrate into mainstream culture. To these international students, they are both integratively and instrumentally oriented in SLA. Therefore, the old claims that L2 learners with integrative orientation have greater success in SLA than those with instrumental orientation are no longer applicable; rather, the overlapping of the two orientations sustains L2 learning.

As the social psychological theory was initiated in Canada, a multicultural country where both English and French are the official languages, the model of integrative-instrumental orientation was proposed based on a unique Canadian situation. As L2 learning depends on the actual context (Dörnyei, 2003), it is necessary to consider other models to thoroughly understand and complement the L2 motivation theory. Likewise, Noels et al. (2003) note that researchers initially recognize that the desire for contact and identification with the people in their mainstream country is important for SLA; however, it only occurs in specific sociocultural contexts. Thus, the model of integrative-instrumental orientation has limitations; it, therefore, may not be appropriate for other second languages or other social contexts. To supplement the earliest model of integrative-instrumental orientations, many researchers explore other models based on Gardner’s model.

At around the same time that Gardner was developing his characterization of types of orientation for language learning, the self-determination theory was proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985) from a cognitive psychological perspective, comprising of intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. L2 learners who are motivated intrinsically due to their inner pleasure and interest in the activity would gain more enjoyment and satisfied feelings from learning; however,
extrinsic orientation is caused by outside factors such as winning a prize or avoiding punishment (Noels et al., 2003). More profoundly, students with an intrinsic orientation to learn an L2, are self-directed to gain enjoyment and satisfaction from the learning process itself, whereas the extrinsic orientation stimulates students to learn an L2 for the purpose of receiving—from someone else—extrinsic rewards, including good grades. According to Noels et al. (2003), the self-determination theory focuses on autonomy in that L2 learners can choose by themselves based on their interest instead of being affected by factors outside themselves. For students who are intrinsically or extrinsically oriented, second language learning is almost self-directed and self-determined, so they choose to learn the second language due to their personally related reasons.

A comparison of these two models of motivation reveals they both have similarities and differences and, most significantly, the overlapping of orientations appears in the two models. First, integrative orientation is similar to intrinsic orientation, both of which show learners’ positive attitudes toward SLA. Integratively oriented L2 learners, like intrinsically oriented ones, are interested in learning an L2 due to their personal reasons. However, integrative orientation is distinct from intrinsic orientation in some aspects. As noted above, integrative orientation is appropriate in socio-cultural contexts, the L2 learners who desire to integrate into mainstream communities and communicate with native speakers have an integrative orientation. Whereas, intrinsic orientation is analyzed from a cognitive psychological perspective, and intrinsically oriented learners want to learn a second language because they enjoy the language learning process. Accordingly, Noels et al. (2003) claim that, to some extent, integrative orientation can
be conceptualized as a part of extrinsic orientation. This is because the essence of integrative orientation is not associated with the personal enjoyment of learning itself. From their standpoint, being oriented to learn a second language by personal enjoyment and satisfaction can be recognized as intrinsic orientation; otherwise, they pertain to extrinsic orientation.

Second, the main difference between instrumental orientation and extrinsic orientation is that students who are instrumentally oriented are stimulated by internal factors to some degree, such as obtaining a better job or entering into a key university. Even though these are practical purposes, students are motivated by their own goals to improve themselves, rather than outside factors. From this perspective, the instrumental orientation is a kind of self-directed approach to learn a second language that overlaps in intrinsic orientation. In the literature, we also find very different takes. Thus, for example, Shenk (2011) argues that both integrative and instrumental orientations tend toward extrinsic orientation, since the integration and communication with target language speakers, job-related promotion and academic advancement are regarded as the practical need for extrinsic rewards. Shenk (2011) re-conceptualizes and integrates the self-determination theory with Gardner’s theory into intrinsic orientation and extrinsic orientation (integrative/instrumental orientation). The most essential findings are that intrinsic orientation, integrative orientation and instrumental orientation are not mutually exclusive; rather, they overlap which means that L2 learners can have intrinsic, integrative and instrumental orientations.

It is due to the similarities and differences between the two models that there exists the overlapping of orientations. The integration of a social psychological theory with a cognitive
psychological theory not only complements the traditional framework of L2 motivation, but also provides a new field of vision and teaching methodology to L2 teachers. Dörnyei (1998) points out that the incorporation of cognitive concepts into traditional social psychological models has been widely accepted and applied, which results in a more general perspective of social cognition. To sum up, the overlapping of orientations and the integration with different models shows that L2 motivation is a complex and uncertain concept depending on actual contexts.

In Canada, as a multicultural country, integration is very important for immigrants. Elderly Chinese immigrants who are the focus of this review have no external pressure from employment or academic achievements to learn English; rather, what stimulates them to learn English is to integrate into the target language community, simply communicating with native speakers to meet their daily needs as well as satisfying and enjoying themselves. Based on Shenk’s (2011) overlapping of orientations, in terms of elderly Chinese immigrants, some of them might have integrative, instrumental and intrinsic orientations at the same time as learning English. Some of them perhaps only have one or two of the orientations, some of them may set an integrative goal to learn English but lack the motivation to achieve that goal. Thus, teachers should not only focus on one orientation, instead, they’re better off integrating these three orientations, intrinsic orientation, integrative orientation and instrumental orientation together in the light of students’ L2 learning goals (Shenk, 2011).

Hou and Beiser’s (2006) study reveals that elderly Chinese are one of the groups that is least likely to learn English. They explain that elderly persons often rely on their children or grandchildren to be their linguistic and cultural interpreters in daily life so that they can insulate
themselves from the need to learn a new language. Without their children or grandchildren’s help, it is impossible for them to do a lot of things, such as going to see a doctor at a hospital or dealing with government issues. Taking Richmond as an example, a city where a great number of Chinese immigrants have settled down, even though the hospital or government departments provide signs or handbooks in Chinese, most staff are Canadians who only speak English. After all, Canada is still a predominantly English-speaking society, therefore, it is necessary for Chinese immigrants to know English and then combine the intrinsic, integrative and instrumental orientations together to support their learning English.

**Age and L2 Ultimate Attainment**

The existence of age is always a key research area in SLA research. Krashen, Long and Scarcella (1979) claim that a lot of research has been investigating the differences between children and adults in the ultimate attainment in SLA. Muñoz and Singleton (2011) critically reviewed the age-related research on L2 ultimate attainment and asserted the existing relationship between age and L2 learning. They agreed that age is a decisive factor for the success of SLA so that early acquirers tend to be close to native speakers’ performance, whereas later acquirers were not (Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). To them, the success of SLA means becoming native-like or near native-like speakers so that young L2 learners have the chance to achieve that goal, whereas adult L2 learners do not. But for some other researchers, success refers to completely mastering an L2 across all levels and all aspects of the language (Han, 2004b). Therefore, the different views toward the success of L2 learners indicate that the definition of success depends on different contexts. As for elderly Chinese L2 learners who are
the research subject of this project, their success in SLA does not mean a complete mastery of English or achieving native-like proficiency. Such proficiency is unlikely attained at their age. Rather, the success for them is defined as acquiring some basic English, and speaking comprehensible English so that they can simply interact with native speakers and meet their daily needs, such as going shopping, traveling on their own or dining out. Rather than native-like English, researchers have consistently emphasized that comprehensibility is a more realistic goal for the success of communication (Derwing & Munro, 2009). Accordingly, in this project, success for elderly Chinese immigrants’ success or high level in SLA refers to achieving the goal of obtaining basic English frequently used in their daily life and speaking comprehensible English. This level of success is so different from the success of children and young adult L2 learners who are younger than 55 years old. The distinctions of the success between young adults and elderly L2 learners are determined by their age factor. Within the discussion of age-related factors in SLA, there have been a lot of arguments about the extent and nature of advantages in L2 learning. Who can achieve the ultimate attainment in L2, children or adult learners?

When it comes to comparing who performs better in L2 learning, there are different points-of-view in the research. Some comparisons of children with adults, reported that children have more advantages in L2 learning, especially in the success of communicative competence. Bagarić and Djigunović (2007) conclude that the term “communicative competence” is similar to the term “language proficiency, communicative proficiency, communicative language ability, and communicative language competence,” which are defined as “knowledge and abilities/skills for use” (p. 100). More specifically, an L2 learner who has a high level of communicative
competence or proficiency means that they do not only master the linguistic knowledge, but they also have the ability to apply their knowledge to better communicate with others. Generally speaking, child L2 learners are capable of obtaining better communicative competence than adult L2 learners. The most essential advantage for children is their young age. Many researchers agree with the proposal that there exists a critical period in SLA, after which it is more difficult for L2 learners to acquire a new language and achieve a high level of communicative proficiency. Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow (2000) define the critical period in this way:

the term critical period for language acquisition refers to a period of time when learning a language is relatively easy and typically meets with a high degree of success. Once this period is over, at or before the onset of puberty, the average learner is less likely to achieve native-like ability in the target language. (p. 9)

That is to say, children who start learning an L2 before the critical period are more likely to obtain a native-like proficiency, whereas it is much more difficult for those who start learning an L2 after the critical period. There is no certain age for the critical period, some researchers claim that the critical period is during or at the end of childhood, some proposed that puberty is the offset point for the critical period, (Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). Actually, whatever the age is for the critical period, elderly L2 learners will have far surpassed that point. For most L2 learners, their ultimate goal for L2 learning was to achieve a native-like proficiency in all aspects, acquiring both all levels of linguistic knowledge and the skills to use the knowledge like native speakers. Among the aspects of linguistic knowledge, phonological proficiency will be particularly concerned in this project.
The reason why L2 learners cannot achieve a native-like proficiency after the critical period is because of their decayed neurological and cognitive development. Hakuta, Bialystok, and Wiley (2003) assert that cognitive aging gradually decays some of the mechanisms that are necessary for learning a new language. Owing to this existence of the critical period, adult L2 learners find SLA more difficult. The age of adults is well beyond the critical period and their overall ability to learn a new language erodes with the decline of their cognitive ability. Therefore, it is harder for adult learners to achieve a high level in L2 learning after the critical period, let alone for those over 55-years of age L2 learners who started L2 learning at an advanced age.

Although, the existence of age effects is generally accepted, many researchers have attempted to show that even though children are achieving a more native-like proficiency in L2, adult L2 learners still have a chance to achieve success in some aspects of SLA. One of the most popular assumptions holds: “older is better for rate of acquisition, younger is better in the long run” (Krashen, Long & Scarcella, 1979, p. 573). More specifically, they demonstrate that adults learn faster at the beginning of L2 learning, whereas children will achieve a higher level in the L2 ultimate attainment. For adult L2 learners, generally, they acquire knowledge of syntax and morphology faster than children (Krashen, Long & Scarcella, 1979). Accordingly, even though children have more of a chance to reach a high overall level in SLA, adult L2 learners also have their own assets in some aspects at the beginning of L2 learning, such as morphology and syntax. Besides that, adult L2 learners have accumulated a large amount of knowledge, experience and wisdom according to which they can make their own decisions and perform tasks (Park, 1998).
These characteristics would help adult L2 learners find an appropriate learning strategy to acquire a new language in a faster way; additionally, their accumulated knowledge and experience are beneficial for them to independently solve problems they meet during the process of L2 learning. Among the adult L2 learners above, elderly learners are included who have also accumulated abundant knowledge and experience which helps them learn an L2 in some aspects.

However, with the decline of their cognitive ability, elderly adult L2 learners face more problems in learning a new complex language than children or young adults do. As this project focuses on elderly Chinese immigrants over 55 years of age, there is no doubt that their advanced age greatly influences their progress in SLA. In fact, most elderly Chinese immigrants start to learn an L2 at an advanced age without any previous English learning experience. Thus, it is difficult for them to ever achieve a high-level attainment in L2. As suggested by Muñoz and Singleton (2011), “different areas of language (phonology, syntax, lexicon, etc.) have different critical ages associated with them” (p. 8). As for the phonology area, Baker’s (2010) age-related research on Korean speakers found that L2 learners’ phonetic skills in speaking start to decline between the ages 20 and 30. Therefore, as elderly Chinese immigrants have exceeded the critical period of phonology, it is impossible for them to achieve ultimate attainment in native-like phonological proficiency and so this is not an appropriate goal for them.

**The Transfer of L1 to L2 in SLA**

There exists considerable research claiming that the transfer of L1 also tends to influence the success of SLA. Ellis (1994) concludes that the study of transfer includes the study of errors (negative transfer), facilitation (positive transfer), avoidance of target language forms, and their
over-use. Besides the notion of “transfer,” some researchers prefer other terms instead of “transfer,” such as “interference” or “cross-linguistics.” Kellerman and Smith (1986), for instance, support the term of “cross-linguistic influence” rather than “transfer” to emphasize the significance of the integration of elements from one language to another. “Interference” is one-sided because it only focuses on the negative effects (errors) from L1 that are an impediment in SLA. However, the terms “transfer” and “cross-linguistics” contain a positive side. The difference between these two terms is that the “transfer” emphasizes different forms of the influence by L1, whereas the “cross-linguistics” stresses the connection and integration between L1 and L2. Since there are many differences among and similarities between Chinese and English, I chose the term “transfer” in this project to emphasize the different forms of effects caused by L1 in SLA. A great many studies have shown the presence of transfer from L1 in SLA, and some suggest that L1 would interfere with the success of SLA, however, others insist on the positive transfer of L1.

As for the proposition of the positive transfer of L1, researchers consider that native languages could be beneficial to SLA, especially in the initial stages of L2 learning. Taking Chinese and English learning as an example, the great differences between Chinese and English as well as the lack of English knowledge leaves beginners to rely on what they do know and their native languages when in urgent need to communicate with others (Shi, 2005). For the L2 beginners, they make full use of the L1 as a resource to think and initiate utterances in when they have insufficient knowledge of L2.
The positive transfer of L1 can be used as a translation tool to understand the meaning of English in the early stage of learning. Since the overwhelming majority of ESL beginners have insufficient knowledge of English (Wei, 2008), the L1 used in class would play a positive role in English language learning and it would help elderly Chinese immigrant leaners better understand English. Likewise, Auerbach (1993) claims that the use of the L1 in the teaching process has developed more rapid progress in ESL learning. Consequently, ESL teachers who are bilingual would be better considered to teach L2 beginners. They can make full use of their L1 to translate some English grammar or new sentences’ meanings to students and help them better understand English. From the discussions above, both Wei and Auerbach agree with the positive effect of using the L1 in class, however, it only limits them at the beginning stage of L2 learning.

The long-term use of L1 in L2 learning will produce negative transfer, such as when English beginners prefer to think of a Chinese sentence in their minds first, and then translate this mentally before speaking it in English. To some degree, this approach helps learners better express their ideas in the short run. However, the long-term use of L1 in English learning hinders students’ improvement.

There are many obvious differences between Chinese and English which result in making mistakes in communication. Shi (2005) proposes that the differences between two languages produce many difficulties and errors for L2 learners so that negative transfer occurs. This study focuses on oral English teaching for elderly Chinese immigrants and because of starting English learning at an advanced age, they have been affected by their L1 for a long time. Therefore, it seems that L1 is more likely to negatively influence elderly Chinese immigrants in
communication. For instance, in terms of literal translation, Shi (2005) gives many examples of the use of expressions directly translated from Chinese when they speak English, such as run car (sports car), family computer (personal computer), welcome you to China (welcome to China) and the like. Moreover, as the use of prepositions in English is so different from Chinese, L2 learners often miss or incorrectly use the prepositions in English expression. For example, in English, we have to use different prepositions to describe the date and time, such as on Monday, at 7pm, in January, but in Chinese, we use shi (是) to describe the date and time, like Xian zai shi 7 dian (It is 7 o’clock now.) or Jin tian shi xing qi yi (Today is Monday.).

There are also many differences in pronunciation between English and Chinese, such as intonation, word stress and phonemes. English is an intonation-type language, whereas Chinese uses four pitches (tones) of a phoneme sound to distinguish words. There are also features of pseudo-similarity; for example, Chinese and English have some similar sounds, such as ‘ch’ and ‘sh’ existing in both Chinese Pinyin and English, but the difference is that they are always voiced sounds in Chinese and can be voiced or voiceless consonants in English. Levis and Grant (2003) claim that intonation and stress will affect both the meaning of words and the entire utterance, which is why we should pay closer attention to English pronunciation teaching. Furthermore, many English phonemes are similar to Chinese, but some English phonemes are totally different than Chinese phonemes (Zhang & Yin, 2009), which makes Chinese learners confused about how to pronounce some English words. For instance, the phoneme of /b/, /p/ and /d/ are the same in both Chinese and English, but /ð/ and /θ/ occur in English but not in Chinese. In English, there are prolonged and short sounds; for example, /i:/ and /i/ differ a lot in the meaning of beat and bit,
whereas there is no difference between the prolonged /i:/ and short /i/ in Chinese. As these negative transfers from L1 will influence learners’ pronunciation and utterances, learners’ comprehensibility will therefore be affected to some degree. Crowther et al. (2015) claim that the transfer of L1 pronunciation greatly impacts on learners’ comprehensibility.

To elderly Chinese immigrants, L1 has both positive and negative transfers in SLA. On the one hand, the use of L1 at the beginning can assist L2 learners to better understand the meaning of new English words, sentences or grammar, and to better express their own ideas. This will decrease the misunderstanding in communication. However, elderly Chinese immigrants are more affected by the negative transfer of L1 than the positive transfer of L1. As they have had a long-term exposure to Chinese, they have exceeded the critical period of phonology, and it is difficult for elderly Chinese immigrants to be prevented by the influence of their L1. As a result, many of them are unable to change some phonological errors, such as accent and pronunciation.

**Fossilization in SLA**

It has been observed that a great number of L2 learners fail to achieve native-like competence in speaking. Selinker (1972) introduced the term “fossilization,” to account for this slow down or stopping of language learning in the interlanguage process. Interlanguage is the process of transition from L1 through a continuum of steps to a level of L2 learning, Han (2013) notes, “L2 learning is a linear process, from native language through interlanguage to target language” (p. 137). During the interlanguage process, L2 learners’ interlanguage will keep some characteristics of their L1 which will be mixed up in L2 learning. Due to the transfer of the L1, L2 learners tend to express their ideas in a non-native manner because some L1’s expression or
ideas will be brought into the L2 utterances. The fossilization hypothesis has been conceptualized many times over the years, and it is no longer as broad a concept as it was at the beginning; instead, it is a complicated construct combined with different kinds of failure (Han, 2004b). In her research (Han, 2004b), Han emphasized that fossilization is a part of the characteristics of ultimate attainment, which means that L2 learners are able to reach a stage where they do not progress anymore if they suffered from fossilization. In Han’s (2013) later research, she found that fossilization is negative rather than a positive process, and it can occur at any point in the L2 development, no matter whether it is at the beginning, in the middle or at the end. In general, nearly all the research on fossilization has focused on adult L2 learners. Long (2003) concluded that there was no published research describing fossilization in children, but only in adults. The occurrence of fossilization is a widely reported factor that interferes with the successful achievement in SLA for adult L2 learners.

Recent research has been concerned with the question of whether only a few aspects of language or the whole system should be fossilized. This leads to a controversial issue about whether fossilization is local or global. The local fossilization means that only some parts of the subsystems of interlanguage (i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, pragmatics) will be fossilized, whereas the global fossilization refers to the entire interlanguage system that will be fossilized (Han, 2013). Some researchers have considered fossilization happening globally to the whole interlanguage system, whereas others have supported that fossilization only occurs locally in some parts of the subsystems of interlanguage according to Han (2004b). Han’s (2013) research on updating a forty-year fossilization hypothesis reveals that more and more current
research has agreed with the finding that fossilization is local instead of global, and among these subsystems of interlanguage (i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, pragmatics), phonology is easily fossilized. Consider a sentence written by a Chinese L2 learner as an example, *She has read seven book*, it seems that the learner had syntactic fossilization showing by not using the plural form for *books*, however, the meaning of the whole sentence makes sense so that the semantic and lexical aspects are not fossilized.

One of the greatest distinctions between Chinese and English is the difference in phonology, such as the phonological difference between Chinese and English. In the light of phonological fossilization, Wei (2008) defines, “phonological fossilization is the repetition of phonological errors which result from the incorrect acquisition of pronunciation of L2, usually affected by L1” (p. 128). For example, there are some certain sounds that only exist in English but not in Chinese, such as *father* /ð/. Usually, some Chinese students pronounce *there* /zər/ instead of the correct pronunciation *there* /ðeər/ due to the influence of the negative transfer of the L1. Once this kind of phonological error is repeated over time and forms a steady status, and if there is no modeling or correction, phonological fossilization will occur.

Five types of fossilization (i.e. phonological fossilization, morphological fossilization, syntactic fossilization, semantic fossilization and pragmatic fossilization) are identified in Wei’s research (2008). Of these, phonological fossilization should be the main concern of ESL teachers when they teach oral English. The common points are that all the types of fossilization are affected by L2 learners’ L1, particularly by the differences between Chinese and English. However, Wei did not explain whether the five types of fossilization occur at the same time.
With respect to the sequence of fossilization, Al-Shormani (2013) claims that phonology is the first aspect to be fossilized in a language compared with other subsystems of interlanguage. Therefore, fossilization is local rather than global and only some aspects of subsystems of interlanguage will be fossilized.

Besides the issue of whether fossilization is global or local, it is important to research the factors affecting the occurrence of fossilization. In a broader view, fossilization is affected by environmental, cognitive, psychological, neurobiological, and socio-affective factors (Han, 2004a). More specifically, she proposed that L2 learners’ L1, background, prior language learning experience and cognitive processing styles, setting and input played a crucial role in the occurrence of fossilization (Han, 2004a). Among these factors, Han (2013) points out that L1 influence has been recognized as one of the most significant factors from past to present. In the previous part of the transfer of L1, I mentioned that the differences between Chinese and English will lead to the negative transfer in SLA. Once the negative transfer leads to errors, and if there is no correction, the fossilization will occur in adult SLA. As for enhancing elderly Chinese immigrants’ oral English, once their phonology is fossilized, no matter how much instruction they receive and how much effort they make, there is no change in their English speaking proficiency.

Owing to the influence of old age and the negative transfer of L1 in SLA which leads to the occurrence of fossilization, elderly Chinese immigrants are, evidently, in a disadvantaged position to learn an L2. L1 is regarded as the key factor for fossilization; therefore, the differences between Chinese and English will fossilize learners’ different aspects of language,
such as phonological, semantic or pragmatic aspects, etc. During the process of oral English learning, it is significant for ESL teachers and elderly Chinese immigrants to particularly pay attention to the prevention of phonological fossilization by correcting students’ errors in time.

**Pre-migration Educational Background**

A great deal of research has attested that a pre-migration educational background plays a significant role in SLA. In terms of this project, I focus on discussing L2 learners’ level of schooling and L2’s learning experience. The higher education immigrants achieve, the better they would perform in L2 learning post-migration. Mesch (2003), for instance, suggests that language proficiency and use will be enhanced with education. Dustmann and Fabbri (2003) also claim that the level of education has a strong effect for language fluency. More specifically, students’ schooling experience can cultivate their way of thinking and learning in a systematic way that helps them acquire an L2 more efficiently. Moreover, Beenstock (1996) points out that the reason immigrants who have more years of schooling acquire an L2 faster and have obvious improvements is that they have obtained some meta-linguistic skills from their advanced L1 learning which can be transferred to their L2 learning. Likewise, the more-schooled immigrants who acquire an L2 more efficiently are that way because of their better ability to master their L1 and their higher capacity to learn new concepts and terminology (Carliner 2000).

If immigrants achieve a higher-level of schooling in their home country, they can benefit through having mastered some language learning knowledge, learning strategies, as well as by forming a systematic and critical way of thinking that can be applied to L2 learning. In other words, to some extent, the pre-migration level of schooling experience is another aspect
supporting the positive transfer of L1, and what immigrants obtained from the education experience in their home country can be transferred to their L2 learning in the migration country. Thus, elderly Chinese immigrants who received more years of schooling will find it less difficult to learn English than those who did not receive education at school before immigrating to Canada, because their prior knowledge can help them understand and learn to some degree.

In addition to years of schooling, the experience of L2 learning prior to migration also contributes to SLA. According to Beenstock (1996), whether immigrants obtained L2 training prior to migration, or in a resettlement country, or in both, resulted in formal language training being an important determinant in reducing the difficulties in SLA. If immigrants have some formal language trainings before immigration, English will no longer be a totally new language for them. Familiarity with some basic English words, expressions and grammar helps them to quickly adapt to the L2 learning after immigration. Even though the pre-migration L2 learning experience is an important determinant in successful SLA, it has a greater impact on reading and writing skills than it does on speaking skills. Dustmann and Fabbri’s (2003) state, “educational background variables have larger coefficients for reading and writing skills” (p. 705). Students who receive L2 learning training will enhance their reading and writing, but little difference will be made to their speaking ability (Beenstock, 1996). Although the experiences of L2 learning prior to migration are beneficial to L2 learners’ SLA after immigration, they impact students’ SLA in different ways. As for the enhancement of elderly Chinese immigrants’ oral English, using and practicing English in daily life is more important. However, in China, English teachers lay more emphasis on English grammar and other aspects of standard usage instead of English
speaking. In addition, there are few opportunities for students to use L2 and communicate with others outside the classroom (Sawir, 2005). Therefore, even if some elderly Chinese immigrants had L2 learning experience in China before immigrating to Canada, their levels of communicative competence in English may be quite low.

The percentage of elderly immigrants who achieve a high level in education and have L2 learning experience prior to immigrating to Canada is still very low. The statistics conducted by Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC] (2010) show that more than 40% of newcomers over the 2000–2001 period spoke neither English nor French when they arrived in Canada. In the Introduction, it was reported that Chinese are the second largest foreign-born group in Canada (Chinese Immigrants to Canada, 2015), so the percentage of Chinese who cannot speak English or French among the 40% of newcomers represents a large group. In fact, few elderly Chinese immigrants have received foreign language learning before they immigrated to Canada because China experienced a long period when English was neglected by the Chinese government. Since 1950, the Chinese Ministry of Education set Russian as a required foreign language in the curriculum instead of English. Later, from 1966 to 1972, during the ten-year black history of the Cultural Revolution, the English curriculum was almost canceled due to the damage at the schools and the oppression of English teachers. English language teaching regained the attention and implementation of the Chinese government as of 1977, when the College Entrance Examination System was restored, and in 1978 the Reform and Opening Policies were implemented (Cheng, 2010). English experienced a long-term undeveloped status so that the majority of students at that time could not receive a high quality English education or even the
chance to learn English. For those elderly Chinese immigrants who immigrated to Canada after 55 years of age, most of them experienced that time in China, therefore, they did not receive formal English education at all or some of them did not receive a high quality of formal English education before immigrating to Canada. Even if some elderly Chinese immigrants learned English, the inappropriate and nonprofessional English instruction did not positively affect their post-migration English acquisition. According to Cheng (2010), in the 1950s, owing to the influence of the Russians’ language teaching methods, a teacher-oriented class and the cramming method of teaching were the main ways of teaching English at that time. Most significantly, the L1 was widely used by Chinese English teachers to explain English at that time (Cheng, 2010). Even though the use of L1 in English class, to some degree, helps beginners understand the meaning of English, it does not help students develop their English proficiency in the long run, because the negative transfer of the L1 will lead to the incorrect acquisition of English. Moreover, the majority of those nonprofessional English teachers were not capable enough to speak English accurately and fluently. Because of their poor oral English skills, students were easily affected by their teachers at the beginning of their learning process. In the long term, their incorrect English speaking will be permanent and phonological fossilization occurs. Therefore, prior-migration L2 learning experience is another factor affecting the occurrence of fossilization in SLA.

Pre-migration experience of schooling and English learning help elderly Chinese immigrants learn English after immigrating to Canada because of their acquired English knowledge. Due to the national policies in the history of China, it is difficult to change the established fact that few elderly Chinese immigrants had achieved a high level of education and
had a good quality of English learning experience at school before they immigrated to Canada. Even though some of them had the chance to learn English in China, the lack of speaking opportunities and improper instructions hindered the development of elderly Chinese immigrants’ communicative proficiency.

**Concluding Discussion**

In conclusion, there are multiple factors affecting elderly Chinese immigrants’ SLA, such as motivation, age, the transfer of L1, fossilization, and pre-migration educational background. By reviewing these five factors, I concluded three main findings.

First, motivation is the foundation in SLA. According to the research reviewed, L2 learners may have overlapping orientations in SLA, some of them have one or two of intrinsic, integrative and instrumental orientations, some perhaps have all of the orientations simultaneously. Even though some elderly Chinese immigrants have orientations to learn English, some of them are lacking in the motivation required to achieve that goal. On the one hand, their children sponsor elderly Chinese immigrants. They socially and economically depend on their children. Thus, if they have to use English sometimes, they also have to rely on their children or grandchildren dealing with the issues. The social environment and the dependency on others who do speak English does not provide a situation that would encourage motivation to learn English. On the other hand, a great number of elderly Chinese immigrants did not experience years of schooling or L2 training prior to migration, with the declining memory and other cognitive abilities, and they feel it is difficult to acquire a new language which leads to the loss of confidence and interest in English learning. Therefore, to help elderly Chinese immigrants better
integrate into Canadian society and to encourage them to speak English in their daily lives, the most important approach that is recommended for ESL teachers is to not only focus on one orientation but to combine the intrinsic, integrative as well as instrumental orientations to sustain elderly Chinese immigrants’ English learning.

Second, due to the advanced age, elderly Chinese immigrants have many impediments in SLA compared with young adult L2 learners, for example, the decline of cognitive ability makes it difficult for this group of students to remember what they learned, and the occurrence of phonological fossilization makes it difficult for them to achieve a native-like phonological proficiency. Therefore, the success of elderly Chinese learners in SLA is defined as acquiring frequently used English to meet their basic needs, and being capable of speaking comprehensible English which can be easily understood by listeners instead of a native-like phonological proficiency. Accordingly, ESL teachers are supposed to help elderly Chinese immigrants set a realistic goal in their oral English learning.

Third, the positive transfer of L1 benefits elderly Chinese immigrants in better understanding, while the negative transfer of L1 leads to the occurrence of fossilization. In terms of the positive transfer of L1, owing to lacking enough knowledge in English, the L1 can used as an interpretive tool to help elderly Chinese immigrants better understand the meaning of some new words or sentences. Besides that, their pre-migration educational background, especially the L1 learning experience has developed learners’ learning strategies or skills that benefit elderly Chinese immigrants’ L2 learning in a more systematic way. In terms of the negative transfer, because of the differences between Chinese and English, such as the different sound systems and
different cultures, the negative transfer of L1 will lead to errors in pronunciation. Once these errors are repeated over time and eventually become stable, if there is no modeling or correction, phonological fossilization will occur in SLA. Thus, the L1, is one of the significant factors in SLA, which necessitates ESL teachers helping students identify the specific differences between Chinese and English, and giving corrective feedback so as to reduce the negative transfer of the L1 and minimize the impact of fossilization.

To improve the teaching for elderly Chinese immigrants in Canada, ESL teachers should take these five factors into account and come up with a focused teaching method which emphasizes enhancing learners’ English speaking. Some specific implications of teaching oral English to elderly Chinese immigrants will be provided in the next section.
Implications

A review of the literature suggests that elderly learners of oral English are negatively affected by several factors. This project started from concerns about teaching elderly Chinese immigrants English, which is different from teaching young adults or young children. To promote elderly Chinese immigrants’ English proficiency, particularly speaking, ESL teachers should improve their teaching methods. This would, hopefully, have a positive effect on this special group’s speaking ability. In this section, each of the learning factors discussed in the literature review is considered and the implications for educational practice are described. Accordingly, I recommend five teaching approaches for ESL teachers to improve elderly Chinese immigrants’ oral English: (a) designing a teaching plan aiming at elderly Chinese immigrants; (b) developing students’ learning motivation, (c) improving students’ comprehensibility; (d) remembering vocabulary; and (e) enhancing cultural competence.

Planning

As the target students are elderly Chinese immigrants over 55 years old, according to the five factors discussed in the second part, it is known that elderly Chinese immigrants have disadvantages in SLA due to their cognitive functioning and fading memory, the occurrence of phonological fossilization and lack of pre-migration English learning experience; moreover, the majority of these elderly Chinese immigrants are beginners without any English basis. Because of their disadvantages in L2 learning, it is necessary to design a special teaching plan to instruct oral English to elderly Chinese immigrants, including teaching goals and teaching contents.
Before designing the teaching plan, ESL teachers should find out about their students first so that they can make the teaching plan accordingly. For example, ESL teachers can conduct a questionnaire survey, containing students’ personal information (e.g. age, grade level, English learning experience, etc.), learning goals for learning English, preferred teaching contents and teaching activities. By analyzing students’ personal information, ESL teachers learn about students’ age level, educational background and English level, therefore, teachers are able to anticipate students’ average English level which decides the difficulty level of teaching contents for elderly Chinese immigrants. In terms of the learning goals, some of them may be oriented to speaking only basic English, while others aspire to reach an intermediate level in speaking, listening, reading and writing abilities, and some may even want to achieve a native-like proficiency. By analyzing students’ learning goals and combing their real English levels, ESL teachers are able to set realistic teaching goals for elderly Chinese immigrants to achieve.

Additionally, when it comes to asking students what they prefer about teaching methods, teachers could list some topics and teaching activities of English class for students to choose from. For instance, they could include the topics of going shopping, seeing a doctor, asking directions and so on, as for the teaching activities, the listing will contain games, situational dialogues practice, watching movies and TV dramas, holding a theme party, etc. From the statistics of the most popular topics and activities, ESL teachers can choose these topics and activities for reference in the teaching plan for elderly Chinese immigrants.

After conducting and analyzing the survey, ESL teachers should set a realistic teaching goal for elderly Chinese immigrants according to the results of the survey. The main teaching goal is
to develop elderly Chinese immigrants’ listening and speaking ability, most significantly, improving their ability to speak some basic English which is frequently used in their daily life instead of writing and reading ability.

According to Wu’s (1975) investigation of elderly Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles, inability to understand and speak English was the most serious problem of elderly immigrants in a foreign country. For instance, “they could not ask information from the bus drivers, many of them were afraid to go out alone because they could not tell their home address and were afraid they would not be able to find their way home” (p. 272). If teachers teach some frequently used vocabulary and situational dialogues to their students, they will be more independent when they go out alone, and will also increase their confidence to practice English and interact with native speakers. Compared with young adults, reading and writing are not as necessary for elderly Chinese immigrants to acquire because they have no pressure of employment. Their purpose for learning English is to meet daily needs and learn some basic English that can be used to simply communicate with others in Canada. For instance, if they knew even basic English, they would be able to go shopping or go to see a doctor by themselves. For elderly Chinese immigrants, most of the time, English is a tool to communicate with English “outsiders” in their daily life. Therefore, elderly Chinese immigrants can be expected to achieve the goal of speaking basic English so that they can interact with native speakers in simple and familiar contexts.

In order to help elderly Chinese immigrants achieve the teaching goal, ESL teachers need to design appropriate teaching content combined with interesting activities in class. In terms of the teaching content, ESL teachers could choose students’ favorite topics according to the survey
results, and also add topics which would be helpful for Chinese immigrants living in Canada, such as how to make an inquiry in a supermarket or a shopping mall, or how to make a reservation and order food in a restaurant, etc. When teaching these topics in oral English class, I suggest that ESL teachers create more engaging activities which involve the students in the class rather than the traditional approach of teaching in which the teacher is the authority who transmits knowledge to his or her students. For instance, if the teacher instructs on the topic of buying fruits in a supermarket and how to ask for the price, it would not be sufficient to simply show students a simple sentence frame: *How much is ...* and new words for fruits and vegetables. Instead, I suggest that ESL teachers prepare some pictures of fruits and fake money, with which each group of students can practice the new sentence and the words. They practice a dialogue by pretending they are in a supermarket, one acts as a customer buying fruits and the other as a cashier:

Customer: How much is the watermelon/ strawberry/ peach...?

Cashier: The watermelon/ strawberry/ peach ... is two dollars a pound.

Customer: Ok, I’d like to buy three pounds.

Cashier: Sure, the total is six dollars.

Customer: Here you are. Thanks.

Cashier: Thank you, have a good day.

Conducting this kind of dialogue not only increases the class atmosphere, but could also help arouse their interest in English learning. On the one hand, this activity is relevant to students’ real life so that students will feel that learning English is useful and helpful to their daily life in
Canada. Thus, elderly Chinese immigrants will attach importance to English learning and their intrinsic orientation as well as integrative orientation will be reinforced. On the other hand, these teaching tools make the simple dialogue more authentic and realistic which would encourage students to apply what they have learned in class into real life outside the class, and as a result their instrumental orientation would also be developed to some degree.

**Motivation**

Motivation is the fundamental factor in SLA compared with other factors, but most elderly Chinese immigrants do not attach importance to learning English because some of them believe they can get by without speaking English by relying on their children or grandchildren. In order to assist this group to better integrate into mainstream society and improve their communicative competence, ESL teachers need to enhance their overlapping orientations to support their learning English.

ESL teachers should do a needs’ analysis for their students and, more specifically, teachers need to know the reasons why some elderly Chinese immigrants attend English class and what they want to learn from the class. After analyzing students’ needs pertaining to learning English, ESL teachers will be able to learn about the students’ orientations for learning English. For example, in the first class, ESL teachers can ask each student to talk about their reasons for attending the oral English class, some of them may be there to make new friends, some are there to communicate with native speakers, and some are there to learn about Canadian culture. There is no doubt that different students have different orientations when learning English, and some
students have overlapping orientations. Therefore, teachers should teach English by developing intrinsic, integrative and instrumental orientations together and not only focus on one orientation.

To begin with, ESL teachers should increase the amount of active classroom atmosphere and inspire students’ interest in learning English by integrating some games or playing daily life TV dramas into the class. It is these activities that help elderly Chinese immigrants learn English in a more interesting and efficient way. Especially from TV dramas, students can learn some frequently used words and situational dialogues which can be applied to their daily lives. Therefore, their intrinsic and integrative orientation to learn English will be enhanced by having more confidence and interest in learning English, and their instrumental orientation will also be promoted because of the practical use of English in their daily life.

Besides that, incorporating Canadian culture into English class is also recommended for ESL teachers, due to culture being one of the most important parts in a language. Toni and Rostami (2012) assert that to promote students’ integrative orientation, ESL teachers are better at arousing students’ interest in the target language and its culture. Learning about the culture is not only a way to help these students integrate into the native culture and the community (integrative orientation), but it also raises their curiosity and interest in learning English (intrinsic orientation). Thus, ESL teachers are also responsible for teaching about mainstream cultures instead of just teaching the language.

When it comes to teaching about Canadian culture, ESL teachers are firstly advised to assist students to differentiate between Chinese and Canadian culture. The different cultural differences could be why elderly Chinese immigrants feel they can not integrate into mainstream culture,
and the long-term confusion regarding these differences could result in the negative transfer of L1 and then lead to the occurrence of fossilization in SLA. Hence, when ESL teachers teach these groups about Canadian culture, they have to help students distinguish the differences between two cultures as well, in order to reduce the impact of fossilization and particularly reduce the misunderstanding in communication resulted by the negative transfer of the L1. Second, ESL teachers are also responsible for teaching about mainstream culture instead of merely teaching the language. For example, when teachers talk about Canadian festivals, it is better for them to hold a party and enable these students to experience it by themselves; or, teachers could encourage students to be volunteers at a non-profit organization, where they could be provided with more opportunities for immigrants to communicate with native people as well as learn more about the community culture directly.

**Comprehensibility**

In oral English instruction, developing comprehensible English is more realistic and more important than native-like phonological proficiency for elderly Chinese immigrants. Derwing and Munro’s (2013) 7-year study on evaluating Mandarin and Slavic language speakers’ oral skills indicated that neither Mandarin nor Slavic adult learners who range in age from 27 to 56 make any progress in their accent after learning English and living in Canada for seven years. There is no doubt that eliminating a foreign accent is nearly impossible for these elderly Chinese immigrants. For that reason, it is not recommended that ESL teachers spend much time on correcting these student L2 learners’ foreign accent. As the transfer of L1 greatly influences learners’ comprehensibility, especially the aspects of pronunciation, word stress and intonation,
elderly Chinese immigrants’ oral English will not be very correct which will lead to misunderstandings by the listeners sometimes. Furthermore, if they do not receive corrective feedback from teachers, their phonology will be fossilized. In order to improve elderly Chinese immigrants’ comprehensibility, ESL teachers should include some instruction and correction of students’ pronunciation, word stress and intonation.

First of all, it is ESL teachers’ responsibility to change elderly Chinese immigrants’ view of learning oral English. This means a more realistic and possible to achieve level of comprehensibility for elderly learners rather than developing native-like proficiency. For example, teachers can invite some elderly immigrants who have lived in Canada for many years and can speak basic and comprehensible English to talk about their views and their experience of ESL learning in Canada. Sometimes, they might encounter misunderstandings when they talk with native speakers due to their incorrect pronunciation or intonation. For elderly Chinese L2 learners, non-native-like accents are not the biggest problem for communication; but, rather, how to be understood and how to let the listeners easily understand what they are trying to express are the most critical aspects for them. Once elderly Chinese L2 learners realize that the ability to speak comprehensible English is more important for them, they will have an explicit goal and motivation to achieve that goal.

Second, because comprehensibility is affected by the negative transfer of the L1, ESL teachers need to correct their students’ pronunciation, word stress and intonation by providing students with corrective feedback. Otherwise, students’ phonological fossilization will occur without corrections. The most distinctive differences between Chinese and English are that
Chinese is a tone language while English is an intonation language. In Chinese there are four different tones so that the same phoneme with four different tones can mean four different things. In contrast, the meaning of English is affected by various vowel and consonant sounds, and the intonation decides different meanings (Zhang & Yin, 2009). Taking the English word *right* as an example, if a person says it with a rising tone, it means a question to ask whether it is right, but if a person says it with a falling tone, it means an affirmative sentence.

In order to minimize the impact of phonological fossilization on elderly Chinese immigrants by reducing the negative transfer of L1, one of the most efficient approaches is to make full use of the recording devices to repeatedly play the instructor’s English speaking model. Students can then carefully listen to the model and pay special attention to the pronunciation, word stress and word intonation in different sentences. After that, students can practice the word stress and intonation by imitating the model, and reading the words and sentences many times to practice their English intonation and speaking. Based on Levis and Grant’ (2003) implications on pronunciation teaching, they also suggest students record their own presentations on audiotapes, listen to them and self-evaluate their presentations and pronunciation. Therefore, after the imitation, the students can record their speaking on audiotapes and listen to them again and again, until they find their pronunciation, word stress and intonation are very close to the model.

However, it is not enough to just repeat and imitate the model, in fact, teachers’ corrective feedback is quite important for students. If teachers do not correct students’ mistakes in time, their incorrect pronunciation will become stable and then their phonology will be fossilized. Until that time, it will be more difficult to change student’s mistakes. As for the corrective
feedback, ESL teachers can ask students to pronounce words and read sentences according to the model one by one, and require students to concentrate on the pronunciation and word stress of every word and intonation of every sentence. The focus of the teacher’s correction should be on the students’ mistakes in intonation. After they get the corrective feedback from their teacher, they can also record their speaking on the audiotapes again, and then compare with the previous version before having corrections. From this comparison, students will find their progress and focus more on their frequent mistakes.

Third, in addition to the pronunciation, word stress and intonation teaching, the development of comprehensible English cannot be separate from communicative practice. When teachers teach students to pronounce the three most difficult and confused sounds /θ/, /ð/, /s/ for elderly Chinese immigrants, and once students are familiar with pronouncing these words, ESL teachers can incorporate communicative activities in pronunciation teaching, such as by conducting role-playing activities for students to practice. For instance, practice can be done in groups of two, one student acts as the father or the mother, the other one acts as a kid who asks his/her parent about the date and take turns practicing the sounds /θ/ and /s/ in Thursday, /ð/ in mother and father:

Kid: Mother/Father, what’s the date today?

Mother/Father: Today is January 13th.

Kid: Mother/Father, what day is it today?

Mother/Father: Today is Thursday.
By applying communicative activities to oral English class, it is expected that these activities arouse the students’ interest in learning English and increase their involvement in class. Besides creating opportunities for communicative practice in class, ESL teachers are also advised to encourage elderly Chinese immigrants to speak English and interact with natives outside the classroom. To create more opportunities for elderly Chinese immigrants to practice their oral English, it could be beneficial for ESL teachers to encourage them to participate in local community organizations that regularly hold a lot of activities, workshops and parties for immigrants. It enables elderly Chinese immigrants to make new friends, develop their social ability, better integrate into Canadian culture and, most importantly, gain more chances to speak English and communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds.

**Remembering Vocabulary**

Most elderly Chinese immigrants are beginners who need more input in English but find it difficult to remember English words or sentences. Thus, English instruction requires extensive repetition. This is often accomplished through ESL teachers reading while students listen and repeat orally. Even though it helps students know how to read new English words and sentences, due to their fading memory, the mechanical repetition is not an efficient way for permanent memory. According to Whitley (1993), vocabulary growth is essential from the start, and ESL courses for beginners are best taught around situations and functions that emphasize survival-level needs of the general students. Therefore, instead of the traditional teaching method of reading and repeating, ESL teachers are advised to conduct some in-class activities, such as
games and situational performances for elderly Chinese immigrants in order to make new knowledge accessible in an authentic situation.

As an ESL teacher to elderly Chinese immigrants at the Richmond Multicultural Community Services organization now, there are teaching practices that I am more aware of based on my research. My teaching materials are always planned around situational and functional English and are conducted in class in two main parts: vocabulary and dialogue practice. For example, I teach these elderly immigrants how to greet people and introduce themselves, how to buy things and enquire about the price in supermarkets or stores. In class, every time after I teach new vocabulary or dialogues, I encourage students to practice what they learned with their partner in dyads instead of present in front of all class. I never tried to ask students to practice their dialogues in front of the whole class, because their poor oral English makes them lose the confidence to speak and they become afraid to make mistakes in front of people; as a result, they are afraid of speaking English and interacting with others. Therefore, conducting discussions in dyads or in a small group is better, particularly for lower-level beginners. Teaching vocabulary in a situational dialogue can not only transform tedious learning into a more interesting environment, but it can also help elderly Chinese immigrants remember vocabulary more effectively.

**Cultural Competence**

Culture plays an indispensable role in the development of communicative competence. Cultural differences between English and Chinese also need to be considered by ESL teachers in order to improve Chinese immigrants’ communicative competence. The different cultures and
customs will result in the negative transfer of L1 and misunderstandings in communication. If those immigrants understood Canadian culture and customs better, it would eliminate the communication barriers, to some extent, between immigrants and native speakers and allow them to better integrate into Canadian society. For instance, western people will not usually ask strangers about their age, marital status, or salary, but in China, these might be acceptable conversation topics for a first meeting. Additionally, according to my own observation, Canadians prefer to say *How are you?* rather than *Hello* like Chinese people when they meet someone, in fact, people don’t need to think about whether they are good or not, it’s just a normal way to greet others. Even though *How are you?* is similar to *Hello*, in order to communicate better with Canadians, I try to say *How are you?* instead of *Hello* like Canadians do when they meet people. Most of time, if I only say *Hello*, it is hard for us to continue talking, while if I say *How are you?*, it is easy for us to find a new topic and continue the communication. Therefore, ESL teachers should help their students distinguish the differences between cultures and customs among English and Chinese people.

In the oral English class, ESL teachers are responsible for summarizing some cultural differences between English and Chinese in daily communication in order to cultivate and strengthen students’ awareness of cultural differences. In the article Cultural Difference (n.d.), the author lists various cultural differences between China and western countries which always occur in daily communication. For example, when introducing how to greet each other, Chinese prefer to say *Hi, have you eaten your meal yet?* or *Where are your going?* But if Chinese people ask about a meal, it is not a greeting for western people, but they would think Chinese people
were inviting them to have a meal. Instead, they would like to say *How are you today?* or *How is everything?* when they greet people. Another example the author provided is the different response to *Thank you.* Western people’s usual response to *Thank you* is by saying *You’re welcome* or *It’s my pleasure* or *That’s all right.* While Chinese people are used to saying *It is what I should do,* which may lead to misunderstanding by西部ers because they would think that Chinese people were not willing to do it, and that they are doing it just because it is their responsibility.

After acquiring these basic differences between English and Chinese cultures in communication, improving elderly Chinese immigrants’ cultural competence cannot be separated from practice in a real situation. It is possible for ESL teachers to invite some native speakers into the class to teach them some important cultural differences that easily lead to misunderstandings. Then, in order to enhance the effects of the learning and helping them better remember and apply these differences into their daily lives, teachers divide students into several small groups and each group will be assigned a native speaker with whom to practice their English. These activities will reduce the negative transfer of the L1 for elderly Chinese immigrants and, therefore, improve their cultural competence and enhance their communicative competencies.

**Summary**

To enhance elderly Chinese immigrants’ oral English and help them better integrate into Canadian society and culture, I conclude with five teaching methods for Canadian ESL teachers in accordance with my research and teaching experience.
To begin with, ESL teachers need to make a teaching plan for elderly Chinese immigrants, which includes setting a realistic teaching goal and arranging the teaching contents with interesting activities. Conducting a questionnaire survey to know more about students’ information and their learning goals first is conducive to designing that teaching plan. Based on the results of the survey, ESL teachers need to set a realistic teaching goal for those elderly learners according to their real needs and actual language abilities. Due to the low level of English and without the pressure from employment, speaking and listening abilities are more important for elderly Chinese immigrants; therefore, I recommend that ESL teachers concentrate on primarily teaching frequently used vocabulary and situational dialogues. As for the teaching content, it is recommended that ESL teachers choose topics that their students really want to learn and are relevant to their daily life. Most importantly, they need to create more interesting activities in class to teach these topics, such situational performances, in order to arouse students’ interest in class.

Moreover, it is recommended that ESL teachers integrate their student’s intrinsic, integrative and instrumental orientations together and develop these three orientations simultaneously. The first step is to do a needs’ analysis for these students by discussing and sharing the students’ own reasons and needs for learning English. Afterwards, teachers can enhance their students’ overlapping of orientations by creating an active classroom atmosphere, inspiring students in English learning and incorporating Canadian cultures in class.

Additionally, ESL teachers are supposed to develop their students’ comprehensibility instead of expecting them to achieve a native-like phonological proficiency. Initially, it helps to
allow these immigrants know the importance of comprehensibility by inviting some experienced elderly L2 learners to share their learning experiences. As comprehensibility is greatly affected by the transfer of L1, correcting elderly Chinese immigrants’ pronunciation, word stress and intonation by a recording device and getting teachers’ corrective feedback is beneficial to reducing the negative transfer of L1 and the occurrence of the phonological fossilization. Besides that, ESL teachers encourage students to practice English both in class and outside of class.

Furthermore, as the cognitive ability and memory fade with advanced age, it is necessary to help elderly Chinese people remember vocabulary. ESL teachers can conduct some in-class games or combine frequently-used vocabulary with situational dialogues so that elderly L2 learners are able to remember new vocabulary permanently and use it in practice.

Last but not least, improving elderly Chinese immigrants’ cultural competence is one of the most important parts to develop their communicative competence. ESL teachers tend to help elderly Chinese immigrants differentiate between the different culture and customs among English and Chinese which will not only enhance their communicative competence but will also reduce the negative transfer of L1. Therefore, it is recommended that ESL teachers summarize some basic cultural differences between English and Chinese, most importantly, inviting some native speakers to practice English in a real situation and better help elderly learners acquire the differences and improve their communicative competence.
Reflection

Before I started this project, I initially thought the elderly lacked motivation to learn English and I never really thought they could remember English words at their age. In fact, it is a great challenge for them to acquire a new language at an advanced age, since most of them had no pre-migration English learning experiences. Thus, elderly L2 learners are in a disadvantaged position to learn English. After working on this project and accumulating more teaching experience with senior L2 learners, I found that if ESL teachers try to cultivate students’ awareness of the importance of speaking English, arouse students’ interest in learning English, do a needs’ analysis for their students and personalize the teaching according to the students’ real needs, elderly L2 learners would be willing to learn English. What they learn in class can be applied to their daily life in an English-speaking country and that benefits them to better integrate into Canadian culture and society..

Additionally, I had considered that only if adult L2 learners spend a lot of time on learning and practicing English, would it be possible for them to achieve high levels of attainment in SLA. However, after working on more research, I found that elderly L2 learners would suffer from fossilization in SLA, especially phonological fossilization, which is affected by age. In addition, learning is restricted due to L1 interference, lack of previous educational backgrounds and the like. Hence, no matter how much effort they make, it is impossible for them to achieve a level of proficiency that can be achieved by a child and never attain native-like phonological proficiency. Therefore, a more realistic goal for them should be on developing their ability to communicate
with a wider segment of society in familiar and frequent situations and to develop basic comprehensibility.

Furthermore, I had considered that L1 plays a negative role in learning oral English, where it leads to non-native pronunciation and accents. With an increasing number of studies I read, I realized that L1 has both positive and negative transfers in SLA. Due to those beginners’ lack of basic English knowledge and poor L2 language learning skills, using L1 in class at the beginning level will help older L2 learners better understand English. Moreover, because of the differences between English and Chinese in many aspects, if ESL teachers do not identify these differences for students, they will feel confused and find it difficult to learn English. In order to reduce the negative transfer of the L1 and the impact of phonological fossilization on L2 learners, I suggest that ESL teachers lay emphasis on helping them identify the differences between Chinese and English, and then encourage them to communicate in English both in class and outside of class.

When I taught ESL to elderly Chinese immigrants in both the SpeakWell Program and at the Richmond Multicultural Community Services organization, I always asked my students what they wanted to learn for the upcoming class. In reality, most of them hoped to learn frequently-used vocabulary and situational dialogues related to their daily lives, such as going shopping, buying fruits in supermarkets, ordering food in restaurants. Teaching students about things related to their personal life really aroused their interest in learning English, because they felt that learning English was useful and helpful while they lived in Canada. When instructing the dialogues, instead of following me to read sentences one by one, I usually tried to conduct role playing in class to practice the dialogues. To some degree, it created an active classroom
atmosphere and made the simple dialogues more vivid. However, elderly Chinese learners could not remember these sentences immediately and speak fluently and, most of time, they read the sentences rather than speaking during the practice of dialogues. Therefore, the actual effect of role playing for this group of students is not so evident.

Even though the object of my project is for a seniors’ group, the results of the project could also reflect on young adult L2 learners, like me. As a Chinese L2 learner, I also encountered many of the same situations and problems as elderly Chinese learners. First of all, my orientations for English learning also overlapped. In fact, I enjoyed learning English, because of the acquisition of English and because I can now watch English movies and TV, read English books, as well as entertain myself. Thus, I have an intrinsic orientation to learn English. Meanwhile, as a student, I was also instrumentally oriented to learn English to obtain higher grades on English exams, to obtain higher degrees and to attain a decent job. Besides that, I am also integratively oriented to learning English, in order to better integrate into Canadian communities and into their culture; most importantly, I now have the ability to communicate with native speakers. As a result, my overlapping orientations have stimulated me to learn English.

I started learning when I was 11 years old in China. Due to the long-time exposure to the L1 and the lack of an English environment, the negative transfer of L1 led to some incorrect expressions in both my oral and written English. For example, sometimes I still make mistakes in using he and she when I speak to a native. Moreover, I cannot write like a native since I always have a lot of grammatical errors or semantic errors in my articles. Even though teachers give me
corrective feedback, actually, some errors and expressions cannot be revised because of the occurrence of fossilization. However, that does not mean that I cannot make any progress because of fossilization. As a matter of fact, my communicative competence has been enhanced a lot during these two years in Canada, particularly my performance in my improved comprehensibility. It implies that fossilization occurs locally, though some of my aspects have not been fully fossilized, such as phonology. For example, with more accurate and native-like input as well as more opportunities to communicate with natives, I will try to imitate native speakers’ pronunciation, word stress and especially intonation, which make my oral English sound closer to that of natives. Even though my communicative competence has been developed a lot, it is still difficult for me to achieve a native-like communicative proficiency.
Limitations and Further Research

After completing this project, I found that there are still some limitations. Primarily, the group of senior L2 learners lacks attention by researchers and ESL teachers so there were only a few studies that were directly related to my project. Due to there being little research on this special group in the adult SLA area, there are only a few recommendations that ESL teachers can learn to better instruct elderly learners. Teaching the elderly is more different than I had thought at first because of their deficiency in SLA. In addition, the majority of elderly Chinese immigrants are beginners and, because of their disadvantages in SLA, especially their fading memory, it is hard for them to remember what they learn in class; therefore, it leads to inefficient teaching and an unobvious teaching effect.

All in all, I enjoyed the entire journey of my project and, even though I have now completed this project, that does not mean that I will stop my inquiry. As a matter of fact, there are still some new questions that come to mind. One of the questions I hope to research in the future is whether previous L2 (other than English) learning experiences benefit learning English for elderly Chinese immigrants. According to my communications with my elderly students, I was surprised that some of them who were well-educated before immigrating had the experience of learning Russian. To maintain a friendly relationship with the Soviet Union, the Chinese government promoted university students to learn Russian at that time. Generally, Russian is much closer to English than Chinese. For example, there are some similar letters used in both the Russian Cyrillic alphabet and in the English Latin alphabet; moreover, Russian and English share the same number of consonants (Sumerset, 2016). However, she also points out that Russian and
English are very different from one another, such as the different phonological systems that Russian only has five vowel sounds but English has twelve (Sumerset, 2016). Based on what I reviewed in the literature part, I think that there are fewer differences between Russian and English that might reduce the negative transfer in English learning for elderly Chinese immigrants who had the experience of learning Russian. I feel it would be easier to learn English for them. However, when I talked with students who had learned Russian prior to migration, most of them regarded this language learning experience as useless to English learning. Due to the breakdown of diplomatic relations between the Republic of China and the Soviet Union, they did not learn Russian for a long time and because of there being no chance to practice Russian, they forgot it rather quickly. Therefore, their special experience has aroused my interest to study this question. If I have an opportunity, I hope to research this new question and continue to study this special group in Canada. The project has ended, but there is no end to the research.
References


