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## Immigrant Chinese Students' Use of Silence in the Language Arts Classroom: Perceptions, Reflections, and Actions

Yang Hu and Stacey Fell-Eisenkraft

*This article begins with a description of the perceptions of some immigrant Chinese students on their own silence in the language arts classroom. While one of the authors discusses the cultural significance of these students' perceptions from her own perspective as a cultural insider, the other author describes ways to facilitate effectively the learning of these students from her standpoint as a classroom insider.*

"They are quiet and hardworking." We often hear this comment about Asian students. "How do I get them to talk more in class?," we are frequently asked. It isn't strange that we often find ourselves in conversations with teachers about Asian students. One of us, Yang Hu—a researcher and professor—was born and grew up in China. Stacey Fell-Eisenkraft teaches in a middle school located in New York City's Chinatown, where 60% of the students are Chinese immigrants. Three months into a year-long ethnographic study in Stacey's eighth grade humanities class, we decided to investigate students' own perceptions on their verbal behavior.

All eight students we invited for the focus group meeting were born in China and moved to New York between third and seventh grade. They had identified themselves, through an informal survey, as students who "speak occasionally" or "seldom speak" in whole class discussions. None of them were currently classified as an English Language Learner. We asked them, "What do you think is really important for your teachers to know about why you do or don't talk in class?" The question was met with a long, awkward silence. We then invited the students to take a couple of minutes to write their response. Some let out a sigh of relief, and all took their pens to paper. After another invitation, one by one we heard their voices:

- *Lin Hong*: Some people are shy in class.
- *Jennifer*: Yeah, I am.
- *Maisie*: Me, too.
- *Andy*: Sometimes, I don't have the answer for some questions. So...
- *Shi Ying*: I'm afraid that my answers may not be correct.
- *Ya Lan*: Noisy. (Her voice was a whisper. We asked her to speak up.) Too many people talking.
- *Alice*: I'm afraid of being laughed at when I make mistakes.
- *Tian*: I need time to think what I'm going to say. When I'm thinking, someone will have the answer.
- *Andy*: Sometimes, my tongue gets tied up.
- *Shi Ying*: Sometimes kids have the answers but they don't want to share.

We listened to the audio recording of the focus group meeting and asked ourselves: What is the cultural significance of these students' perceptions of their silence? How do we effectively facilitate the learning of these students in the classroom? We identified four themes that seemed to run through these students' perceptions on their verbal behavior: (1) Silence as a result of being shy; (2) Silence as a result of fear of not having the correct answers; (3) Silence as a result of unfamiliarity with talking to learn; and (4) Silence as a result of a lack of confidence in speaking the English language. We then discussed the themes from our own

perspectives. Yang's perspective, as a cultural insider, centers around her own experience and knowledge of the cultural value of communication and of formal education. Stacey's perspective, as a classroom insider, focuses on the strategies she uses to facilitate the learning in her classroom. We have chosen to keep our voices separate to make our individual perspectives known to the reader.

In considering the cultural significance of students' perceptions of their own verbal behavior, we align ourselves with theories that view literacies as social practices (Gee, 1992, 1996; Heath, 1983; Luke, 1991; Luke

& Freebody, 1997; Street, 1993). As social practices, all literacies take place in cultural contexts, and different cultures define and value different social practices. As Bruner (1986) stated, "A culture is as much a forum for negotiating and renegotiating meaning and for explicating action as it is a set of rules or specifications for action" (p. 123). We hope that describing literacy as "historically situated and culturally recognizable" (Taylor, 2000) will help us expand our understandings of the teaching and learning of the immigrant Chinese students and other Asian students with similar backgrounds.



### 1. *Silence as a result of being shy.*

Examples:

*Lin Hong:* Some people are shy in class.

*Jennifer:* Yeah, I am.

*Maisie:* Me, too.

### **Yang**

I often hear the word "shy" being used as a general label to characterize those who display a tendency to remain silent in class discussions. However, according to McCroskey (1991), shyness is a behavior that could be the result of any one or a combination of the following seven factors: skill deficiencies, social introversion, social alienation, ethnic/cultural divergence, unfamiliarity with academic discourse, lacking confidence in subject matter, and/or communication apprehension.

In our subsequent interviews with Lin Hong, Jennifer, and Maisie, they explained that they were only shy in class, not outside of school. It seems to me that the shyness these girls talked about demonstrates a culturally learned style of communication. According to Muriel Saville-Troike (1985), silence is acquired as part of communicative competence. She says, "an essential part of the acquisition of communicative compe-

tence, is how children learn when not to talk, and what silence means in their speech community" (p. 11). She further links the amount of talk expected of children to different notions of child-rearing practices and individual achievement.

Southeast Asian countries like Japan, Korea, China, and Vietnam have been under the influence of Confucian ethics that stressed political and social stability. In the Confucian code, two key concepts guided human relationships: hierarchy and obedience. In these countries, being communicatively competent means that individuals must know their place in the social hierarchy. Every child was born into a hierarchical institution—the family. In most families in China, one is assigned a seat at the dinner table that shows one's status in the family hierarchy. The "upper seats," those facing the door, are usually for the elder male members of the family—grandfathers, fathers, uncles—or for distinguished guests of grandfather's or father's generation. The "lower seats,"



those facing the “upper seats,” are for the children. The “side seats” are usually for the elder female members of the family, such as grandmothers, mothers, or aunts. The dinner table conversation is usually among people who sit at upper and side seats. The children who sit in lower seats are often told not to speak while they eat, and the reasons for this vary. Some parents or grandparents tell the children explicitly that it is rude and disrespectful for children to take part in adult conversations. Others say that speaking while you eat can cause indigestion or choking.

The fact that children from Southeast Asian countries talk less is rooted in their cultural emphasis on obedience and de-emphasis of the individual—two central tenets of Confucian ethics used to maintain the social hierarchy. At home, the Chinese children are expected to accept the lower seats at the dinner table. They don’t have to verbalize their choices or decisions, which are often made for them by adults. Nor do they need to speak up to defend their action if they are to obey their parents. Similarly, at school the children are expected to listen to their teachers, take notes, and memorize. They do not have to talk to make meaning; the meaning is made for them and transmitted to them by the teachers. Deborah Tannen (1994), in discussing the positive connotation about the notion of hierarchy in Japan, wrote, “feeling you are in your rightful place in a hierarchy can feel as safe and close as being in your family—a quintessentially hierarchical institution” (p. 215).

It is not surprising that when the Southeast Asian students find themselves in American classrooms where they need to speak to be part of the learning community, they often resort to what they have been enculturated with—silence. They may feel unsafe because the schools do not have the familiar hierarchy where the teacher has all the say. They may not be used to making their own decisions. And they may have trouble understanding that to speak up in

class and to express your own opinion are ways to assert your individuality and to demonstrate your knowledge, which is considered culturally appropriate here in the United States.

### *Stacey*

It is top priority for me as a teacher that my students feel safe and supported enough to share their opinions and express themselves. In part, I know that means fostering a classroom environment where students feel empowered, striking a balance between nurturing students who are afraid and giving them the slight push they need to begin speaking up. I have come to rely on the following strategies for inviting students into the classroom conversation.

**Setting the tone.** For me, this means I must constantly reiterate that my role in the classroom is not one of “gatekeeper.” At the beginning of the year, my students tend to regard me as a kind of monitor; when they talk, they hesitate and keep their eyes on me, wondering if their comments are acceptable to me. It takes a lot of reminding and time together for the students to start to see me as a discussion facilitator rather than a gatekeeper. Throughout our discussions, I often find myself saying, “Whose comments are you responding to? Look at that person, not me. I’m just listening over here.” In this gentle way, I am trying to assure my students that their voices and thoughts matter to their classmates. I am trying to encourage them to assert themselves in the classroom, to be responsible for their own learning and that of their peers.

**Jigsaw discussion.** Another way to empower students is to engage students in peer-led small group work. I often rely on the “jigsaw” technique to insure that students feel that they have power over what they say. Jigsaw involves breaking a non-fiction text into the same number of sections as there are people in each group. Once the students individually read their sections thoroughly



and take notes, they first meet with all of the other students who read the same section. They use this time to agree on the main points, clarify anything they find confusing, and highlight interesting parts. Once everyone is ready, they reconfigure so that each small group is comprised of people who have all read different sections. Together, the group represents the entire text—each student is a piece of the “jigsawed” text. The groups start at the beginning, and each member of the group is responsible for presenting the material from her section.

My experience has taught me that the most meaningful jigsaws take place when the students interact with one another by asking for clarification, bringing up relevant questions, and drawing connections between the sections. For example, when we began our study of slavery in the Americas, I chunked a non-fiction article from *National Geographic for Kids* that provided an overview of several ancient African kingdoms. When Ka Yuan finished explaining the role of the marketplace for the Hausa people, Xiao Li, a young woman who adores animals, asked if any animals were traded at the market. Ka Yuan looked back at his section of the article and replied, “They don’t say anything about animals.” Suddenly, Lin Hong interjected smugly, “Well, your part might not say anything, but mine does. So now you have to listen to me.”

The jigsaw is especially helpful to students who claim to be shy. In grouping students, I would make sure that students like Lin Hong, Jennifer, and Maisie have a lot of support in the initial groups, as they check their understanding of the same text against one another. For some students, this may mean making certain that there are other people in the group who speak Chinese and can help translate and decipher confusing parts of the text. An added benefit of the jigsaw is the element of teamwork. Everyone plays a key role in their peers’ complete understanding of the text. This means that students who do not usually elect to speak

during whole class discussions must participate within the small group. Plus, those who talk a lot during whole class discussions must work on their listening skills.

**Book clubs.** Peer-led book clubs are yet another forum that fosters talk among students who might not otherwise participate. Groups of 4-5 students select the novels they are interested in reading, agree on a reading schedule, and then meet on a weekly basis to discuss their books.

As with jigsaw discussions, book clubs give students like Lin Hong, Jennifer, and Maisie a sense of ownership. As I listen in during book club discussions, I coach the students to bring less talkative members into the conversation. Often, it is merely a matter of my whispering to one of the group members, “Why don’t you ask Maisie what she thinks?” The ongoing nature of the book club gives students the time they may need to adjust to the setting and to begin speaking. Three weeks of bi-weekly meetings give students like Maisie a chance to find her voice, or as Maisie said herself, “I got in the habit of talking with them.”

**Fishbowl discussion.** Sometimes, despite my prodding and nudging, one or two students will dominate the book club discussion, and it remains difficult for the quieter students to enter the conversation. I have found “fishbowling” to be an effective way to teach group discussion skills. After eavesdropping on book club discussions, I will select a group—one that seems to be carrying on some type of discussion—to continue their conversation while the rest of the class gathers in another circle around them. I assign each student in the outside circle a member of the book club to observe. I ask the observers to take notes on both the active and passive ways that book club member participates. Or, if I have a specific mini-lesson in mind, such as “Formulating Open-Ended Questions,” I may ask the students to record just the open-ended questions. Our fishbowls provide a good



opportunity for students to self-evaluate and articulate individual and group goals for working towards more effective, rewarding discussions.

When we started book clubs last year, I noticed how unnatural some of the discussions sounded. One by one, the students were announcing what they thought about the book. Each student politely waited for a turn. I gathered the students into a fishbowl, explaining my above observation. The book club, which I put in the middle of the circle, was one that seemed to be engaging in more authentic talk about their book. I asked the observers to pay special attention to the way the book club members entered the conversation: when and how do they join the discussion? Five minutes into the fishbowl discussion, I invited the

observers to share what they had noticed. Tom observed that his fish joined the discussion when he disagreed with another peer. "How do you know that?" I prodded.

"Because he said, 'I don't agree, because...'" Tony read from his notes. I asked the rest of the class if anybody else had noticed anything like this. This led the class to come up with a list of "entering moves" or specific kinds of dialogue that the people we had just observed used to enter the conversation: stating an opinion (agreeing or disagreeing), "piggybacking" or adding on to another comment, asking for clarification, and drawing connections. I kept the chart with these notes in a visible place within the classroom and often referred book clubs to it when only one or two people did most of the talking.



## 2. Silence as a result of the fear of not having the correct answers.

Examples:

*Andy:* Sometimes, I don't have the answer for some questions. So ...

*Shi Ying:* I'm afraid that my answers may not be correct.

*Alice:* I'm afraid of being laughed at when I make mistakes.

*Shi Ying:* Sometimes kids have the answers but they don't want to share.

### Yang

Andy, Shi Ying, and Alice's anxiety about not having the right answers reminds me of my own experiences. Throughout the years of my elementary and secondary schools in China, I sat among forty or fifty students in classrooms in rows facing the front. We were expected to be quiet, compliant, and obedient. We learned to read through memorization of long lists of words and poems and essays. We were taught to write by first reading "model essays" and then trying to write like them. We spent most of the school day listening, taking notes, and trying to memorize as much as we could. Teachers did most of the talking. Students' voices were heard only in a teacher-led recitation. The teacher's role was to assess

and judge students' responses. Students were expected to present and demonstrate the degree to which they memorized what was being taught. In our responses, we recited what we had committed to memory or we guessed what the correct answer could be. I don't remember ever engaging in any "exploratory talk" (Barnes, 1992) to discuss what we were coming to know or what we didn't know.

When I came to the United States, I was very happy to discover that students' talk was not used as a medium to present correct answers in my graduate classes. But it took me a whole year to learn to relax while I spoke up in class because the fear of not having the right answers had become deeply ingrained in my mind. I also found that the value of talking to learn is so fundamental in



education that many well-meaning teachers are intent on getting the less talkative students to talk more. It is true that students of all cultural backgrounds could feel anxious about giving correct answers and not making mistakes, and their anxiety contributes to their silent behavior. Yet, for Andy, Shi Ying, and Alice, their anxiety is deeply rooted in their prior school experience in China. Fear of making mistakes or not supplying the correct answer could be crippling and render them in a linguistic exile. It would take a lot of practice for them to speak up without feeling they were being judged. It would, therefore, be a good practice for them to engage in activities in which they have ownership of their opinions and experiences.

### *Stacey*

I agree with Yang that the pressure these students feel that they have to be "right" can create overwhelming sensations of self-doubt. For students like Shi Ying, such self-doubt prevents her from sharing her ideas. For Andy, not knowing feels like a safer position than knowing something with which his peers or teacher may disagree. Although students like Alice and Shi Ying often write thoughtfully before, during, and after a class discussion, they tend to remain apprehensive about sharing their comments during a discussion. One of my goals is to encourage them to speak the same volumes they write. The following strategies have been very helpful in working towards this goal.

**Writing before discussions.** In addition to emphasizing that our discussions honor multiple perspectives, I have found that students like Andy and Shi Ying benefit from the opportunity to write down their thoughts before a discussion starts. Sometimes, this means posting a question that greets the students at the beginning of class. I have also taken to interrupting whole-class discussions that have lost their momentum to ask the

students to try writing before we continue. Other times, this means passing out copies of a text and asking the students to respond. My questions may be pointed queries if I am hoping to focus the students on particular aspects of the text. Or, they may be nothing more than, "So, what do you think?" or "Please respond," if I am hoping for a discussion that will take its direction from the students' interests and concerns.

The scenario described at the beginning of this article attests to the fact that when I ask students to respond in writing to an issue or question, it is rare for somebody to complain that they don't have any answer or a "right" answer. I teach my students that writing is thinking, that when they pick up their pen, they may not know where they stand or what they believe, but that they can best formulate questions and articulate positions through writing.

**Validating students' thinking: Teacher-to-student.** I validate my students' work in hopes of providing anxious students with the reassurance they need to participate. When I respond to students' journals, I use sticky notes and highlighters to specifically show the students where and why I find their thoughts so insightful. I make it clear that I wish we had heard their comments during the discussion. While this method may come after the fact, I believe it helps to build students' confidence over time.

I realize that validating students' thinking must happen every day. To do this, I regularly freeze a discussion to ask students to respond in writing before we continue. I walk quietly around the circle to read over the students' shoulders. When I read something that I sense will be an important contribution to our discussion, I let the student know why I think her classmates will want to hear what she has to say. Conscious of my limited time, I make a point of going to the students who, without my urging, might not otherwise participate.

At the beginning of the year, my support alone may not be sufficient, and I will

sometimes bring up a student's point for him. For example, I may say, "Andy, the point you just made reminds me of what I read over Tian's shoulder. He also wrote about ..." Early on, the students may find my tiptoeing and peeking over shoulders distracting, but they quickly become accustomed to this ritual. By the end of our first semester together, Judy rolled her eyes as I crept over to where she was sitting. "Don't bother me. I already know I am going to share this," she scolded me. Later in the year, Judy wrote the following poem:

#### Lesson

Ms. Eisenkraft looking over shoulders  
being as nosy as can be  
curious about what we wrote  
about the lessons she taught us.  
Hm-mm-ing and Ah-hh-ing  
as she walks  
a smile spreads across her face  
and she writes down  
a list of poetry.

**Validating students' thinking: Student-to-student.** As our class community grows stronger, students begin to do this same kind of validating for each other. At various points throughout the reading of a

chapter, for example, I ask the students to turn and talk to their Read Aloud partner. This requires them to respond/relate to what is happening in the story, ask clarifying questions, or make predictions. I then would follow up some of the turn-and-talk breaks by asking the students, "Did anybody's partner share something that you think the rest of us might find interesting?" If I do a good job of matching Read Aloud partners, more talkative students will help bring out the voices of their quieter partners.

Similarly, when I freeze a discussion to allow the students to respond in writing, I will sometimes ask students to share what they wrote with a partner. Once the partners have shared with each other, I can jumpstart the discussion by asking, "Who heard or read something interesting?" or, more directly, "Does anybody have a partner who hasn't had a chance to talk during our discussion?" Maria, who is Alice's partner, was the main reason that the rest of the class ever heard what Alice was thinking. Alice almost never speaks up in discussions but wrote lengthy and critical responses both inside and outside of class. Throughout the year, Maria insisted that Alice share her writing, once even threatening, "This is so good—if you don't read it out loud, I'll read it myself!"



### 3. Silence as a result of unfamiliarity with talking to learn.

Example:

*Ya Lan:* Noisy. Too many people talking.

#### *Yang*

It is worth noting that Ya Lan first just whispered the word "Noisy" in an attempt to share what was preventing her from speaking up in class, and she expected us to understand what she meant by that. I noticed in subsequent observations that during the few times when Ya Lan did speak up, she relied on words, phrases, or half a sentence

to communicate. I never heard her uttering full sentences in class. I also noticed that Ya Lan is not alone in her laconic answers. I attributed this tendency to the cultural value of indirect communication. A Chinese proverb goes, "Speech is valued for its implications." A Japanese anthropologist Takie Sugiyama Lebra (1987) explains that it is common practice for a Japanese speaker to stop in mid-sentence because it seems



intrusive to the listener to express ideas before knowing how they will be received. This practice is consistent with the value that Confucianism put on the group rather than the individual. Talking is viewed more as a group event. It emphasizes both the speaker and the listener. To be indirect and to expect the listeners to pick up hints puts more emphasis on the listener to be more attuned to the speaker rather than on the speaker to explicitly state everything.

It is also worth noting that Ya Lan would view the noise of "too many people talking" as a cause for her silence. Perhaps she was complaining that she did not have a quiet place to think her own thoughts. Perhaps she was so used to teacher's monologue in the Chinese classrooms that the demand for students to talk in order to construct meaning was hard to get used to. I also wonder if she was voicing what some Chinese parents feel about the American classroom their children attend. I often hear them complain that the room is too noisy, filled with children's voices. One parent once said to me that she was wondering what learning was happening when the teacher spent so much time listening to children talking. Obviously, the classroom in which a teacher does not stand in the front of the room talking and teaching and leading the recitation cannot be compared to the mode of learning in a Chinese classroom. To many Chinese, learning is hard, solitary work. Classic tales abound about the solitary scholar who read and wrote against a cold window for a decade before finally coming to fame.

### *Stacey*

When I first began teaching at this school, I was frustrated by the half-sentences

in which my students tended to communicate. As an American-born individual who values a direct communication style, I wanted them to say what they thought. I would tell my students, "I don't understand what you mean when you only say a word or two. Give me a complete sentence." However, rather than formulate a more complete sentence, my students tended to shut down at such requests. I realized that my strategy for encouraging students to finish their thoughts was ineffective, because my phrasing put too much emphasis on sentence structure and grammar. This served to affirm students' fears about their English being hard to understand and discouraged them from further speaking in class. I learned to rephrase my request in a more affirming way by saying: "Ya Lan, I think I understand, but please keep explaining. Tell us more about what you mean." As we get to know each other better, it becomes less necessary to do so much verbal coaxing. Instead, the students become accustomed to my "keep-going" look.

I have also learned that I need to introduce my students to the concept of learning with and within a community. I have found that our ritual of "circling up" can be an important tool towards understanding that learning is not a solitary act. When we circle up on the rug, I point out that a circle allows us to make eye contact with everyone. "In our circle," I tell them, "You should be able to make eye contact with your peers when you're talking to each other." In the circle, I hold the students accountable for actively listening and responding to each other.



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#### 4. Silence as a result of a lack of confidence in speaking the English language.

Examples:

*Tian*: I need time to think what I'm going to say. When I'm thinking, someone will have the answer.

*Andy*: Sometimes, my tongue gets tied up.

#### *Yang*

Tian's dilemma reminds me of my first few years in the American graduate classroom. One of the first things I was shocked by as a newcomer to this country is the amount of talk that is expected of the students in class. I later learned that "talk is the sea upon which all else floats" (Britton, 1970). Indeed, the view of talk as a medium for learning is an important epistemic function of talk (Vygotsky, 1986; Bruner, 1966; Barnes, 1992). This view of talk is congruent with the notion of a democratic classroom which values exploration of ideas and thoughts through collaborative talk, and talk to challenge, analyze, and think. But for students with a different culturally learned style of communication, breaking out of communication exile may be a challenge that they will face for a long time to come. I remember sitting in a circle in a graduate class as we discussed *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston. Unlike Tian, I did not need time to think what I had to say. I had quite a lot to say about the book. But I could not find a polite moment to enter the conversation until, toward the end of the class, the professor called upon me to hear what I had to say.

According to Anne Rogers (1993), the tragedy of deliberately choosing not to speak what one knows, while at first a strategy for self-preservation, "slips over into a psychological resistance—the disconnection of one's own experience from consciousness" (p. 289). For students who grew up learning how to be silent, especially for those who have developed psychological resistance to speaking up, there is a lot of unlearning to do. In class discussions, simply allowing some space in which the quiet students can

think their own thoughts, instead of following other people's train of thought, is a welcoming step towards helping them to reconnect their experience with consciousness.

#### *Stacey*

Andy and Tian are expressing what many non-native and native English speakers alike feel, that the often frenetic pace of the classroom is not conducive to reflecting and speaking. An alternative to writing that is now a regular feature of my classroom is visual response. As we read a story, I ask my students to sketch, watercolor, and create collages that respond to prominent images and emotions. As a language arts teacher, I can appreciate that a reader-writer manipulates a variety of literary forms depending on her purpose and mood. We need to include aesthetic responses as an equally valid and powerful way of expressing literary experience. Visuals are necessary in the literature classroom because many people turn to images to communicate their understanding and questions (Eisenkraft, 1999).

Making art that responds to literature requires the students to engage deeply with the text. Students also tell me that making art "slows time down" for them and gives them better access to their thoughts. They are able to grasp responses to the text that seem to elude them when they are participating in discussions. Karen Ernst daSilva (2001) explains that "drawing is to help us think, get ideas, observe, and remember. The focus is not on appearance but on meaning. Therein lies the potential. When we link art to the process of writing, we go after the power that the partnership holds, creating classrooms



where students find their stories and all the important meaning in their lives" (p. 8).

My students and I hang visual responses "gallery style," in rows on the wall of the classroom. I then start the discussion by inviting the students to make observations. I ask them: "What patterns do you see here? Do you recognize any scenes or characters? What do you notice about the colors we used? What questions come to mind when you look these over? Are there any common themes?"

### Conclusion

As we look back at our inquiry, we realize that our new knowledge about the immigrant Chinese students' perceptions would lead us to explore other related issues, such as gender differences and their impact on how students adapt to the demand of talk in American classrooms. Our inquiry is still ongoing. We hope that this documentation of our perspectives offers our readers an opportunity to consider the cultural significance of these Chinese students' perceptions on their own silence. Moreover, we believe that our descriptions of how one teacher strives to invite her students into the classroom conversation will serve as an invitation to other teachers to reflect upon their own practice. As our perspectives merged, we came to the realization that we need to do more than just open up channels of communication within our classrooms. We also need to empower the students—especially those students whose culturally learned styles of communication differ from the teacher's—so that they will gain the confidence they need to let their voices be heard not only in school, but also in their lives outside of school, as they grow up to become citizens of the new country their parents have chosen to adopt.

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