CHINESE PARENTS AND ESL TEACHERS: UNDERSTANDING AND NEGOTIATING THEIR DIFFERENCES

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Department of Language and Literacy Education)

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

November 2001

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that the limited communication between English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and parents is a serious problem confronting educators. However, no serious study has been done to date on ESL parent-teacher communication that adequately recognizes the problematic nature of such communication and that approaches the discourse data from a functional linguistic perspective.

This study investigates the communication processes between ESL teachers and Chinese immigrant parents (chiefly from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China) through a focal communication event, ESL Parents’ Night, when they discuss their views of an ESL program in particular and the education of immigrant adolescent students in general. The study falls within the theoretical perspectives of learning organization, negotiation of intercultural conflict in a multilingual situation, language socialization, and sociocultural views of activity. Data were collected by multiple methods: 1) observations of twelve ESL department planning meetings and three annual Parents’ Nights, 2) individual interviews of teachers and bilingual assistants who acted as intermediaries between teachers and parents, and 3) a focus group discussion. Specifically, the methodology combines qualitative research approaches and discourse analysis.

Results indicate that teachers viewed the ESL program positively whereas many parents perceived it negatively. Teachers and parents were deeply divided both by what and how they were discussing at Parents’ Night. This ‘double difference’ creates a major difficulty for intercultural negotiation of conflict, and preconditions aiding dialogue and negotiation become vitally important. Noting variation in interaction in different parts of
Parents' Night, the study discusses various conditions that may have promoted or hindered the intercultural negotiation of these conflicts. The researcher’s analysis of the difficulties of communication between Chinese parents and Canadian teachers at Parents’ Night demonstrates less a solution to intercultural conflict than a need for continuous negotiation between the two cultural groups.

Implications of this research include the need to expand the boundaries of language socialization theory to give a greater role to reflective processes, and learning organization theory to include multilingual and multicultural issues. It also provides practical suggestions for improving intercultural communication between parents and teachers in the interest of adolescent ESL learners frequently caught between conflicting sets of attitudes and expectations.
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to

Shibao Guo and Edmund Ji Guo,

whose unconditional love and comforting hugs

sustained my journey of working on this thesis.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am always and most especially grateful to my advisor, Dr. Bernard Mohan. He put enormous time, energy, and thought into this work. He directed me to a pioneer and significant research project. He has encouraged me to continue my dissertation, whether I was able to articulate what I was doing or not. His faith in me as a researcher and writer has enabled me to journey this far. I am also thankful to my committee members, Drs. Margaret Early and Gloria Tang for their critical insights.

I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC) for support from the grant #410-97-0909 awarded to Drs. Patsy Duff, Margaret Early, and Bernard Mohan. The grant is entitled “Language Socialization in a Multicultural and Multilingual Learning Organization.” I gratefully acknowledge the support of this study by the University of British Columbia in the form of Joseph Katz Memorial Scholarship and the Faculty of Education Research Grant.

I would also like to thank the ESL teachers, the Chinese parents, students, and the bilingual assistants who participated in this study for their support and trust. My gratitude and appreciation also go to the Department of Language and Literacy Education who granted me work in the Language Education Research Center over the years, without which this thesis would not have been possible.

Debts are also owed to my friends, Keith McPherson, Miriam Orkar, Nam Won So, Kim Kozuki, Joy Lin Salzberg, Drs. Mitsunori Takakuwa and Xiaoping Liang, and others in a special study group, over the past few years, for their support, critique, and
their confidence in me. I am deeply indebted to my mentor, Dr. Edmund H. Dale, for his persistent reminder that I have no right to quit, and for his valuable feedback all the way from the University of Regina; to (Dr. to be) Tammy Slater for her careful, thorough proof-reading of the final draft.

I am most thankful to my family across continents: to my parents, brothers, and mother-in-law for their love and patience. To my husband, (Dr. to be) Shibao Guo, and our son, Edmund, I owe my life. There are no words I can think of that might express what this means.

Finally, and perhaps most of all, I wish to extend the most gracious and heartfelt thanks to Dr. Gulbahar Beckett for her timely and constructive feedback, to Gulbahar and Luxin Yang, for their friendship and for cheering me on when I felt there was no point in continuing. They are women of spirit and sisterly affection.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I love to hear about your research, to see the big gap between what I think and what the parents think. And we can actually get a little closer by doing certain other things. (ESL teacher, British Columbia, Canada, February 26, 1998)

1.1 Background

This study investigates the communication processes between teachers and immigrant Chinese parents relative to the English as a Second Language (ESL) program in a Canadian secondary school through a focal communication event, Parents' Night, when they discuss their different views of the ESL program and the education of immigrant adolescent students. Parents' Night is different from routine parent-teacher conferences at report-card time. In the study, the term “ESL Parents’ Night” refers to a special annual teacher-parent conference organised by the ESL Department to address the concerns of ESL parents. By contrast with routine parent-teacher conferences which usually deal with the concerns of a specific parent about a specific student, Parents' Night provides an opportunity to look at concerns that parents share.

The rapidly changing demographic profiles of student bodies in the public schools of North America in general, and of British Columbia in particular, as a result of recent immigration, greatly contribute to the increasingly multicultural and multilingual aspect of the province and render this study both relevant and timely. In 1997, for example, 30,754 of 59,210 students, or 52 percent, in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, were ESL learners (Vancouver Sun, Dec. 3, 1997). According to a school trustee at 1998 Parents’
Night, Vancouver School District is “an ESL district. That’s a new reality.” As the Canadian society becomes more diversified, or more specifically, as the Canadian population becomes more infused with immigrants from Asia (chiefly Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China), the need for their fluency preferably in English, one of the two official languages of Canada, becomes very real. Attempts to cater to this need by ESL programs are being tried vigorously, since familiarity of the new immigrant with English is considered an asset both for the new immigrant and the country. However, the conception of a suitable ESL program, the administration of it, and its reception by the immigrant are fraught with difficulties, owing in part to differences in cultures, in educational concepts, and in time-frame expectations. The whole involves two groups of actors: the giver (administrators and teachers) and the receivers (students and their parents). The present study will focus on the groups of teachers and parents, not on students, even though it will relate to students as needed. Often the objectives of each group differ, and this leads to misunderstanding and/or conflicts. But even if the objectives were the same, the emphasis of the one group is often different from that of the other group. This hinders smooth communication between ESL teachers and parents.

Yet the academic and linguistic achievements of ESL students are significantly increased when parents are involved in their children’s education (Ashworth, Cummins, & Handscombe, 1989). The effectiveness of parental participation in students’ educational achievement has been widely studied. However, as the Vancouver School Board pointed out in 1996 (a), the involvement of immigrant parents in the public schools represents a significant challenge. At the local level, Cumming (1995, p. 90) in his *Review of ESL*
The VSB has translated numerous relevant documents into a wide variety of languages, which are clearly displayed and readily available at VSB offices and at the Oakridge Reception and Orientation Centre. But problems of communicating with ESL students' parents and families on an ongoing basis, after initial stages of students' receptions into the VSB, seem acute and need to be addressed programmatically.

The relationship a school has with ESL parents needs to be seen in the wider context of the politics of ESL policy. For example, in England in the 1980s, ESL programs were discontinued owing to pressure from a group of ESL parents (Calderdale Report, 1986; Leung & Franson, 2001). In North America, we have just seen the example of the Unz Initiative in California which eliminated all forms of ESL instruction and bilingual education except immersion in that state (McAdam, 1998; TESOL Advocacy, 1998). A number of Hispanic parents supported this initiative. Further details of this are given later (in the section dealing with Impact of Parents on ESL and Bilingual Education Programs in Chapter 2).

The issue of communication between schools and immigrant parents has moved to the foreground recently. In the Lower Mainland, British Columbia, Canada, the Vancouver and Richmond School Boards have both been approached with proposals for traditional schools, with claims of support from ESL parents (The Globe and Mail, February 1, 1999). It is worth noting that this debate is presented as being between two familiar sides, the "traditional" and the "progressive," a contrast which does not actually fit local schools. There is the danger that the ready-made rhetoric of the public debate may turn attention away from classroom realities, and that calls for simplistic solutions
may bury valuable educational approaches to very real needs. In the Richmond District, difficulties of communication with Chinese immigrant parents have become a major political question (Chattaway, 1999). Yet communication between schools and immigrant parents is a relatively neglected research area, despite the fact that miscommunication has the potential to derail the provision of multicultural and minority education.

1.2 Definitions

Before introducing the research problems in the next section, it is important to define some of the key terms here in order to understand the present study.

1.2.1 ESL Parents

ESL parents in this study refers to parents of students whose “primary language(s) or language(s) of the home, is other than English, and who may therefore require additional services in order to develop their individual potential within British Columbia’s school system. Some students speak variations of English that differ significantly from the English used in the broader Canadian society and in school; they may require ESL support” (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 6).

1.2.2 ESL Parents’ Night

The term was defined at the beginning of the thesis. The ESL Parents’ Night, which is being examined, has a long tradition in the ESL Department of a secondary school in Vancouver, Canada. Since 1988, the ESL Department has organized an annual
Parents' Night to explain to parents how the ESL program prepared ESL students for mainstream classes. At the meetings, teachers explained how they taught the English language, the content area knowledge and skills within the context of a Canadian school culture. Former and current ESL students also presented topics regarding Canadian educational and cultural norms (see the section on the History of ESL Parents' Night in Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion).

1.2.3 English Learning Centre (ELC)

The ELC is a transitional program from ESL to mainstream. It is designed to provide language support services to students whose level of English proficiency reflects comprehension and vocabulary development beyond the scope of students at the ESL level. The program reviews and develops those language skills previously introduced in the ESL program; as well it emphasizes higher orders of literate thinking skills, communicating skills, reading skills, and writing skills. Increased knowledge of the structure of the English language is another objective of the ELC.

1.2.4 Communication between School and Home

Communication, or goutong in Chinese, is defined as “the process by which we understand others and in turn endeavour to be understood by them. It is dynamic, constantly changing and shifting in response to the total situation” (Littlejohn, 1992, cited in Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998, p. 5).

Communication between school and home points to such activities as conducting
home visits, surveys, face-to-face communications, parent council meetings, the use of consulting hot-lines, and the use of child-transmitted notes, memos, report cards, publications, phone calls, and non-verbal communications. This study deals with complex issues related to face-to-face communications between teachers and parents at the ESL Parents’ Night.

1.2.5 Chinese Educational Culture

The notion of culture embraces a range of topics, processes, and differences. Culture is usually defined as shared feelings, thinking, norms, and values that guide people’s behaviour (Tayeb, 1994). Chinese educational culture refers to the educational cultures of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. This is the educational culture the parent participants in the present study brought with them to Canada. This is not to say that the Chinese are a homogeneous cultural group. In fact, there are significant differences in the political, economic, social, and educational systems between China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and thus caution in generalizations about Chinese education is needed (Garrott, 1995). However, these three groups do share a common traditional Confucius educational culture, such as the Four Books and Five Classics1, and a common written language. Hawkins (1998) even claims Confucianism is the glue that holds Korea, Japan, and China together in education. While there are of course educational reforms in Chinese societies, it

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1 The four books refer to The great learning (daxue); The doctrine of the mean (zhongyoung); The analects of Confucius (lunyu), and Mencius (menzi). The five books are The book of songs (shijing); The book of history (shujing); The book of changes (yijing); The book of rites (lijing); and The spring and autumn annals (chunqiu). These classics “which viewed acquiring wisdom as the path to personal and social integrity, have traditionally served as the foundations of learning throughout Chinese history” (Ping, 1995, p. 37).
is this Confucius tradition that still shapes today’s educational cultures in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

Other researchers have used Chinese to refer to Chinese from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Beckett, 1999; Leung, 2000b; Liang, 1998; McKay & Wong, 1996). In addition, several local immigrant organizations such as the United Chinese Community Enrichment Services Society (S.U.C.C.E.S.S, 2001), Chinese Cultural Centre, and Chinese Parents’ Associations in British Columbia act on behalf of all Chinese immigrants including those from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in educational and other matters (Beckett, 1999). This evidence clearly shows that in both the academic and public worlds, it is legitimate to view the immigrant Chinese parents from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as a cultural group with shared characteristics. Essentially, the focus of the study is not on the individual differences within the group but on their interpretations of education and of Parents’ Night as a social representation (see the section on Data Presentation in Chapter 3 for detailed discussion), which the researcher believes has transcended geographical and political boundaries.

1.2.6 China and Hong Kong

The researcher is aware that Hong Kong returned to China in 1997. She refers to it as a separate territory because at the beginning of the study, Hong Kong was still under the British rule.
1.2.7 Discourse Analysis

For Harré and Gillett (1994), discourse is any intentional use of language. They argue that discourses contain sociocultural knowledge of people engaged in linguistic exchanges, through which people display their attitudes and create a social status. The researcher is aware that discourse analysis is conducted in a variety of disciplines with different research traditions (see van Dijk, 1985, for his four-volume handbook on discourse analysis). This study takes Schiffrin’s (1994) definition of discourse analysis. Schiffrin considers discourse analysis as dealing with such tasks as identifying and analyzing discourse produced by people for certain purposes, interpreting its social, cultural, and personal meanings, and justifying our interpretations of those meanings for the participants involved (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 42).

1.2.8 Text

Texts are specific examples of discourses. According to Halliday (1999b), text refers to “all the instances of language that you listen to and read, and that you produce yourself in speaking and in writing” (p. 7).

1.3 Research Problems

This section will discuss briefly the research problems. Canadian schools have become increasingly multilingual and multicultural. Schools need to respond to the needs of the diverse student and parent populations (Goldring, 1993; Goldring & Rallis, 1993). Students may have formal schooling that is significantly different in content or process
from the norms in North American public schools (Vancouver School Board, 1996a). The Canadian K-12 ESL population, unlike the French immersion student population, includes considerable numbers of students at risk of educational failure (Watt & Roessingh, 1994). In a review about immigrant children's school performance, Bhatnagar (1976) concludes that, on the whole, immigrant children's attainment at school was considerably less than that of the indigenous population. They may have difficulty in adjusting to the school environment. There is a consensus among researchers that building parent-school partnership in education improves immigrant children's academic achievement (McCaleb, 1994; Swap, 1993). Increasingly, teachers are being asked to work closely with ESL parents. There have been many studies describing the effectiveness of mainstream parental participation in students' educational achievement (e.g., Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein, 1991; Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993; Schneider & Coleman, 1993; Swap, 1993). However, little is known about communication between ESL parents and teachers.

Research also reveals that the limited communication between ESL parents and teachers is a serious problem confronting educators (British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 1994b; Ghuman & Wong, 1989; Gougeon, 1993; Li, 2000; Nieto, 1996; Salzberg, 1998; Yao, 1988). In addition to language barriers, other factors work against smooth communication between ESL parents and schools. Many ESL parents may not understand how the Canadian school system differs from theirs or how the classroom is operated. They have little communication with schools besides the annual routine of parent-teacher conferences after report cards. Cultural conflict over child-rearing and
differing systems of values also disturb many parents (Yao, 1988).

Parents may have different views of education. For example, Salzberg’s (1998) study reveals that Taiwanese immigrant parents were not satisfied with the ESL program which was without clear external markers for achievement or criteria for advancement. Parents wanted their children to move as soon as possible into mainstream classes where they would receive grades and credits. The research conducted by Ghuman and Wong (1989) again indicates that the Chinese immigrant parents from Hong Kong, according to their study, tended to prefer greater use of testing, more intensive homework, and the concept of teacher as disciplinarian, urging students forward to greater academic progress. Gougeon (1993) finds Chinese parents were distrustful of the Canadian school system. They were suspicious about the lack of discipline and lack of national entrance examinations. They were confused about the significance of credentials and confused about Canadian-style teaching and learning. According to one teacher, “as [ESL] parents, I think they may feel very disappointed in the Canadian system. They do not view this as real learning” (p. 265). Teachers, on the other hand, believed they had the obligation to provide immigrant students with English language proficiency and knowledge of Canadian culture with the current ESL methodologies (Gougeon, 1993). Teachers also expressed a major concern about the “unrealistic expectations of some parents of ESL students, in particular the demand that students be integrated into regular classes earlier than the ESL specialists deemed appropriate” (British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, 1994a, p. 47).

Parents may also have different assumptions about home-school communication. Yao (1988) explains that Asian parents seldom initiate contact with school as they see
communication with teachers as a check-up on teachers, and this is culturally disrespectful. Most Asian parents believe that they are responsible for nurturing and educating their children at home, not at school. On the contrary, many teachers may feel it is difficult to get ESL parents involved in the education of their children because “it was a result of a lack of interest on the part of the parent rather than a language barrier” (Pieronek & Chuter, 1983, p. 219). Research seems to suggest a complexity of Chinese parents’ and Canadian teachers’ views, potential conflict between parents and teacher because of the cultural chasm, as well as the difficulty of negotiation of such conflict.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate qualitatively the communication processes between ESL teachers and parents through a focal communication event, Parents’ Night, when they discuss their different views of ESL programs and education in general. First, the study examines the teachers’ and parents’ perspectives of the ESL program. Specifically, it explores the potential differences between the key educational concepts and approaches held by Canadian ESL teachers and by Chinese parents. Second, an attempt is made to examine how the teachers approach Parents’ Night, or more specifically, the teachers’ strategies or degree of success for mitigating these differences. It also explores how the parents react to Parents’ Night. Third, the study investigates the potential difficulties of intercultural negotiation of conflict between teachers and parents. The following three research questions thus form the basis of the present study.

1. What are teachers’ and parents’ perspectives of the ESL program and
1.5 Significance of the Study

Answers to the above research questions will provide much needed information that can be helpful for ESL parent-teacher communication. The study is significant in a number of ways. First, it builds upon knowledge of parental attitudes and beliefs concerning educational practices for immigrant ESL students. ESL parent voice is not always heard or solicited (Calgary Board of Education, 2000). The present study reveals that parents are very concerned with the ESL program. Parents’ dissatisfaction can push matters in many directions. It is noted, for example, that ESL and bilingual programs were discontinued in England and in California. If program closures expand to other areas, ESL could disappear as a distinct profession.

In addition, this study looks into the communication processes where these attitudes and beliefs are at issue. It will be shown that there are not only major differences of understanding and belief between immigrant parents and schools but also, and most importantly, that immigrant parent-teacher communication processes are themselves problematic, placing the resolution of these differences in doubt. In other words, it appears that the process is flawed, so that greater opportunity for communication is unlikely to produce solutions, and may indeed make the situation worse.
Furthermore, this study is meaningful to the researcher. Born and raised in China, educated both in China and in Canada, the researcher began to learn English as a foreign language in her early teens, then taught English in a Chinese university. She has an in-depth knowledge of education, especially language education in China, and she has acquired an in-depth knowledge of language education in Canada. She is herself an immigrant parent with a son in the B. C. school system. She is active in her son’s education, learning with him to become confident in Canadian schools and society. Her language learning/teaching, cultural background, and parenting experience may allow her to explore ESL programs from the multiple perspectives of a student, parent, teacher, and researcher. In addition, her personal experience of communicating with schools in the past six years may enable her to understand better the immigrant parents who go through a similar process. Furthermore, the fact that she shares a similar linguistic and cultural background with the parent participants in the study may allow her to obtain more and even different kinds of information than a researcher could from another linguistic and cultural background (see Beckett, 1999, for a similar point).

1.6 Theoretical Framework

So far, the study introduces a brief background to communication between ESL teachers and parents, the definitions of key terms used in the study, an outline of the research problems, and a statement of research purpose and significance of the study. In this section, some related theories will be reviewed to position the present study.
Theories guide researchers to generate research questions, provide conceptual frameworks in phrasing questions, and reformulating research questions (McMillan and Schumacher, 1993; Pierce, 1995). Theories also inform the procedures, methods, and approaches researchers use to carry out research projects. It is thus significant to position research in relation to theory.

1.6.1 Learning Organization

One of the theoretical frameworks that guide the study is that of learning organization. This study views the school as a learning organization where teachers and parents have the potential to negotiate a common agenda and to learn how to learn together. Learning organization is a concept enunciated by Senge (1990). Realizing the limitations of our illusion that the world is created of separate and unrelated forces, Senge (1990) argues that we need to

...build ‘learning organizations,’ organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. (p. 3)

Following Senge, the researcher regards schools and their wider educational communities not just as organizations which promote student learning, but as learning organizations which themselves can learn. The researcher believes that educational and social institutions “need to move beyond a concentration on second language learning by the individual. They need to recognize that educational tasks may be given culturally divergent interpretations; that teachers, students and parents may have culturally
divergent views of the educational agenda; that therefore schools, as discourse communities, have an urgent need to become learning organizations” (Mohan et al., 1996, p. 1)

Organizational learning changes the theories or “models or reality” held by the participants. For Senge, mental models are “deeply ingrained assumptions … that influence how we understand the world and how we take action” (1990, p. 8). Argyris, who has worked with mental models and organizational learning for thirty years, puts it this way: “Although people do not [always] behave congruently with their espoused theories [what they say], they do behave congruently with their theories-in-use [their mental models]” (cited in Senge, 1990, p. 175). Senge’s concept of mental models is useful for exploring the important obstacles to ESL parent-teacher communication, the differing cultural assumptions about the ESL program, and its rationale held by teachers and parents.

Parents’ Night is a central process for the school of the present study as a learning organization. One of the mandates of the school is to encourage parent understanding and participation and promote development of a sense of community through Parents’ Night. Creating a multicultural, multilingual learning organization is complex. What dilemmas and conflicts exist in attempts to create a successful multicultural, multilingual learning organization comprised of two linguistic/cultural sub-communities? How do the discourse practices of these sub-communities interact to resolve or compound problematic issues at Parents’ Night? Taylor (1994) is correct in stating that the problematic nature of communication in multicultural communities is being recognized.
1.6.2 Multicultural Negotiation

Another theoretical framework used in this study is Taylor’s (1994, 1997) “diversity dialogue”. Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher, published several books on negotiating the differences in the situation between Quebec and the rest of Canada. In *The politics of recognition* (1994) Taylor argues that individual identities are socially and culturally constructed. He insists that in order to affirm individuals’ equal dignity, we must recognize the worth of different cultures. To him, respect for other cultures without recognition of their worth is inconsistent with the view that selves are socially constituted (Strike, 1996). Taylor challenges the notion of “this is how we do things here.” Instead, he offers us an approach of fused horizons. He asks us to

...learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture. The “fusion of horizons” operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate these contrasts. (p. 67)

Taylor takes on the problem of how two groups with different cultural viewpoints can communicate with each other and possibly negotiate some agreement (detailed discussions are given in the section on Taylor’s multicultural negotiation in Chapter 2). Following Taylor, this study intends to compare and contrast the views of parents and teachers of the ESL program and associated beliefs and their views of the parent-teacher communication process at Parents’ Nights. In the process of developing new vocabularies of comparison, it is hoped that teachers and parents will come to a better understanding of what they mean by the “best” education for ESL students, and that both sides will
A second framework related to intercultural negotiation is that of Ting-Toomey (1997). Ting-Toomey's work particularly applies to Chinese intercultural negotiation in circumstances of conflict. A notable feature of Ting-Toomey's theoretical stance is the idea that strategies for dealing with conflict vary with culture. Hence in an intercultural negotiation, the parties may not only be in conflict about substantive issues. They may also have culturally different strategies for dealing with conflict (see the section on Negotiation of Intercultural Conflict in chapter 2 for a detailed discussion).

Finally, the broadest framework that will be applied to intercultural negotiation is Halliday's (1999b) framework for text in context. He regards text or discourse as being located in a context of situation and a context of culture (see the section on Text and Context in Functional Linguistics in chapter 3 for a detailed discussion).

1.6.3 Theories of Language

In order to understand the possible position teachers and parents take in judging the ESL program, one must understand the dominant theories of language. This section reviews two opposing views of language: in Schiffrin's words, "formal (or structural) and functional" paradigms (1994, p. 20). Kress (1985), on the other hand, contrasts functional and formal views in terms of "social" and "traditional linguistic" approach:

Perhaps it will help to characterize the latter [the more traditional linguistic approach] in a few sentences. Within the discipline of linguistic there is a strong and still dominant strand which regards the study of phonology and syntax and their theoretical treatment as 'real' linguistics. This strand asserts the autonomy of linguistics, in terms of its theories, methodologies and subject matter. The
approach is characterized in journals such as Language, Journal of Linguistics, Linguistic Inquiry. In the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, this approach was epitomized by the work of Chomsky and of the theory of Transformational Grammar. Another strand has always emphasized the social dimensions of language... The theoretical work of Michael Halliday is in that tradition. In the mid-1960s, ... Dell Hymes introduced the concept of ‘communicative competence’ in reaction to Chomsky’s narrow and asocial definition of linguistic competence. Hymes’ work had been most important both as a corrective and an alternative theory of language as a social phenomenon. (p. 98)

Formal theorists such as Chomsky (1957, 1965) regard language as a set of rules governing the use of words, phrases, sentences, syntax, and notions. They tend to focus on language structure and grammatical competence. In doing so, they ignore the social context of language.

1.6.3.1 Functional Views

In contrast, the functionalists emphasize the social dimensions of language. The functional paradigm includes a number of different points of view (e.g., Givon, 1989; Grimes, 1975; Halliday, 1985, 1994; Hymes, 1974). Goodman and Goodman (1990) discuss the functional view of language, best represented by the influential work of Michael Halliday (1975, 1985, 1994):

In his study of language development, Michael Halliday (1975) uses the phrase “learning how to mean.” He describes the development of a range of personal/social functions which then stimulate the development of the forms of language. As learners experience the wide variety of functions and forms of language, they internalize the way their society uses language to represent meaning. So they are learning language at the same time they are using language to learn. They also are learning about language. But all three kinds of language learning must be simultaneous (Halliday, 1980)...Halliday...has a social theory of language. In his systemic-functional view, the very form that language takes derives from the fact that it is used socially and that, through its use, language users, including children, create and learn the language conventions or social rules.
of language to make communication easy and effective.

It is equally important to recognize the central role that language plays in human learning. Language makes it possible to share experience, to link our minds and produce a social vicarious experience through language. (p. 231)

Halliday’s functional view is concerned with “how people use language with each other in accomplishing everyday social life” (Eggins, 1994, p. 2). This interest in language use, as Eggins summarizes it, leads Hallidayan functional linguists to make four main theoretical claims about language:

...that language is functional; that its function is to make meanings; that these meanings are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged; and that the process of using language is a semiotic process, a process of making meanings by choosing. (p. 2, emphasis in original)

The present study takes the Hallidayan view of functional linguistics that regards language primarily as a resource that people use to make meaning (Halliday & Martin, 1993). The meanings are socially and culturally constructed. This view is useful for the present study in understanding teachers’ and parents’ interpretations of the ESL program at Parents’ Night.

1.6.4 Theories of Language Learning

Our assumptions about language learning are influenced by our assumptions about language. The formalist view of language is associated with the language acquisition approach to language learning, whereas the functionalist view of language is associated with the language socialization approach to language learning. The two views have
different emphases. While researchers of language acquisition focus on the acquisition of
the language 'code', researchers of language socialization attempt to explain language
learning in social contexts, where an understanding of meaning and social context is
acquired along with the language system.

1.6.4.1 Language Socialization

Language socialization (Halliday, 1986; Ochs, 1991; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) is
an important development in thinking about language learning. It is a view of language
learning which sees knowledge of language and knowledge of culture developing
simultaneously. Language socialization treats language as the focus of learning as well as
the medium of learning (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Following Mohan et al. (1996), this
study regards organizational learning as a language socialization process. Here we move
from learning by the individual to learning by the organization. What do organizations
learn through the discourse processes of Parents' Night? Language socialization applies to
Parents' Night in two ways: to what is discussed and to how it is discussed. The subject
matter of Parents' Night, the ESL program and its policy, is a language socialization
process of both language and culture, particularly the educational culture of Canadian
schools. Its social action, Parents' Night itself, is a language socialization process of
parent-teacher communication in the Canadian community which differs somewhat from
parents' prior experiences in their home societies.
1.6.5 Theories of Social Science Research

In addition to the conceptual framework of learning organization, negotiation of intercultural conflicts in a multilingual situation, language socialization, the study also takes Harré’s (1993) ontological assumptions about social science research. In their discussion on competing paradigms in qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln (1994) emphasize that it is significant for social science researchers to articulate the basic beliefs (paradigms) which guides their inquiry. For them, “questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigms” (p. 105). Harré (1993) also stresses the importance of a clear belief system in social science research. He suggests that before researchers decide which techniques of inquiry to use and how to exercise them, they need to examine their ontology and epistemology regarding human beings and human interaction. Researchers need to ask, for example, “Are human beings to be taken to be active agents who use their social knowledge jointly to accomplish certain ends? Or are they information-processing automata, the behaviors of which are the effects of causal processes?” (Harré, 1993, p. 11). For more discussion on this issue, see Anderson (1994), Denzin and Lincoln (1994), and Eisner (1998).

1.6.5.1 Human Beings as Information-processing Automata

Harré (1993) criticizes the positivist research paradigm that perceives human beings as information-processing automata and human behavior as “the effect of a casual process, triggered by the stimuli to which the subjects are exposed. The job of the experimenter is to look for correlations between elementary stimuli and elementary
behaviors" (p. 14) and to identify central tendencies by using statistical analysis. One of the limitations of this paradigm lies in its meaning problem. The experimenter assumes the stimuli created by the experimenter have the same meaning for all participants, and they have the same meaning to the participants as the experimenter intends. However, as Harré explains, citing Mixon's (1971) research, different participants may have various interpretations to the same stimuli, and they may have a different meaning to the set of stimuli from that intended by the experimenter. Thus, while the positivist paradigm may be appropriate to investigate automatic or habitual behavior, other approaches are needed to examine, as in the present study, different human interpretations and actions of Parents' Night.

1.6.5.2 Human Beings as Active Agents

Harré (1993) argues for the hermeneutic paradigm that treats human beings as active agents and human behaviors as "the structured product of the joint actions of intelligent and knowledgeable agents acting to further some end or other. It is not the effects of causes" (p. 107). The goal of the researcher is not to discover cause-and-effect relations, but to make sense of an event or situation by understanding the conventions and rules (social representations) that are accepted as valid in the actors' community. Social representations are social images, ideas, or theories of the world shared within a group (Thommen, Crannach, & Ammann, 1992; Kruse & Schwarz, 1992). Kruse and Schwarz (1992) comment that this knowledge is often taken for granted, and that it "serves as a common interpretative schema as well as a means of communication" (p. 23). Thommen,
Crannach, and Ammann (1992) also maintain that social presentations of a group
determine individual action, and individual action in other words is socially constructed.

This study takes on the ontological assumption of the hermeneutic paradigm
which views human beings as active social agents and human behaviors as the product of
joint action of human agents acting intentionally, according to local norms, to achieve
certain goals (Cranach, 1992; Secord, 1990). The focus of the present study is on
sociocultural conventions rather than individual differences. Furthermore, the study
considers learning as a socio-linguistic and sociocultural process, and the manner in which
the parent and the teacher interpret the learning process. Are their interpretations similar
or different? Do they conflict? As active agents, what ends (policies, agendas) are the
teacher and the parent pursuing? Do they conflict, and how does the learning process fit
in with them? Do they talk together to try to create a common policy? How do they
implement their policies as they manage the learning process? What problems do they see
and how do they respond to them?

1.6.6 Positioning the Study

In sum, this study views schools as learning organizations that need to recognize
that teachers and parents may have culturally divergent views of the educational agenda.
It is important to recognize, understand, and negotiate the differences through “diversity
dialogue.” The study takes a functional perspective and views language as a resource for
meaning making and language use as conditioned by its social and cultural context. It
perceives organizational learning as a language socialization process. Language socialization applies to Parents’ Night in two ways: to what is discussed and to how it is discussed. The subject matter of Parents’ Night, the ESL program and its policy, is a language socialization process of both language and culture, particularly the educational culture of Canadian schools. Its social action, Parents’ Night itself, is a language socialization process of parent-teacher communication in the Canadian community which differs somewhat from parents’ prior experiences in their home countries. By taking the ontological stance that human beings are active agents, the study is open to potential differences in parents’ and teachers’ interpretations of the ESL program and Parents’ Night. Particularly, it considers Parents’ Night as a site of potential tensions in which Chinese parents and ESL teachers may hold multiple and conflicting beliefs and goals and may act differently.

It is important to note that the theoretical positioning of the present study is based on the nature of the research topic. In so doing, the study is by no means assuming that other theoretical perspectives are not valid. According to Billig (1996, p. 123), “between the two opposed interpretations, both are seen as equally reasonable” (emphasis in the original text). Rather, the focus of this study determines that the theoretical perspectives adopted here are appropriate for the study.

1.7 Overview of Other Chapters

Chapter 2 of this thesis reviews the literature concerning ESL parent-teacher communication. It discusses the impact of parents on ESL and bilingual education
programs, and suggests the importance of ESL parent-teacher communication in the education of ESL students. It explores the factors that may influence their communication, including Chinese parents' and ESL teachers' different views of ESL learning and their different expectations regarding home-school communication. The chapter concludes with a model of intercultural conflict negotiation which may help us to understand how teachers and parents negotiate their different interpretations of second language education of immigrant students at Parents’ Night, and the difficulties of such a negotiation.

Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology adopted for the present study. It shows that Parents’ Night is a socially constructed activity and contains many sub-activities within wider sociocultural contexts. The researcher argues that the nature of the research topic determines that qualitative research is appropriate for the study. Thus, a variety of qualitative data collection methods such as participant observations, interviews, focus group discussions, and documents are employed for the study. The chapter then discusses how the study combines qualitative research methods with a functional linguistic approach to discourse analysis by investigating the multiple layers of Parents’ Night as a sociocultural activity, followed by an examination of the trustworthiness of the study.

As noted earlier, language socialization applies to Parents’ Night in two ways: to what is discussed and to how it is discussed. Chapter 4 presents and discusses the possibility for the former. Specifically, it focuses on the findings regarding teachers’ and parents’ perspectives of the ESL program, its policy and the education of immigrant
students. It discusses what their differences were and offers some possible explanations of what accounted for these differences.

Chapter 5 presents and discusses the latter one, that is, how teachers and parents negotiate their differences. It examines the nature of Parents' Night as a speech event and social activity. It asks whether teachers and parents apply different frames of interpretation (expectation) to the messages of Parents' Night. Following Taylor's multicultural negotiation and Ting-Toomey's Chinese conflict management, the chapter explores variation in interaction in different parts of Parents' Night and discusses various conditions that may have helped or hindered the intercultural negotiation of the potential conflicts between teachers and parents.

Chapter 6 summarizes the findings of the study and discusses their implications for future research and for ESL parent-teacher communication. It points out that the negotiation of intercultural conflicts is a complex undertaking. Implications of the research include both the need to expand the boundaries of multicultural negotiation, language socialization, and learning organization, as well as practical suggestions for improving intercultural communication between parents and teachers. The chapter concludes with an awareness that this thesis presents a partial picture, pregnant with reflective questions for future research.
CHAPTER 2: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF ESL PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION

2.1 Introduction

The importance of the home-school link in children’s education is strongly supported by research (McCaleb, 1994; Swap, 1993). Parents and teachers are being encouraged to forge partnerships (Sleeter & Montecinos, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 2000). As noted earlier, a major challenge for many multilingual and multicultural schools has been the communication with ESL parents who may have different expectations regarding the home-school link and different views on education. This chapter reviews the literature concerning ESL parent-teacher communication. It discusses first the impact of parents on ESL and bilingual education programs, suggesting the importance of ESL parent-teacher communication in the education of ESL students. The chapter goes on to explore the factors that affect their communication, identifying some different views of parents and teachers on ESL learning. The chapter concludes with a model of intercultural conflict negotiation, as suggested in the literature, which may help to understand how teachers and parents negotiate their differences.

2.2 Impact of Parents on ESL and Bilingual Education Programs

The link a school has with ESL parents needs to be seen in the wider context of the politics of ESL policy in the broader community. For example, the Calderdale decision was formulated in England in the 1980s (Calderdale Report, 1986; Leung & Franson,
2001) by a group of ESL parents who successfully sued a school district because they felt that their children were being "ghettoized" in an ESL program. On the basis of this one group, the Ministry of Education prohibited ESL programs throughout England, and ESL teachers now have to work as support teachers within content classes.

In North America, the Unz Initiative (California Proposition 227, approved in 1998) in California State (McAdam, 1998; TESOL Advocacy, 1998), passed with a 63 percent approval and eliminated all forms of ESL instruction and bilingual programs except immersion in that State. Dissatisfaction and misunderstanding of some of those closely associated with these programs were factors there too, with numbers of Hispanic parents voting against ESL and bilingual education. Parents believed that their children were not learning English quickly enough. This is like closing down math if parents think their children are not learning math quickly enough. In the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada, the Vancouver and Richmond School Boards have both been approached with proposals for traditional schools by ESL parents (The Globe and Mail, February 1, 1999). The message from this is clear: Even if the majority of parents are satisfied with ESL programs, it is important to reach smaller groups who are not satisfied and may not fully understand the program.

2.2.1 Importance of ESL Parent-Teacher Communication

There is much empirical evidence that highlights the effectiveness of parental participation in the school achievement of ESL students (Berryman, 1983; Comer, 1986; Early & Gunderson, 1993; Moll, 1992; Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982). ESL
students' school achievement and social growth are significantly increased when schools actively encourage parental participation. For example, Comer (1986) reports that students' academic achievement, attendance, and behaviour improved greatly after their parents had participated in what the schools were doing. One parent in each classroom worked 10 hours a week at minimum wage as an assistant to the teacher. Comer states that students in the school with a meaningful parental participation program ranked third out of the 26 elementary schools in New Haven and they were achieving seven months above grade level.

Tizard et al. (1982) also find that collaboration between teachers and parents could improve ESL children's reading ability. Tizard and his colleagues conducted a two-year experiment in the borough of Haringey, a working-class area of London, England. One group of children were given additional reading instruction in small groups several times a week by a trained reading specialist. Other groups of children were asked to read books sent by the school to the parents on a regular basis. Many parents in the district spoke Greek or Bengali as their first language, and little or no English. Tizard and his associates found that children who read to their parents made significantly greater progress in reading than those who were given special reading instruction.

Heath (1983), in her ethnographic investigation of the cultural context of literacy development in three communities in the Piedmont Carolinas, finds that the positive value of orientation toward involving the communities and families promoted literacy for children from these communities. Her study documents how children of these culturally different communities learned to use language in their homes and communities, and how
the teachers' knowledge of the children’s ways with words enabled them to bring these ways into their classroom. According to her observation, “knowledge in their classrooms moved on a two-way path, from the community to the school and from the school to the community” (p. 34). Building on what Moll (1992) calls “funds of knowledge” from their home culture motivates minority students to acquire new knowledge and improve their self-esteem. The significance of active parental participation in supporting ESL children’s success at school becomes clear. Schools should therefore actively seek to build partnerships with minority parents that encourage them to participate with the school in promoting their children’s academic progress (Ashworth, Cummins, & Handscombe, 1989).

2.3 Barriers to ESL Parent-Teacher Communication

There have been many studies describing the effectiveness of parental participation in students’ educational achievement. Yet little is known about the communication between ESL parents and teachers. Communicating with parents is not easy. Communicating with parents whose first language is not English and whose children are struggling academically adds another dimension to the interaction between home and school because of cultural differences. Many educators are underprepared to work with a diverse parent population. The lack of preparation that teachers have regarding the demographic realities of the percentages of ESL students and parents, whom they will now have to face, is well documented in literature (Clair, 1995, 1998; González & Darling-Hammond, 1997; McKeon, 1994; O’Byrne, 2001). Many of the classroom
teachers are trained for when ESL students are not a majority. Many teachers have little or no idea about how to work effectively with parents from different cultural backgrounds (Faltis, 1997). Similarly, Constantino (1994) reports that the ESL teachers see a need for more parental involvement but don’t know how to proceed. Many factors work against better school-home communication, including family demands of parents and teachers, cultural differences, anxiety and mistrust of school by parents, inability to help with homework, receiving only bad news at interviews, and inconvenient meeting time (Moles, 1982).

2.3.1 Language

For ESL parents, language is the major barrier to communicating with teachers. British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (1993b) reports that many parents of ESL students tried to communicate responsibly with schools but were hampered by their limited English and the lack of translation services available. As Scarcella (1990, p. 162) explains, “frequently, [ESL] parents avoid going to schools because they cannot communicate in English, and there is no one at school who speaks their native language.” Scarcella sees a connection between poor ESL parent-teacher communication and parent’s lack of English. Similarly, Ghuman and Wong (1989) report that Chinese parents regarded their lack of understanding English as a great obstacle to understanding their children’s education. One parent noted:

Language and the nature of my job make it difficult for me to take part in parents’ day. I would only know how to stand in front of his teacher and smile nicely. I
communicate with the teacher through letters. My elder daughter is my interpreter. She also explains to me about her school report. I only know A is excellent, B is good. (p. 136)

On the other hand, the school system is often uncommitted to ESL parents by the predominance of the use of English in most formal school-parent communication. In his preliminary study of the relations between urban schools in Alberta and immigrant families, Gougeon (1993) reports that ESL parents often depended on their children to interpret mail, answer the telephone, translate the newsletter, and interpret at parent-teacher conferences at school. Asking ESL students to act as a translator may be problematic as they are learning English themselves. Poor language skills may prevent them from understanding the subtleties of coded speech in the school. In addition, in her study of 64 Chinese- and Vietnamese-American bilingual students who acted as language brokers\(^2\) between schools and their parents, Tse (1996) finds that while they perceived the benefits of increased independence and maturity, the minority students felt that brokering experiences brought additional burden. Tse concludes that "brokers are making educational decisions independently which may or may not be in the best interest of students" (p. 493). Furthermore, in Latino culture, for example, asking "young children to translate for their parents during conferences grates against a cultural norm" (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 52). Similarly, Anderson and Higgs (1976) report that Portuguese parents find it "much more difficult" to discipline children who broker for them outside the family (cited in Goldstein, 1994, p. 37). Finally, the use of jargon also hinders effective parent-

\(^2\) "Unlike formal interpreters and translators, brokers mediate, rather than transmit, information" (Tse, 1996, p. 485).
teacher communication even though some ESL parents are bilingual (Lauer, 1992).

2.3.2 Unfamiliarity with the School System

Unfamiliarity with the host country school system is another barrier that prevents parents from participating in school activities (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Gibson, 1987; Olson, 1990). In her study of the academic achievement of Punjabi immigrants in an American high school, Gibson (1987) reports that many parents had little understanding of the American system of education. Few were able to help with homework or course selection. As recent arrivals who were struggling for economic survival, they had no time to get involved in school activities. Even long-time residents did not understand what their children were actually doing in school or whether or not they were making progress. Like Gibson, Delgado-Gáitán (1990), in examining the family lifestyle of Mexican children in the United States, also find that parents were unable to offer their children academic advice because they were usually unacquainted with the school system. Similarly, Leung (2000a) reports that Chinese immigrant parents are not familiar with the Canadian school systems in Montreal. They also have difficulty in understanding and accepting the ways of teaching and the curriculum used in the schools.

2.3.3 Teachers' Attitudes

However, many ESL teachers regard the lack of parent involvement as being disinterested or unconcerned about the placement and curriculum of their children. The
nation-wide survey of ESL programming in Canadian schools (Pieronek & Chuter, 1983) shows that it was difficult to get ESL parents involved in the education of their children. Teachers felt that “it was a result of a lack of interest on the part of the parent rather than a language barrier” (p. 219). Delgado-Gaitan (1990) also reports a similar view of teachers on parent involvement. One teacher commented, “some parents just don’t want to take the time to help their kids. Other parents work just as many hours but when it comes down to their kids, they’re here in a minute. Sure I feel sorry for some parents cause they just can’t get it together, but I work hard here too and they just have to learn how to cooperate” (p. 36). Delgado-Gaitan concludes that this attitude about the parents’ role in the schooling of students was a common one held by the K-6th grade bilingual teachers in the Portillo School District teacher survey.

Teachers’ attitudes towards parents and their efforts to involve parents are critical to parent participation and to school effectiveness. How much do schools really want parents, any parents, to understand the inner workings of the “system”? Williams (1981) maintains that while teachers encourage parents to help their children with homework, neither they nor their principals welcome parent participation in instruction, school governance, or curriculum development. Lynch and Stein (1982) point out that in spite of the expectation for increased parental involvement in Southern California, parents were, in fact, playing a very passive role at individual education program meetings. They conclude that parents of Caucasian children were more aware of the service offered by the school and they contributed more suggestions during meetings than parents of other cultural groups did.
In addition to the language barrier and parents’ lack of understanding of the host country school system, another major reason that prevents ESL parents from participating in the school curricular activities is that some teachers discourage their involvement (Cummins, 1986). These teachers believe that parents’ interaction with their children in their first language interferes their second language learning. Despite the fact that English is a language in which parents are not easily able to express themselves, these teachers advise ESL parents to speak English at home in order to help their children. Wong-Fillmore (1991) questions the assumption that ESL parent’s switch to English is of great help to their children’s English ability. She presents evidence and findings from a national survey study of language minority children in the United States in 1990. Over 1,000 immigrants families were surveyed to determine the extent to which family language patterns were affected by their children’s learning of English. The findings suggest that the loss of a first language, particularly when it is the only language spoken by parents, can be very harmful to the children, their families, and to society as a whole. As Scarcella (1990) explains, “when minority parents switch to English, they often deprive their children of exposure to valuable input in their first language, eradicate their children’s cultural identities, and expose their children to an imperfect variety of English” (p. 164). This view is supported by Cummins (1989), who argues that the prejudice of these teachers is mentally and culturally disabling of minority students (cited in Scarcella, 1990, p. 164). If parents perceive that the schools are doing such a disservice to their children, then it would profoundly affect the way in which communication with institutions is viewed.
2.3.4 Different Views of Education

In order to understand the communication process between teachers and Chinese immigrant parents, one must understand Chinese parents’ views on schools and teaching. Anderson (1995) reminds us that “different cultural groups have different ways of teaching and learning and different views of what it means to teach and to learn” (p. 514). Gunderson (in press) also notes “what seems true across cultures and political affiliation is that parents, teachers, and other interested adults seek ‘the best’ for students. However, what is true both within and between cultures and groups is that there are fundamental disagreements as to what constitutes ‘the best.’”

2.3.4.1 Two Prevailing Views of Chinese Education

In this section I will review the two prevailing views of Chinese education, given the fact that the study deals with Chinese parents. In the following sections I will turn my discussion to Chinese teachers’, students’, and parents’ views of Western language teaching, particularly Chinese immigrant parents’ views of ESL learning in the West, in contrast with Western teachers’ beliefs of ESL learning.

There have been many opinion papers and books describing authors’ perceptions of Chinese education, but there is surprisingly little empirical work on teachers’, students’ and parents’ perceptions of Chinese education. Chinese education has been characterized in the literature as being teacher-oriented, textbook-centered, and examination-centered (Guo, 1993, 1996; Ping, 1995; Pratt, 1992). Pratt (1992) interviewed 19 Chinese scholars from the People’s Republic of China who were visiting
Canada for one year and 38 Chinese adult educators in China. He reports that his subjects perceived learning to be a process of transfer of information and skills from teacher to learner. Chinese teachers are seen as experts and specialists in certain subject areas, as providers of knowledge. Thus, the teachers' responsibility is to "deliver content" (p. 313). According to Pratt's subjects, Chinese students become consumers of knowledge and their responsibility is to absorb content. This kind of interpretation represents the dominant view of Chinese education in the West.

A growing body of literature has drawn attention to another interpretation of Chinese education (Biggs, 1991, 1996a, 1996b; Gardner, 1989; Marton, Dall'Alba & Tse 1996; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Watkins, 1996; Watkins & Biggs, 1996). Stevenson and Stigler (1992) in their research state that in the dozens of elementary schools they visited in China and Taiwan, lessons were oriented toward problem-solving rather than rote mastery of facts and procedures, and teachers make use of many different types of representational materials. Teachers, as a knowledgeable guide rather than a prime dispenser of information, stimulated students to produce, explain, and evaluate solutions to problems.

Biggs' (1991) research about approaches to learning in secondary and tertiary students in Hong Kong and Australia reports that Chinese students are not rote learners. The Western misconception that Chinese students are rote learners arises from "a mistaken interpretation of repetitive effort. Chinese students may be repetitive learners but there is no evidence that they rote learn any more than their Western counterpart" (Biggs, 1996b, p. 63). Similarly, Marton et al. (1996) interviewed 20 teacher-educators...
from China who traveled to Hong Kong to participate in a course for English language teachers. They find that these Chinese teachers believe memorization and understanding are mutually supportive, not incompatible processes. Their findings suggest that the Chinese practice of repetition could have a different purpose. Memorization can be used to deepen and develop understanding.

While Marton et al.'s research sheds light on the Chinese teachers' conceptions of learning, Gardner (1989) expands our understanding of Chinese teachers' conceptions of creativity. Gardner described how in his early visits to China to study art and music teaching, he concluded Chinese teaching was mimetic, then he came to realize the differences between Chinese and American teaching lay in beliefs about the appropriate order of learning and creativity. Chinese teachers believe in skill development first, which typically involves repetitive learning, after which there is something to be creative with, whereas American teachers believe in exploring first, then in the development of skill.

2.3.4.2 Chinese Teachers' and Students' Views of Western Language Teaching

A number of papers have discussed Chinese teaching and learning methods in relation to learning English teaching in Chinese culture (Dunkelblau, 1996; Harvey, 1985; Maley, 1983; Ping, 1995; Scovel, 1983a, 1983b; Wu, 1983; Yu, 1984). Briefly, such methods include intensive reading, grammatical analysis, use of translation, and a strong emphasis on the correction of errors (Harvey, 1985). Ping (1995) explains that intensive reading, which focuses on analyzing individual phrases and structures, learning new vocabulary, repeatedly reading sentences and texts, have been used throughout Chinese
history, and is later transferred into foreign language teaching.

It becomes not difficult to understand that Chinese students often regard the less directive teaching methods of the foreign teachers as a waste of time (Maley, 1983). Moreover, according to Guo (1996), British teachers liked to use methods such as students doing projects, group discussion, and individual presentation. Chinese students, on the other hand, found these activities interesting but ineffective. They believed that “the teacher resorted to such methods only because they [the teachers] did not prepare the work and thus want to avoid responsibility” (p. 26). Similarly, Ogbu (1995) also notes that Chinese immigrant students in the United States considered team teaching and open classroom approach as disorganized. Burnaby and Sun (1989) report in their research that Chinese teachers mentioned that “many of the activities common in communicative language teaching seemed like games rather than serious teaching. Thus, some Chinese teachers feel that they are not really teaching when they use such activities, and they expect the students to complain about them” (p. 229).

Burnaby and Sun’s research compares Chinese and Canadian contexts of English teaching. They report the views of 24 Chinese (People’s Republic of China) teachers of English on the appropriateness and effectiveness of “Western” language-teaching methods for use in Chinese situations. Their interview data show that Chinese teachers are constrained by government-controlled curriculum, traditional teaching methods, large class size, scarce resources, and pressures of examination. These teachers appear to see that on the one hand, communicative methods are suitable for the contexts and purposes of use in English-speaking countries. On the other hand, Chinese methods are suitable for the
purpose and context of learning English as a foreign language in China.

Harvey (1985) states that “understanding the grammatical framework of a language is extremely important for speakers of very different languages.” Wu (1983) also explains that for Chinese speakers, whose native language does not have the complicated formal changes that English has, it is much easier to grasp the forms of English when one goes through them progressively. However, grammar should never be taught as an end in itself but as tool to be used in communication (Rao, 1996). Additionally, learning grammar provides an essential basis on which to further develop the learner’s communicative competence.

Minami (1995) studied 30 high school students from Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea who were studying in the United States. The data show that many participants of the study felt that ESL classes provided them the opportunity to relax and relieve some of the tensions of other classes, as well as many opportunities for active participation. However, some other participants felt their ESL classes were not cognitively challenging and stimulating.

Beckett (1999) interviewed 70 Grade 8-12 secondary immigrant students from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in the Province of British Columbia, Canada. She reports that some students found the project method used in ESL programs interesting and useful in creating opportunities for them to learn technological and social skills. Yet others felt it was an overwhelming method that left them without close teacher-guidance. These students felt bored and frustrated because they did not feel they learned enough considering the amount of time they spent on this way of learning.
2.3.4.3 Chinese Immigrant Parents’ Views of ESL Learning and Education in the West

Recent efforts in the field of early literacy have investigated the epistemological issues related to the culturally divergent interpretations of learning and teaching of immigrant parents (Anderson, 1995; Anderson & Gunderson, 1997; Early & Gunderson, 1993). For example, Gunderson (in press) argues that whole language, as an extremely complex model of language learning developed by teachers, “would appear to be a pedagogical phenomenon uniquely imbued with mainstream North American cultural features.” As a result, Chinese immigrant parents from Taiwan and Hong Kong expressed discontent with the whole language program. They wanted a skill-based curriculum, much homework, and teacher-centered instruction. Anderson (1995) interviewed thirty parents selected equally from three cultural groups—Chinese Canadian, Euro-Canadian, and Indo-Canadian in Vancouver. He finds that Euro-Canadian parents were much more supportive of an emergent literacy perspective whereas Indo-Canadian and Chinese Canadian parents “unanimously... rejected some aspects of emergent literacy” (p. 275). These parents rejected invented spelling, which is a norm in Vancouver elementary public schools. In these studies Chinese parents’ views about teaching and learning are not monolithic; there is variation, though they share many of the views of other groups of immigrant parents about ESL programs. Asian immigrant parents send their children to public schools but do not trust the schools to do a satisfactory job of educating their children (Fuller & Olsen, 1998).

In another context, Ghuman and Wong (1989) interviewed 34 Chinese families in
Manchester, England, to ascertain their views on various aspects of their children’s education and schooling. Ghuman and Wong find that Chinese parents viewed education as a central part of their children’s life. This attitude is clearly represented by the following comment by a Chinese food take-away restaurant owner:

I encourage my kids to study as much as they want, it does not matter if they are sons or daughters. It doesn’t cost much to send them to school or university. I only ask them to help me during weekends. On weekdays they have to go to bed at 10 p.m. Education is more important.

These parents valued education highly, wanted more homework for their children, and preferred a stricter regime in schools. These parents interpreted self-discipline and informality in the British school as being too lax and ineffective. They also find that the ‘lack of respect’ within the English education system presents a worrying concern for the parents rooted as they were in their cultural norms. Similarly, the Chinese American parents also reported their grave concerns about the lax discipline in the schools, lack of moral education, poor mathematics training, and insufficient homework (Lee, 1991).

Again, Salzberg (1998) conducted ethnographic interviews with eight Taiwanese immigrant families in the Lower Mainland region of British Columbia, Canada, in order to examine the attitudes of parents toward the ESL learning program. Her findings show that parents were not satisfied with the holistic learner-centered approaches prevalent in Canadian schools. They also expressed discomfort with the overly long periods (most students took two to three years) spent in ESL classes without clear external markers for achievement or criteria for advancement.

Salzberg’s data demonstrate that parents were anxious to mainstream their
children as they believed second language learning was delayed through separate ESL classes. For example, one mother questioned:

If they were put in with regular students, wouldn’t they catch on naturally?! Kids learn so quickly from each other. If there are so many students and only one teacher [in ESL], then of course they learn slowly and then the time they spend in ESL is so long and then they are going from one class to another and saying, ‘it’s so easy, so easy...’ So he wastes so many years. (p. 76)

Parents also considered ESL classes as holding back the students’ learning of content area material. Another father commented: “ESL level 2 is too easy, too little homework, too little taught so he [his son] feels really relaxed, very happy but then his English as a result has not been pushed” (p. 75).

Salzberg’s work clearly represents the perceptions of Taiwanese immigrant parents on education and ESL learning. These perceptions are bound up with culturally engendered notions and values that seem to clash with those experienced in the host country. The Taiwanese immigrant parents who were interviewed tended to prefer greater use of testing, more intensive homework tied to material frequently tested, and a concept of the teacher as disciplinarian, urging students to greater academic progress as measured by such tests.

As discussed above, Chinese immigrant parents in both the British (Ghuman & Wong, 1989) and the Canadian (Salzberg, 1998) contexts have high expectations with respect to their children’s education, yet many voice mixed feelings or even frustrations in their perceptions of their children’s ESL programs. How do ESL teachers perceive immigrant parent’s concerns? Interestingly, although there are many cross-cultural studies
on parents concern over the academic achievement of their children, there seems to be no qualitative studies that focus on the interpretations of ESL teachers’ perceptions of immigrant parents’ concerns. Gougeon (1993), in the first phase of his study of the relations between urban schools and immigrant families, conducted interviews with 27 teachers in one school in Alberta, Canada. His analysis of interview data suggests that, from the teachers’ point of view, Chinese parents were distrustful of the Canadian school system. They were suspicious about the lack of discipline, and lack of national entrance exams. They were confused about the significance of credentials, and confused about Canadian style of teaching and learning. According to one teacher, “I think they [ESL parents] may feel very disappointed with the Canadian system. They do not view this as real learning” (p. 265). Gougeon’s data analysis shows that the teachers were aware that many immigrant parents criticized the laxity of the host country school system and teaching styles. Such a Canadian study is highly relevant for the present study which focuses on the perspectives of ESL teachers and parents.

In sum, Ghuman and Wong’s study examines the Hong Kong Chinese immigrant parents’ views on various aspects of their children’s education and schooling in England. Gougeon’s work represents teachers’ perceptions of ESL students, of their parents, and of the school systems in Alberta, Canada. Salzberg’s research reveals recent Taiwanese immigrant parents’ perceptions of their adolescent children’s ESL learning and academic achievement in British Columbia, Canada. There appears to be no study that examines both teachers’ and immigrant parents’ beliefs about language education and communication, nor investigates the interaction between ESL teachers and parents about
language education and communication. The research conducted by Ghuman and Wong, Salzberg, and Gougeon reveals the complexity of the views of parents and teachers, as well as the difficulty of negotiation.

2.3.4.4 Teachers' Perspectives of ESL Learning

Many teachers regard learning English as crucial for ESL students before they move to mainstream classes. Gibson's (1987) interview with teachers in one California high school reveals that many teachers believed that “success in even the slower-paced mainstream classes required at least a 6th grade command of English” (p. 296). Vancouver School Board states that “the acquisition of a new language is a long, gradual, complex and social process” (1996a, p. 9). Learning a new language takes a sustained effort. It is believed that in general, students take from one to two years to develop sufficient basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) to converse in everyday social situations. It takes from five to seven years for students to approach grade norm in cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Collier & Thomas, 1989; Cummins, 1981, 1991).

Learning a new language is also complex. A survey of ESL programming in Canadian schools (Pieronek and Chuter, 1983) shows that teachers believed that ESL programs helped language minority students acquire proficiency in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing within the shortest possible period of time. Teachers also believed that ESL classes helped students acquire basic study skills and socialize into North American school cultures, which were fundamental to their continuing education in Canada. Numerous texts of authority and research on ESL
teaching and learning (Brown, 1994; Early, 1990; Mohan, 1986; Nunan, 1993; Richards &
Lockhart, 1994; Snow & Brinton, 1997; Swan, 1985) provide educationally sound
teaching methodologies which promote critical thinking, reflective teaching,
communicative teaching methods, the integration of language and content, and cooperative
learning. ESL teachers are encouraged to use “interactive techniques” and “group or
individual self evaluations,” and to conduct “learner-centered” activities in their
classrooms (Brown, 1994; Nunan, 1993).

This section of the review indicates that Chinese parents’ notions and values
related to their children’s education, such as what constitutes academic achievement,
teachers’ and parents’ responsibilities, and students’ role in their learning, represent the
parents’ beliefs which are based upon their Chinese cultural background and experiences.
Owing to the competitive Asian “testocracy” system (Sorensen, 1994), where secondary
school and college entrances are governed by national entrance examinations in the
People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, Chinese parents place tremendous
pressure on their children and their children’s teachers. The Chinese parents tend to see
regular homework, practice tests, and strict teachers as crucial in their children’s academic
success. The immigrant Chinese parents have brought with them their culturally engrained
notions and values of education. The Chinese notions of the teacher, teaching styles, and
examination style significantly contrast with those currently prevailing in ESL
classrooms. This clash between immigrant parents and teachers indicates the complexity
of communicating the differences between Chinese immigrant parents and Western
teachers.
2.3.5 Cultural Differences of Home-School Communication

Another barrier to ESL parent-teacher communication is cultural differences about home-school communication. To study the practice of parent-teacher interaction, it is necessary to study the norms and understanding that parents and teachers bring to that practice (Harré, 1993). Communicating with schools as one type of parent involvement is a norm in North America (Campbell & Hansen, 1998; Epstein et al., 1997). Parents are expected to come to the routine parent-teacher conferences before or after they receive report cards (Wine, 2001). They are also expected to volunteer at school functions, help their children with their homework, and initiate parent-teacher meetings if they have any particular concerns.

At a local level, the School Board identifies immigrant parent involvement as an important goal in ESL students’ education. For example, the Vancouver School Board states:

As with all students, the collaborative effort of parents and school staff to educate students facilitates with overall development. Where culturally appropriate, family and community members should be involved in students’ education. Even though the involvement of immigrant and refugee parents in our schools represents a significant challenge, it is a worthwhile goal. (Vancouver School Board, 1996a, pp. 9-10)

This is consistent with the ESL policy prescribed by the Ministry of Education in British Columbia:

Parents play a vital role in the education of their children by working in partnership with educators. Parental support is an important component of an ESL students’ education. Parents are encouraged to actively participate in the learning process. (Ministry of Education, BC, 1999, p. 8)

The Vancouver School Board also makes the following recommendations to the
communication between ESL teachers and parents:

- That the improvement of communication with ESL parents be a district priority, and
- That current communication models and methods be reviewed in light of existing research and knowledge, and be revised accordingly, and
- That the VSB establish more extensive and regular relations with the multilingual communities of Vancouver on a school specific and district-wide basis. (Vancouver School Board, 1996b, pp. 22-23)

As pointed out previously, school administrators and teachers interpret lack of school involvement by Chinese immigrant parents as evidence of lack of parents’ interest in their children’s education. However, “parent involvement” is mainly a North American concept. It is neither expected nor practised in China (Ogbu, 1995). Chinese parents “do not feel it is appropriate for them to tell teachers what to do because they think that teachers are experts” (Ogbu, 1995, p. 274). The ESL parents from a focus group discussion conducted by the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (1993a) report that “the notion of helping in schools is a ‘western idea,’ so they need more outreach to involve them” (p. 2). A survey of Chinese American parents in New York City (Ho & Fong, 1991) reports that the child’s report card was the only means of parent-teacher communication for many Chinese parents. Based on her data from a series of dialogues with nine immigrant Cantonese-speaking mothers in their native tongue, Wan (1994) concludes that the concept of visible parent involvement is foreign to immigrant Chinese parents in the United States. In fact, there is a negative association with the parents’ presence in schools. Chan (1976) explains in Hong Kong, that Chinese parents seldom attend school functions because if the school asks to see parents, it means their children have got into trouble. This social stigma associated with communicating with teachers
might prohibit some Chinese immigrant parents from interacting with schools when they came to Canada.

Other researchers find Asian parents are reluctant to challenge a teacher’s authority because in their cultures they have a great respect for teachers. For example, Scarcella (1990) notes that “recalling the traditional Vietnamese respect and awe with which the teacher is regarded, one realises that the teacher can expect the total support of the parents. Learning is highly valued, and teachers are ranked just below the king and above the father” (p. 167). Asian parents see teachers as professionals with authority over their children’s schooling. They believe that parents are not supposed to interfere with school processes. Yao (1988) explains that Asian parents seldom initiate contact with schools as they see communication with teachers as a check-up on them and that is culturally disrespectful.

Most Asian parents believe that they are responsible for nurturing and educating their children at home, not at school. According to Heath (1986), Chinese parents “see their role as complementing that of the school; and they tell their children to listen to the teacher, to obey, and to recognize that practising habits rewarded by the school will help ensure their future job opportunities” (p. 159). For example, parent involvement in Taiwan is a relatively new phenomenon in an educational system that traditionally showed great respect for teachers (Lin, 1996). In his survey of school principals’ response strategies and parents involvement in Taipei municipality public elementary schools, Lin adopts Epstein et al.’s (1997) six types of parent involvement, that is, parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and
collaborating with community. He reports that in these types of parent involvement, parenting had the highest mean score, and volunteering had the lowest one. Although parents in Taiwan are concerned about their children's education, they try not to interfere with the teaching process: “Instead of actively engaging themselves in school activities as volunteers, parents prefer spending more time to educate their children at home” (Lin, 1996, p. 158). Lin also mentions that parent involvement in secondary schools in Taiwan is not the pattern. Parent involvement declines dramatically as students grow older (Epstein, 1986; Stouffer, 1992).

If parent involvement is not the norm for Chinese parents, how then do they communicate with schools? Chinese parents are in fact very much involved in their children's education. In China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, parents get plenty of information about their children's education. Parents know their children's progress through textbooks, daily homework assignments, scores of frequent tests (Li, 2000; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Wan, 1994. Detailed discussions are given in chapter 4). Chyu and Smith (1991) note how parents of high school students in Taiwan are required to sign the homework booklet before the child returns it to the school. It is generally “the duty of the individual teacher or school guidance counselor to contact or call parents in case of minor student-related problems. Parents-teacher conferences are rare, and parents assume all is well if their child does not request that the parent see a teacher” (Chyu & Smith, 1991, p. 133). More recently in some schools in Taiwan, teachers keep contact with parents through electronic mail (T. Yang, personal communication, Spring 2001). A class list server is built for parents of children who are in the same class. The daoshi (homeroom
teacher) posts daily homework assignments to the class list server so that every parent in
the class receives them. The teacher also informs specific parents about specific behavior
and other problems. If parents have a question or concern, they can also contact the
teacher via electronic mail.

Numerous cross-cultural studies between Chinese, Japanese, and American
schools conducted by Stevenson and his colleagues find that Chinese parents are actively
involved in their children’s education (Chen, Lee & Stevenson, 1996; Fuligni & Stevenson,
1995; Stevenson & Lee, 1996; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). All the studies highlight the
interrelationships between the home environment and high academic results. They notice
that most Chinese students appear to see school as central to their lives. Chinese parents
support their children’s efforts by organizing the home environment to make it conducive
to studying. One of their important findings shows that Chinese parental involvement
accounted for most of the difference between math achievement of Chinese and of
American grades 1 and 5 pupils, the results favoring the Chinese. Parents’ expectation for
their children’s progress was also significant. In sharp contrast with American mothers,
who were most satisfied with the schools for their children, Chinese mothers were often
critical of the schools. One reason for the low levels of satisfaction of the Chinese parents
is that they hold high standards for their children’s academic achievement (Stevenson &
Lee, 1996). The studies of Stevenson and his associates shed light on how Chinese
parents support their children’s education in China and Taiwan. However, in their review
of research on families, schools, and multicultural communities, Hidalgo et al. (1995)
conclude that “there is no book or article in research journals that deals exclusively with
the frequency and nature of Chinese American parental contacts with the schools and/or their participation in the community around educational issues” (p. 508). The issue of Chinese parental involvement in education in North America remains an unexplored field.

2.4 Rationale for the Present Study

We have noted that ESL parent-teacher communication is a serious problem and much theoretical and empirical evidence shows the importance of ESL parents on ESL programs (e.g., the Calderdale decision and the Unz Initiative) and on the education of the ESL students. But to my knowledge, no study has been done to date on ESL parent-teacher communication that adequately recognizes the problematic nature of such communication and which approaches the discourse data from a functional linguistic perspective.

The present study is essentially one of ESL parent-teacher communication. It raises the issues of conflict and negotiation, and it is intercultural communication. The research literature on the area of communication, conflict, and negotiation across cultures is considerable and quite diverse. For example, it appears that there is no generally agreed definition of conflict shared by researchers in the area. Thus Tidwell (1998), in a review of concepts of conflict that have influenced the area of conflict resolution, states: “Conflict is a term used to mean a variety of things, in an assortment of context” (p. 30). The same can be said of the term ‘communication’. The research strategy adopted in this thesis will therefore be a selective one. The study views communication from the standpoint of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), examining discourse data using
frameworks from SFL work. The study will not be doing a SFL grammatical analysis, but rather will look at the discourse data from a SFL theoretical framework. A key concept of SFL is the notion of field of discourse, which is typically subdivided into two: (a) the social activity manifested in the discourse, and (b) the topic or subject matter of the discourse (Halliday, 1978, 1994). Studies using SFL frameworks provide a range of ideas that apply to the analysis of conflict and negotiation (see, for example, Hodge & Kress 1988; Lemke, 1995), and they will be accessed as required. In addition, the study draws upon two non-SFL approaches to conflict and negotiation which are quite different from each other, but are both particularly relevant to the data of the present study; one approach was developed by Charles Taylor, and the other was developed by Stella Ting-Toomey. In terms of the SFL notion of field of discourse, Ting-Toomey’s approach relates to (a), the social activity, and Taylor’s approach relates to (b), the topic of discourse. In the following sections a brief discussion of these two perspectives will be presented.

2.4.1 Taylor’s Multicultural Negotiation

The existing literature about the immigrant home-school connection has centred on the barriers that hinder smooth communication between teachers and immigrant parents with little emphasis on conditions for a real dialogue between diverse voices. What can help teachers and immigrant parents communicate better with each other? Is it possible to conduct a real dialogue about their different views of education? Conditions of dialogue
remain an unexplored area in intercultural discourse analysis. Until the early 1990s, research on intercultural discourse mainly focused on “contrasts between the pragmatic rules of English and those of a small number of other languages/cultures—for example, German, Japanese, Polish, Hebrew, Spanish” (Clyne, 1999, p. 502). This group of research pays great attention to differences of rules for performing speech acts, such as apologies, complaints, compliments, promises, and requests in cross-cultural settings involving different groups. They assume that intercultural communication could automatically occur, thus they overlook the conditions of intercultural discourse. Sleeter and Montecinos (1999) argue that teachers should move from domination to partnership with parents, and “collaborate to achieve mutually agreed upon goals.” The problem is, of course, that they do not say anything about the conditions for doing that.

Taylor (1994, 1997), on the other hand, suggests that differences between different cultures can be negotiated through “diversity dialogue.” A diversity dialogue between teachers and parents, or dialogue across differences as Burbules and Rice (1991) refer to it, can heighten our sensitivity to “how the ‘same’ thing might look and feel quite different to members of different cultural groups” (Burbules & Rice, 1991, p. 405). Taylor (1994) suggests four steps for different parties to engage in “diversity dialogue.” First, it is important to listen to other voices because each voice is unique. Secondly, it is significant to recognize and understand differences since non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm and can be the basis of oppression and domination. Taylor holds out the possibility that we might recognize the worth of different cultures by expanding our horizons or fused horizons (Strike, 1996). The third step is to respect differences. The
equal value of different cultures is not only recognized, but also cherished. The next step is to negotiate and accommodate differences. We can accommodate differences because cooperation allows us to build some remarkable things together (Taylor, 1997). For Taylor, the precondition for achieving all of these steps is that we have to “communicate with each other in a democracy of mutual disposition” (Taylor, 1997). However, it is assumed that the participants of different parties can actually engage in a sustained and intensive dialogue. Taylor does not examine how different parties negotiate their differences and under what conditions they can reach a shared common ground. Thus investigation of conditions of intercultural negotiation is needed.

2.4.2 Negotiation of Intercultural Conflict

Taylor (1994) points to historical developments in Western culture which mean that conflicts within the community have increased over time. He is aware of the difficulties of negotiation where conflicts are at issue. Taylor’s suggestions for addressing these difficulties are in terms of achieving a fusion of horizons between the parties in relation to what they are talking about.

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) offers an approach to analyzing discourse communication situations that the study will use in the analysis. It is noted in Chapter 1 that SFL offers a particular conceptual framework which views language as a social semiotic (Halliday, 1978). Building on Saussure’s idea that language is a product of the social process, Halliday (1978) argues that “social reality [or a ‘culture’] is itself an
edifice of meanings—a semiotic construct” (p. 2). This point is significant at two levels. First, meaning is situated in contexts of situation and SFL pays a great attention to contexts. Halliday states that “the contexts in which meanings are exchanged are not devoid of social value; a context of speech is itself a semiotic construct” (p. 2). Second, SFL claims that meaning can be specified through three variables of field, tenor, and mode (Halliday, 1994, 1999b). Christie and Unsworth (2000) explain that field refers to the socially constructed activity (e.g., Parents’ Night). Tenor refers to the nature of the relationships among people involved (e.g., tenor in Parents’ Night could reflect the power relations between teachers and parents). Mode is the medium and role of language—whether spoken or written (teachers’ and parents’ comments can be oral or written). This study focuses on field and does not address the differences between tenor and mode.

Field is one of the variables of situation. Field is concerned with the social action and its content or topic (which Halliday calls ‘subject matter’). More precisely there is a useful distinction that Halliday (1978, 1999a) makes between field one and field two. Field one is the social activity being pursued (e.g., instructing somebody in how to prepare a dish), and field two is the ‘subject matter’ of the activity that is concerned with (e.g., the ingredients and methods of cooking). Field one in this study refers to the social activity of Parents’ Night (Chapter 5 is about field one and how it actualizes field two). Field two is the content of Parents’ Night, that is, ESL teachers’ and parents’ views of the ESL program and of the education of immigrant students (Chapter 4 presents a possibility for field two). Taylor’s suggestions appear to apply to the content or topic about which there is conflict (field two) rather than to the social activity as a whole (field
one). It is important to note that field one and field two distinction is a useful analytical tool for discourse data. However, it is not that straightforward in application. For example, as we will see, when ESL teachers are discussing their beliefs about the ESL program, they are also talking about how to teach ESL students do schooling in Canada.

Ting-Toomey’s (1997) work appears to relate to the social activity (field one). She takes a cultural variability perspective where cultures vary on ‘core value characteristics’, for example, individualism-collectivism. These appear to be values that influence how a participant will interpret and structure the social activity. It is important that researchers are aware of the issues of cultural variability that she identifies. However, it is also important to note that field one is not limited to the value characteristics that she identifies, and field is only one of the three situational variables within SFL (field, tenor, and mode). Many researchers other than those in SFL identify contextual variables that relate to the social activity (field one). For example, Scollon and Scollon (2001) mention that the “grammar of context” includes scene, key, participants, message form, sequence, co-occurrence patterns, and manifestation. These can be seen to be labels for some of the components of the social activity. By contrast, Ting-Toomey’s main focus is on the metaconflict issues in a conflict episode. She declares that “Different cultural value assumptions exist as the metaconflict issues in framing any intercultural conflict episode” (1997, p. 396). She rightly zooms in on these quite specialized matters. But this study takes a broad view of the social activity.

Ting-Toomey speaks of the “cross-cultural conflict negotiation process” (1997, p. 392) which is a helpful way to view Parents’ Night, knowing as we do that teachers and
parents hold different views, and that they are from different cultures. However, she says “intercultural conflict typically starts off with miscommunication” (1997, p. 392). But it is important to note that parents and teachers considered in this study hold different views, and are potentially in conflict before they interact. If there was any conflict, it did not begin with miscommunication, though it may be aggravated by miscommunication.

Parents’ Night can be conceived as, in Tracy’s (1997) words, “a dilemmatic situation—a communicative occasion involving tensions and contradiction” (p. 4). Tracy’s study of academic discourse in the departmental colloquium in two American universities depicts the web of dilemmas that faculty and graduate students faced in their intellectual discussion. Specifically, in their roles as presenters and discussants, individual participants risked being seen foolish or provoking interest, intimate with or distant from ideas, displaying theoretical interests or practicality, intellectual ability or self-aggrandizing, and linguistic elegance or interactional naturalness. As a group, participants confronted dilemmas such as serious or playful climate, displaying expertise or equality, and critique in terms of idea merit or speaker experience. Simply put, academics believed that intellectual ideas and people cannot cleanly separated. Although Tracy deals with academic discourse, the researcher’s interest is in her attention to a dilemmatic perspective of her analysis. Such dilemmatic perspectives may enrich our understanding of the problems that teachers and parents face in their communication at Parents’ Night.

In sum, the importance of the research process of the SFL perspective on field is that it contains both the social activity (and includes the issues referred to by Ting-Toomey, but is much broader) and the topic (which includes the issues referred to by
Taylor). As will be seen, Parents’ Nights are shown to involve multiple dilemmas in terms of both social activity and topic.

2.4.2.1 Chinese Conflict Management

Human conflict and conflict resolution are “cultural phenomena. The ways by which conflicts are perceived and handled reflect a culturally-shared set of attitudes and beliefs” (Fry and Fry, 1997, p. 10). For individualistic cultures, conflict is viewed as “an expressed struggle to air out major differences and problems,” whereas for collectivistic cultures, conflict is viewed as “damaging to social face and relational harmony and should be avoided as much as possible” (Ting-Toomey, p. 1997, p. 396). Conflict is avoided in Chinese communication in order to preserve harmony (he). According to Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998), the Chinese term “‘he’ denotes harmony, peace, unity, kindness, and amiableness” which is the “foundation of Chinese culture” (p. 7). For Gao and Ting-Toomey, the notion of harmony affects any communication event in Chinese culture. Inherent in this notion of harmony are the constructs of self and face, which are frequently used in explaining Chinese conflict management. The Chinese notion of self originates from the Confucian idea that social and ethical responsibilities define the true self (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; King & Bond, 1985). The Chinese self is relational and other-oriented. Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998, p. 10) state that “the Chinese self-development is connected closely with the self’s orientation to others’ needs, wishes, and expectations.” In conflict situations, Chinese people usually consider other people’s face (mian zi). Ting-Toomey et al. (1991) reports mainland Chinese and Taiwanese, compared
with their U.S. counterparts, had a higher degree of avoiding styles of conflict management in order to save face of other people.

How then do the Chinese manage their conflicts? One of the strategies used by Chinese is non-confrontation \(^3\) (Chen & Chung, 1997; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Tung, 2000). Therefore, a third person, also called an intermediary, is customarily used for resolving a conflict. Several writers (Cohen, 1991; Leung, 1988; Ma, 1992; Ting-Toomey, 1985; Tung, 2000) indicate that for the Chinese culture, conflict is typically managed through the use of informal third-party intermediaries. Such a structure allows Chinese people to avoid direct confrontation and combat, and protect and save the face of each of the parties involved in a conflict situation.

It is important to note that intermediaries in North America are mostly “professional or contractual in nature: lawyers, negotiators, marriage counsellors, and the like” (Yum, 1997, p. 82). Intermediaries in Chinese culture are usually informal; they are close friends of both parties, and have knowledge of the both parties’ characteristics. Close friends are chosen to be intermediaries because most Chinese “won’t talk about their conflict to a wai-ren (outsider)” (Ma, 1992, p. 274). Insider (zi ji ren) and outsider (wai ren) are two of the most frequently used concepts in discussing Chinese communication processes (Gao, Ting-Toomey & Gudykunst, 1996; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Insiders refer to members of an in-group and outsiders refer to members of an out-group. Insiders include members of the family and relatives in a family unit, and

\(^3\)Tung (2000) reminds us that Chinese people asked President Clinton many confrontational questions about substantive and controversial topics during his visit to China in June 1998. Caution of generalization is needed.
friends in a social circle. In organizations, people on the same hierarchical level, such as co-workers and students who are in the same class, may be considered insiders. Outsiders are strangers and others with whom one has not established a special relationship. The distinction between an insider and an outsider is significant because it "not only places people in different relational circles but also prescribes specific rules of interaction in communication" (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998, p. 49). In conflict situations, the Chinese often choose insiders to be their intermediaries because these intermediaries are expected to persuade each party in conflict to accommodate each other's views without a loss of a face (Bond, 1991).

2.4.2.2 Role of Intermediaries in Immigrant Communication

The importance of intermediaries is a well-known theme in studies of immigrant communication. In their study of Chinese parental involvement in the schooling process, Constantino, Cui, and Faltis (1995) report that the active "intervention" of third parties, the mediator or the arbitrator, such as Chinese bilingual resource teachers, serving as a "bridge" between teachers and parents, determined the success of parent-teacher communication. Their study, based upon their interview of ten elementary teachers and fifteen Chinese immigrant parents in southern California, indicates that parents and teachers placed different weights on parent-teacher meetings. Teachers believed all the parents should attend the meetings. In contrast, parents chose not to attend because, in addition to language barriers, they did not understand the significance placed on the meetings. The Chinese bilingual resource teacher attached Chinese translations to all the
signs in the school area, and translated many school forms and monthly school newsletters into Chinese. The bilingual resource teacher also provided teachers in-services, including discussions about Asian and Chinese culture, cultural values, and the myriad of roles members play within the culture, and crash course in conversational Chinese. Because of these active interventions, teachers and Chinese immigrant parents were more at ease when they communicated with each other. This is the only study the researcher can find from the literature pertaining specifically to communications between teachers and Chinese immigrant parents. It makes a good point about the importance of intermediaries in Chinese immigrant communication and it shows that the parents and teachers had different views concerning what actually was significant involvement, but it does not deal with how they negotiated their differences.

Hirji and Beynon (in press) also find that the Punjabi bilingual teachers helped to smooth communication between home and school because they served as intermediaries between the parents of their Punjabi Sikh students and school personnel. The purpose of the study was to examine role perceptions of teachers of Punjabi Sikh ancestry in the British Columbia public education system. They interviewed 20 Punjabi Sikh bilingual teachers, three of whom were born in Canada and seventeen who immigrated to Canada. The Punjabi bilingual teacher-participants who took part in the study reported that they were viewed as being appna or “one of us” by the Punjabi Sikh parents because of their understanding of Punjabi Sikh language and culture. The members of the community often approached them for advice. Their linguistic skills and cultural background enabled them to serve as translators and cultural brokers with the Punjabi community as well as with
schools. The study includes some examples of how these bilingual teachers transmitted the needs of the school to parents and disseminated cultural information to their colleagues as a result of preventing misunderstandings between the Punjabi community and schools.

Buchanan (2000) also suggests that schools should use intermediaries in a multicultural community communication to build parent-school partnership. Buchanan reports that parent liaisons (part-time hourly workers) were employed in Fairfax County Public Schools of Washington D.C., where students spoke over 100 languages and came from over 150 countries and represented 35,000 language minority families. Parent liaisons worked directly in schools -- reflecting the family’s cultures represented in that particular school. One half were Spanish speakers, but they also had Kurdish, Somali, Arabic, Vietnamese, and Korean liaisons. These liaisons had substantive knowledge of, and appreciation for, the cultural diversity present in school communities, including racial, ethnic, socio-economic status, religious and language diversity, and good knowledge of school operations and community resources. They served as links among the school, parents, and community groups to facilitate school and parent communications.

2.4.3 Research Questions

The present study views the school as a learning organization and the parents as part of the organization’s steering process of organizational learning and decision-making. The topic of the thesis is ESL parent-teacher communication as it relates to decisions
about ESL students' education. We have already noted that Ting-Toomey's (1997) definition of conflict is useful to view Parents' Night as a 'cross-cultural conflict negotiation process'. Ting-Toomey maintains that "conflict denotes a state of dissonance or collision between two forces or systems. This state of dissonance can be expressed either overtly or subtly. In the context of intercultural encounters, conflict is defined...as the perceived and/or actual incompatibility of values, expectations, processes, or outcomes between two or more parties from different cultures over substantive and/or relational issues" (1997, p. 392). This study interprets Parents' Night as a conflict situation in relation to this definition at two levels. First, parents and teachers may have different ideas about the education of the students. This is a state of dissonance about a substantive issue of Parents' Night. A main topic of Parents' Night is the education of the immigrant students (i.e., it is a main field two of Parents' Night). Second, at a metalevel of conflict, one cannot assume that parents and teachers share the same cultural values, expectations, and processes about how conflicts are negotiated, in other words, about the metaconflict issues in a conflict episode. The study interprets Parents' Night as an intercultural conflict negotiation process on the grounds that it is communication between parents and teachers that covers the topic of education of the students. The conflict is expressed by the parents in a more subtle way than an overt way. Furthermore, the teachers are well aware of the differences, and regard Parents' Night as an opportunity to discuss ideas about the education of the students. The study does not focus on superficial quick-fix negotiation between parties, but more on a search for better explanation and analysis.
The study also frames its thesis topic by viewing Parents' Night as a communicative situation from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) theory. It pays particular attention to the component of the situation described by SFL as a "field" of discourse, which means "social activity, and topic" (Halliday, 1978). In other words, there is both a first order field, the social activity of Parents' Night, and a second order field, the topic of Parents' Night (e.g., the education practices of the school). The following three research questions thus form the basis of the present study:

1. What are teachers' and parents' perspectives of the ESL program and education, and what are the differences between them?
2. How do teachers and parents negotiate their differences at Parents’ Night?
3. What are the difficulties of intercultural negotiation of conflict (Taylor, 1994; Ting-Toomey, 1997)?
CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY

3.1 Introduction

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this study is to investigate qualitatively the communication processes between ESL teachers and parents through a focal communication event, Parents’ Night, when they discuss their views of ESL programs and education in general. Determined by the nature of the research topic, the researcher chose a qualitative research approach as the methodology for the present study. This chapter discusses how the study brings together qualitative methods and an approach to discourse analysis based on systemic functional linguistics (SFL). Specific topics include the contextual description of the history of the ESL Parents’ Night (3.2), the design of the study (3.3), data analysis (3.4), ontological assumptions of qualitative research (3.5), Parents’ Night viewed as a sociocultural activity (3.6), data presentation (3.7), and the trustworthiness of the study (3.8).

3.2. The History of ESL Parents’ Night

This section frames the study contextually through descriptions of the history of Parents’ Night, and the evolution of the three annual Parents’ Nights being examined. Created by one of the ESL teachers in 1988 with two ESL classes, the ESL Department at Milton Secondary School (pseudonym) in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada grew into ten ESL classes for a total of 200 students in 1997. The department encouraged cooperative learning and content learning. A number of parents were not happy about this
approach and wanted to move their children out of the ESL program as soon as possible. Teachers in the ESL Department recognized the need to explain to the parents about the goals and philosophy behind their system.

Annually, the ESL Department organized an ESL Parents’ Night to explain to parents how the ESL program prepared students for mainstream classes. From 1988 to 1993 the ESL Parents’ Night was held in the ESL Department Head’s classroom. The head explained the ESL program to the parents, and the administrators spoke about school rules, and sometimes an invited guest speaker from the Vancouver School Board gave a speech. By the time they had seven ESL classes in 1994, there were too many people to fit into one classroom, so they had their Parents’ Night in the school cafeteria. Unlike the previous Parents’ Night, ELC students were involved in planning the event. The ELC students facilitated discussions, compiled the parents’ concerns, made all the presentations, and explained the ESL program. In 1995, the ESL department added the teachers’ presentations. Six stations were set up, of which two stations were for explaining the differences between ESL and mainstream classes, two were for ESL programs, and two for skills and attitudes. At one of these stations, the ESL teachers and mainstream teachers jointly explained to parents how ESL classes teach prerequisite skills for the academic tasks which students face in mainstream classes. But parents had different cultural views of issues discussed in Parents’ Night, such as motivation, the ESL program, homework, and assessment (Salzberg, 1998).

The year 1996 was an accreditation year at Milton Secondary School, so the ESL teachers felt extra time constraints. However, they planned to have a Parents’ Night. They spent seven meetings planning the event, but they kept postponing the date. In February of 1997, the department as a whole decided not to have a major Parents’ Night, but one teacher designed an evening solely for her homeroom class. The ESL Parents’ Night took place in the teacher’s classroom from 6:30 p.m. to 8:20 p.m., followed by potluck desserts when parents and guardians socialized in the staff room. Out of 18 students, 15 parents and guardians attended. The vice-principal and ESL counselor, three former ESL students and the teacher sat in a panel format. The teacher asked the parents to brainstorm in small groups the question: “What motivates students to work?” and the bilingual graduate students from the university were asked to join the groups to assist with translation. The teacher addressed the importance of student self-motivation. Three former ESL students made oral presentations about the difficulties ESL students have in regular classrooms and how parents can help their children. The vice-principal talked about the school rules, and the ESL counselor used her personal experience to advise parents about how they can assist their children in learning. The teacher then discussed the rest of the topics from why students generally stayed in ESL for two years, how students moved from ESL to ELC, the importance of field trips, and the use of L1, to students’ motivation and homework.

The 1998 ESL Parents’ Night was organized on a larger scale. The whole ESL Department, that is, eight classes participated. On February 17, about 150 parents and
guardians attended the first part of the meeting in the school auditorium from 6:45 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. Some parents came with their children and some came with their grandchildren. The school principal made a welcome speech, and a school trustee and an ESL support teacher from the district made a short speech about the ESL program. The Science Department Head, the English Department Head, and one Social Studies teacher all talked about the requirement for students to be successful in mainstream classes. One former ESL student and one parent representative of a former ESL student talked about their experiences, and three multicultural home-school workers were introduced. Some of the speeches were translated into Mandarin and Cantonese. Then the parents went into seven different ESL core classes (two ESL classes had their meeting together) for class presentations. The researcher and her assistants participated in each classroom. The activities of the seven classrooms varied from the teacher doing all the presentations in one classroom to the students doing all poster presentations and role-plays in another classroom. Finally, all the parents, students, and teachers gathered in the school cafeteria for potluck desserts and socials.

The 1999 ESL Parents’ Night took a different format. The ESL classes were reduced to six owing to low enrolment. The meeting took place in the school auditorium on January 26, 1999. Mandarin-speaking parents sat on one side and a multicultural liaison worker translated for them. Cantonese-speaking parents sat on the other side and one parent-volunteer translated into Cantonese. Those parents who could understand English sat in the middle. The principal made a welcome speech and one of the vice-principals spoke briefly about the purpose and importance of the ESL program. The head of the ESL
Department explained the ESL courses and movement from ESL to ELC, and the ESL counselor explained the course choice and options for those older students who could not finish courses at the school. The meeting lasted from 7:00 p.m. to 8:15 p.m. and then everybody went home.

3.3 Design of the Study

The methodology of this study combines qualitative methods with discourse analysis. Qualitative methods use discourse as data, and it is important that discourse be analyzed using rigorous and known methods of discourse analysis. The following sections will discuss the design of the study from a fairly standard qualitative point of view. Then, turning to discourse analysis, later sections will discuss Parents’ Night as a sociocultural activity in terms of an approach to discourse based on systemic functional linguistics. Significant in the present study are the relations of theoretical and practical discourses because they provide evidence of the cultural meaning of Parents’ Night activity.

Both primary and secondary sources were used to obtain information for this study. The primary sources were in the form of taped interviews, observations of planning meetings for Parents’ Night and three ESL annual Parents’ Night events, focus group discussions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Patton, 1990). The secondary source was in the form of documents. As will be discussed below, the approach taken in the present study sees Parents’ Night as a sociocultural activity. An activity has a theory and practice dimension. Qualitative research uses theoretical discourse to illuminate the theory of an activity, and practical discourse to illustrate the practice of an activity. The design of the study is
graphically represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Design of the Study: Parents’ Night as a Sociocultural Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Interviews, focus group discussion, documents, and discourse analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Observations, documents, and discourse analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.1 Sampling Procedure

The purposeful sampling procedure (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993) was adopted for the present study. The procedure was purposeful because the school selected could supply adequate and suitable information for investigation. The school’s mandate was to encourage parent understanding and participation and promote development of a sense of community. One critical feature of this agenda was ESL Parents’ Night with more than a ten-year history. The ESL Parents’ Night and the participants chosen could provide significant insights about the questions under investigation.

3.3.2 Research Site

This study was conducted at Milton Secondary School (pseudonym) in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, with a specifically designed ESL program for immigrant students. It is a relatively large secondary school with about 1700 students from grade 8 to grade 12. It is situated in a quiet, middle- to upper-middle income
According to the Vancouver School Board (1994), 62 percent of the students of the school spoke a language other than English at home. At the time of data collection, about 200, 160, and 120 of students respectively in 1997, 1998 and 1999, who attended this school were studying in the ESL program. Many of these ESL students were new immigrants to Canada from Taiwan, Hong Kong, with a smaller number coming from China.

3.3.3 The ESL Program

It is important to describe the ESL program being examined in the study since the central focus of Parents’ Night is on teachers’ and parents’ perspectives of the ESL program.

Figure 2: The ESL Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Physical Education</td>
<td>1. Physical Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mainstream)</td>
<td>(Mainstream)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Math (Mainstream)</td>
<td>2. Math (Mainstream)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ESL Science or Science</td>
<td>3. ESL Science or Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ESL Social Studies</td>
<td>4. ESL Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ESL Core</td>
<td>5. ESL Core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ESL Writing</td>
<td>6. ESL Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. ESL Literature</td>
<td>7. ESL Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. ESL Drama</td>
<td>8. Elective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Figure 2 illustrates, the students generally took courses in the ESL program for two years, except Physical Education and Math where students are placed in mainstream classes. The ESL courses did not have credits. The philosophy of the ESL courses was to integrate language and content (Mohan, 1986). For example, the ESL Science was designed to prepare students for mainstream science programs at the appropriate grade level. Language patterns, vocabulary, thinking skills, and scientific procedures were developed through studies of biology and chemistry, including demonstrations, dissections, labs, and other hands-on activities.

Most of the ESL classes were, according to the department handbook, heterogeneous classes in which students are randomly assigned by the computer. The school referred it as a multilevel grouping system. This meant any single ESL class might have students from different ages and from varying levels of English language proficiency. This system was unique in the city where most secondary schools used a lock-step level system, in which ESL students moved through various levels to reach regular classes. The multilevel system allowed ESL students to move into mainstream classes at any time during the school year when a student was ready and a space in the mainstream classes was available. The multilevel and mixed-age system of the ESL program intended to encourage cooperative learning and provide peer support for new immigrant students. The school also had an English Learning Center (ELC), offering transitional support for students who could handle the regular content classes but needed additional language and cultural support.
3.3.4 The Participants

Participants in the study were teachers in the ESL Department of Milton Secondary School, and bilingual (Mandarin-English) graduate assistants from a Canadian university.

Nine ESL teachers participated in the study. The educational backgrounds of teachers varied from having a bachelor degree in a particular subject area to those who were not content specialists. They all had some training in teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). Some held a Masters degree in TESL while others had a TESL diploma. They also had significant experiences in teaching English language learners. Some had taught in Japan, Taiwan, and others taught in the public school systems in other parts of Canada. The teachers spent much time during their lunch hours in planning for Parents’ Night. All teachers in the ESL Department participated in the planning, delivery, and feedback sessions of the event. All the teachers involved their students in the whole process.

Six bilingual assistants from a Canadian university also participated in the study. The assistants were graduate students, also experienced EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or ESL teachers who spoke fluent English and Chinese. They also had in-depth knowledge of language education in Canada, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. They acted as interpreters and intermediaries between ESL teachers and Mandarin-speaking parents of ESL students who attend the teachers’ classes. Before the ESL Parents’ Night, the ESL teachers sent home an invitation to the parents with a tear-off sheet at the bottom that they could return. The bilingual assistants followed up the invitations with the
parents/guardians.

The bilingual graduate assistants telephoned 18 parents/guardians in 1997, 140 parents/guardians in 1998, and 99 parents/guardians in 1999 before Parents’ Night to explain its purposes in their first languages, and 80 parents/guardians after Parents’ Night to get their feedback. The researcher also did some follow-up calls with some parents/guardians whom the bilingual assistants referred to her. From 1997 to 1999, the researcher called 105 parents/guardians. Unlike earlier immigrants in the study of Ghuman and Wong (1989), many Chinese parents in the present study were entrepreneurs, investors, or independent immigrant status. This group consisted primarily of middle to upper-middle economic class, post secondary educated, achievement oriented business people or professionals (Salzberg, 1998). For many parents the major reason they immigrated to Canada was for their children’s education. The lengths of these parents’ stay in Canada ranged from a few months to four years. Parents were asked about their perceptions of the ESL program, their questions and concerns they wanted to express to the teachers, their experiences at Parents’ Night, and their suggestions regarding the communication between home and school.

The bilingual graduate students acted as interpreters at Parents’ Night when asked to do so by the teachers. Some of them did simultaneous interpretations for a small group of Mandarin-speaking parents when the teacher was talking. Some of them took notes and explained to parents afterwards. Some translated parents’ questions from Mandarin to English and asked teachers these questions on behalf of the parents.

The researcher attempted to conduct formal face-to-face interviews with the
parents but parents did not wish to be interviewed. This was not unexpected. As part of a research team studying ESL students, their teachers and their parents, the researcher had learned that direct access to parents was difficult. One of the bilingual assistants had interviewed Taiwanese parents for her MA thesis (Salzberg, 1998). Salzberg found access challenging even though she had considerable credibility with the parents beforehand. Her interview data was very valuable, and the researcher used her data as part of triangulation in this thesis, but clearly other kinds of data were needed.

Since formal interviews were not possible, another approach had to be found. It was decided to use various forms of observation of the parents’ engagement with the events of Parents’ Night (the initial contact with the parents, the parents’ interaction during Parents’ Night, and follow-up and feedback) and to draw on relevant documents. Data about the Chinese parents’ perspectives in the researcher’s thesis were gathered from six bilingual assistants, who telephoned the parents before and after Parents’ Night. Data about the parents were also gathered from the researcher’s and the bilingual assistants’ direct observations of the parents at Parents’ Night, parents’ written responses to the teacher’s invitations, parents’ written responses to the questionnaire designed by the ESL Department after Parents’ Night, and reports about parents in student journals.

3.3.5 The Researcher’s Role

The researcher was introduced to the teachers and parents as a researcher from a Canadian university who studied the processes of home-school communication. She
played a role of a moderate participant observer (Spradley, 1980), seeking to "maintain a balance between being an insider and an outsider, between participation and observation" (p. 60). She participated in some activities in response to teachers' requests. She explained Parents' Night to the parents on the phone and presented information gathered from the parents at the teachers' planning meetings before Parents' Night. She also interpreted for Chinese parents at Parents' Night and reported parents' feedback to the teachers after Parents' Night.

3.3.6 Data Collection Procedures

The study was conducted from January 1996 to March 1999. Detailed discussions about the procedures of the data collection for the present study will be given in the following sections.

3.3.6.1 Observation

The researcher observed twelve ESL Department planning meetings for Parents' Night from January 1996 to January 1999. These planning meetings occurred in the classrooms at lunch hours. Each meeting lasted for about 50 minutes. All the meetings were audio-recorded with permission. At the planning meetings the teachers discussed parents' feedback about Parents' Night. The feedback was based on a survey they did with the parents after Parents' Night in 1995. The survey questions included "Would you come to a follow-up session in the school to get answers to your questions?" "If yes,
what time would you prefer to come to school for this meeting?” “What language would you like the presentation to be in?” “What could we do to help you understand our program?” “Are there still things that you don’t understand?” “In what ways can we assist your child more?” “What things can we do better?” “What should we do differently?” Building on parents’ feedback, the teachers discussed their purposes, content, time, location, format, language use, speakers, and involvement of students for the next Parents’ Night. In the evening after the meeting or on the following day, the researcher transcribed all the data and then tried to discover the emerging themes. These emerging patterns were helpful in guiding further observation and reflection. Observations of the planning meetings helped the researcher to examine how the teachers responded to parents’ feedback from the previous Parents’ Night, and consistencies and discrepancies between what they planned for Parents’ Night and what they actually did at Parents’ Night. Observations of the teachers’ planning meetings allowed the researcher to understand better the teachers’ beliefs and ideas about Parents’ Night.

Spradley (1980) discusses participant observation as a way to investigate cultural behaviour or the practical aspect of an activity. This method was adopted in the present study to find out how teachers interacted with parents at Parents’ Night. The researcher observed three annual ESL Parents Nights that took place on March 25, 1997, February 17, 1998, and January 26, 1999. The focus of the observations was on the interactions between ESL teachers and parents. The researcher observed how the meetings were arranged, how teachers, administrators, and students made their presentations, what topics were covered, how parents asked their questions and how teachers responded. The
1997 Parents' Night took place in one classroom. The researcher and four bilingual assistants audio-taped the presentations with permission. The 1998 Parents' Night took place in a big assembly first in the school auditorium and then continued in seven different classrooms simultaneously. The researcher observed one class while six bilingual assistants observed the other six classes. There were eight ESL classes in 1998 and two classes decided to merge together. The researcher audio-recorded the speeches made by the administrators, teachers, students, and one parent representative in the auditorium. After the big assembly, the researcher and the bilingual assistants recorded the meetings in different classrooms. The 1999 Parents' Night occurred in the school auditorium. The researcher recorded all the speeches made by the teachers.

The researcher also kept a “fieldwork journal” (Spradley, 1980) which included detailed description of the setting with a hand-drawn map, the number of the attendants (roughly counted if the meeting was in the school auditorium), the meeting’s format, language use (first or second language), its procedures, and speakers’ main points. The journal also recorded the researcher’ interpretations of the events she observed. This reflection assisted the researcher to become aware of the recurring patterns and challenged her assumptions.

The limitation of observation lies in its subjective interpretations of situations because of its exclusive dependence on researchers’ own perceptions (Adler & Adler, 1994). To overcome the risk of bias, the researcher used interviews to get a better understanding of insiders’ view (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Interview is a fundamental method in qualitative inquiry as it helps the researcher get an in-depth
understanding of the phenomenon observed.

### 3.3.6.2 Interview

The present study applied what Spradley (1979) calls “ethnographic interviewing” to elicit participants’ cultural meanings for Parents’ Night activity. According to Spradley (1979), ethnographic interviewing is “one strategy for getting people to talk about what they know” (p. 9). It “employs questions designed to discover cultural meanings” (Spradley, 1980, p. 123). The researcher conducted ethnographic interviews with participants in order to get an in-depth understanding of the theories behind their actions at Parents’ Night.

The interview with teachers took place after the three annual Parents’ Nights in 1997, 1998, and 1999. The researcher interviewed nine ESL teachers individually. Three teachers were interviewed twice because of their active involvement in Parents’ Night. The interviews with the nine teachers took place in their classrooms, each interview lasting from thirty to eighty minutes, and allowed teachers to reflect on and recall their experiences of Parents’ Night. Unstructured interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 1995) were used to open up respondents’ experiences because it is “useful for eliciting participants’ meanings for events and behaviours” (p. 82). Its conversational style and the interviewers’ non-judgemental attitude allow respondents to feel what they are saying is important. While auto-taping the interview, approved by the participants, the researcher also took abbreviated notes based on the participants’ answers. The key words and phrases were then used to probe for further clarification and elaboration (Bernard, 1994;
Watkins, 1996). Immediately after the interviews, the researcher listened to the tape and tried to recall the interview process. In the evening after the interview, she transcribed the data and tried to uncover the emerging themes. As verbatim accounts of conversations, transcripts are highly valued data which can be used to illustrate the teachers’ theories of Parents’ Night activity.

The researcher also interviewed two teachers before Parents’ Night, one in 1997 and the other in 1998, to get a better understanding of their goals of Parents’ Night. As the researcher observed, the ESL department planning meetings at lunch hours for Parents’ Night were too short, for some teachers did not have enough time to illustrate their points. For example, two teachers strongly voiced their views about the purposes of Parents’ Night. They often had to go back to teach when the afternoon classes resumed. The formal interview with these two teachers took place in their classrooms at lunch hours. Each interview lasted for fifty minutes.

Six bilingual assistants were also interviewed individually, from thirty to fifty minutes. The formal interviews with the bilingual assistants occurred at a variety of places, including their offices, the university classrooms, and their homes. The six bilingual assistants contacted about one hundred and forty parents by phone in 1998. Among those parents, 45 spoke Cantonese and 63 spoke Mandarin. Chinese-speaking parents made up 77 percent (108 out of 140) of the ESL parent population. The bilingual assistants explained the purpose of Parents’ Night to the parents. Some parents told the bilingual assistants what kind of questions they would like to ask the teachers. Some parents expressed their concerns about the ESL program. Some parents explained their
reasons for not attending Parents’ Night. At Parents’ Night, parents asked a few questions through the bilingual assistants. The bilingual assistants also talked to the parents informally to get their feedback of Parents’ Night. The formal interviews with the bilingual assistants focused on the parents’ interpretations of the ESL program, the parents’ major concerns, and their strategies for working with these concerns.

The researcher asked teachers and bilingual assistants open-ended questions such as “What are your general impressions of Parents’ Night on Feb. 17, 1998?” “What are your suggestions for next-year’s Parents’ Night?” “What are the main points about the ESL program from the teachers’ point of view?” “How do you think parents see the ESL program?” “What do you think are the parents’ major concerns?” “What do you think are the best ways to address these concerns?” The researcher used these questions as guiding questions and allowed the participants to lead the interviews. These open-ended questions enabled participants to express themselves in their own way, and at their own pace (Bernard, 1994; Hertz, 1995; Phtiaka, 1994).

It is important to note that the face to face interview does bring some bias into the study. The respondent may be influenced by the presence of the interviewer and might look to the interviewer for cues as to the expected or socially acceptable response. Moreover, inflections in the voice of the interviewer can sometimes unintentionally bias the response. It is therefore important to use other methods as well as the interview.

3.3.6.3 Focus Group Discussions

Focus groups are often used in qualitative research to obtain in-depth
understanding about a specific area of interest (Krueger, 1994). Morgan (1997) defines focus groups as

basically group interview...where the reliance is on interaction within the group, based on topics that are supplied by the researcher who typically takes the role of a moderator. The hallmark of the focus group is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group. (p. 2)

The focus group, which typically consists of approximately 8 to 12 people, may provide a secure setting for participants to express their ideas about sensitive issues (Basch, 1987). In the group setting, comments from one participant can spark connections for other participants (Kreuger, 1994; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). The group process also allows people time to reflect on experiences (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Although focus groups have been widely used in market research and program evaluation (Patton, 1990), they can also be applied to social science researches (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999).

In this study, a focus group discussion was held to share understanding of the teachers’ and parents’ interpretations of their living experiences of Parents’ Night. The focus group discussion was conducted after the researcher completed her formal individual interviews with teachers and bilingual assistants and informal interviews with the parents. At this point teachers wanted to know how parents reacted to Parents’ Night. The focus group discussion took place in a private home of a university professor. It started with a potluck dinner and the discussion lasted for two hours. Eight ESL teachers and four bilingual assistants participated in the focus group discussion. The researcher reported the summary data of her interview with individual teachers about their feedback of Parents’ Night. The group also reviewed the data about the parents’ feedback
conveyed by the six bilingual assistants. The focus group discussions generated more
information about the impact of parents on ESL programs, teachers’ and parents’
perspectives of the ESL program, parents’ concerns, and different approaches to
communicate about parents’ concerns. The focus group discussions were taped and
transcribed. The focus group was also used for data triangulation (see section on Research
Trustworthiness for detailed discussion).

3.3.6.4 Documents

Documents are valuable sources in qualitative research (McMillan & Schumacher,
1993; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). Documents as written texts can provide “unwitting
testimony” (Scott, 1990, p. 13), uncovering participants’ values and beliefs often tacit in
their behaviours. In addition to observations, interviews, and the focus group discussions,
the study also used, as background, documentary analysis of public written documents in
English and Chinese used for communication with parents. These included the school’s
ESL Handbook, Parents’ Night invitations, Parents’ Night handouts, students’ journals
about Parents’ Night, and ESL Parents’ Night questionnaires and parents’ responses.

After Parents’ Night, some teachers asked their students to reflect in their journals. The
teachers designed several questions for students to respond to, such as “What part of
Parents’ Night worked well? Why?” “What part did not work well? Why?” “What was
the most important advice you read in the students’ presentations?” “What would you do
differently in the future?” “What comments did your parents have about the evening?”
“What are your comments?” The students’ responses reported indirectly their parents’
reactions. Analyses of these documents helped the researcher to understand better the rationale of the ESL program, the teachers’ goals of Parents’ Night, and parents’ concerns and reactions to Parents’ Night.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thirty-five sixty-minute tapes hold the discourse data collected over a period of three years. The process of discourse data analysis for the study was concurrent and subsequent to data collection. Data analysis began with the researchers’ first site visit. Observations of the teachers’ planning meetings for Parents’ Nights, Parents’ Night events, and individual interviews and focus group discussions with the participants were transcribed, with margin notes made on the field notes. Reflective passages were written, and summary sheets were drafted and presented for peer debriefing.

As we will see below, the study focuses on the analysis of the participants’ reflection and action discourse (Harre, 1993; Mohan et al., 1998) in an attempt to explain the theoretical and practical aspects of Parents’ Night activity. It applies inductive analysis and discourse analysis for data analysis.

3.4.1 Inductive Analysis

The inductive analysis strategy (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993) was applied to the interview data in order to understand how teachers and parents perceive the ESL program and Parents’ Night. Observation data of the teachers’ planning meetings were
also analyzed inductively to identify teachers' goals for Parents' Night. This was accomplished by searching for categories, patterns or “domains” (Spradley, 1980) that emerged from the data rather than being imposed on data prior to data collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993). Domains are large cultural categories that contain smaller categories/subcategories and whose relationships are linked by a semantic relationship (Spradley, 1980). For instance, educating parents about the philosophy behind the ESL program (subcategory) is one kind of (semantic relationship) teachers’ goals for Parents’ Night (domain).

The domain analysis was combined with the coding system of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) to conceptualize the relationships between emergent categories. Strauss and Corbin consider analysis consisting of open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding refers to the analytic process of identifying categories and their characteristics. Axial coding is the process of relating categories to their subcategories. Selective coding refers to the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development. The first two levels of data analysis parallel Spradley’s domain analysis. Selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was specifically applied for the study to search for core categories and an integrated framework that can be used to explain the phenomenon of Parents’ Night.

3.5 Qualitative Inquiry and Ontological Assumptions

The search for an integrated framework was accomplished with the application of
Mohan et al.'s (1998) action and reflection discourses, derived from the functional linguistic perspective. The next sections will discuss the approach to discourse analysis taken in this thesis.

This study combines qualitative research with discourse analysis. Before turning my discussion to discourse analysis, it is important to examine the ontological assumptions of qualitative research in order to link it with discourse analysis. The present study does not take a causal or technical (means-end) view of negotiation between teachers and parents, but instead searches for better interpretation and analysis of the meanings that parents and teachers bring to the sociocultural activity of Parents' Night. A qualitative research approach is appropriate for this purpose. Qualitative research involves “an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). In a word, qualitative research studies the meaning of what people do in natural contexts. It is contrasted with positivist research “that supports the status quo through its conception of social and psychological phenomena as universal and invariant” (Ratner, 1997, p. 231). Harré provides an insightful characterization of one of the central ontological assumptions of much qualitative research when he says that “social behaviour is the structured product of the joint actions of intelligent and knowledgeable agents acting to further some end or other. It is not the effect of causes” (1993, p. 107). The researcher's account of Parents' Night as a sociocultural activity will aim to suggest how action, meaning, knowledge, and context are interwoven in the activity.
3.6 ESL Parents’ Night as a Sociocultural Activity

The social situation central to this study is an activity of ESL Parents’ Night. In Figure 3 an attempt is made to establish the activity of ESL Parents’ Night as a sociocultural practice. The physical settings are classrooms and school auditoriums, places known to teachers engaged the activity of the ESL Parents’ Night, but unfamiliar to parents.

Figure 3: The Activity of ESL Parents’ Night

Actors:
Teachers’ and students’ presentations
Parents’ questions

Activity:
Explaining to parents about the ESL program

Sociocultural practice

Places: the classroom and the auditorium

An activity itself contains smaller units. For instance, Parents’ Night contains smaller units such as teachers and students’ presentations about the ESL program. It is important to identify components that comprise an activity; it is equally significant to consider the multiple sub-activities in a social practice (Spradley, 1980). Figure 4 illustrates the complexity of activities related to Parents’ Night. This study views Parents’ Night as a web of connections containing many sub-activities.
3.6.1 Discourse

A further way to look at the activity of Parents’ Night is to examine the discourses or texts that relate to it. The following text was taken from parent-teacher interaction at Parents’ Night.

A. Parents’ Night

Interaction from “Parents’ Night” at a secondary school:
Discussion about the program.

Parent of an ESL student: “In class are you insisting that all students are speaking English when you are teaching and asking questions?”
Teacher: “Lily, would you like to answer that question?”
Student: “Most of the time we speak English because in my group we have Mandarin and Cantonese speakers. We speak English because we don’t want the other people to feel alone. In class, we speak English, but at recess and lunch time we speak Mandarin.”
In the example above, Text A illustrates Parents’ Night. How is Parents’ Night text related to its context? How is it related to Parents’ Night as a social activity or practice? These questions about discourse are ones that are addressed by systemic functional linguistics (SFL).

3.6.2 Text and Context in Functional Linguistics

This section will discuss M.A. K. Halliday’s systemic functional model of language and context and locate the concept of social practice or activity within it. Figure 5 is taken from Halliday (1999b, p. 8).

Figure 5: Halliday’s Text and Context Model

Note: Culture instantiated in situation, as system instantiated in text. Culture realised in / construed by language; same relation as that holding between linguistic strata (semantics; lexicogrammar; phonology; phonetic). Cultural domain and register are “sub-systems: likeness viewed from “system” end. Situation type and text type are “instance types”: likeness viewed from “instance” end.
In Halliday’s (1999b) text and context model, Text (A), Parents’ Night text, is an example of ‘language as text’. Language as text is related to language as system. It is an instance of language as system. Language as text is also related to sociocultural context. Halliday distinguishes between two contexts: the context of situation and the context of culture. A situation is an instance of culture. Halliday (1999b) explains that “the difference between ‘culture’ and ‘situation’ is rather like that between the ‘climate’ and the ‘weather’” (p. 9). Culture and situation are one and the same thing seen from different perspectives. One is when we are looking at it close up (situation) and another is when we are looking at it from a distance (culture). The context of situation of text (A) is the event of Parents’ Night—the local and immediate context. This event is an instance of culture in more general terms. The context of culture of text (A) would refer to the school as “a cultural institution, a matrix of social practices governed by cultural norms and values” (Halliday, 1999b, p. 9). More precisely, we would need to refer to Canadian educational culture for the teachers’ perspective and to the educational culture of the parents’ home societies for the parents’ perspective.

For Halliday, context of situation “is not just equivalent to setting. The context of situation is a theoretical construct for explaining how a text relates to the social processes within which it is located” (1999b, p. 10). At a more detailed level, Halliday categorizes the context of situation into three variables that affect the way language is used: field, tenor, and mode. Field therefore is the variable that relates to Parents’ Night considered as a social activity. As was pointed out in Chapter 2, the distinction within field between social activity and content or topic is important for the purpose of the study. The social
activity is sometimes referred to as the first order field, or field one, and the content or
topic as the second order field or field two. One can say that text (A) both enacts the
social activity of Parents’ Night (field one) and talks about the ESL program (field two).

It was noted above that a situation was an instance of culture. Mohan (1986) sees
activities or social practices as activity types which can be recurrent across a number of
instances and occasions. Thus Parents’ Night is to be regarded as an activity type, not
merely an instance. As noted earlier, Parents’ Night has a history and has occurred on a
number of occasions across a number of years, though not in identical format. Once
Parents’ Night is recognized as an activity type, it becomes possible to use it as a
repeated unit of analysis and ultimately to see it in terms of theory and practice, as will
be discussed below.

Halliday’s concept of social activity is similar to the concept of activity offered
by the linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs in her discussion of language socialization.
For Ochs, “activity mediates linguistic and sociocultural knowledge” and “knowledge and
activity impact each other” (Ochs, 1988, p. 15). Ochs claims that activity or social
practice is a major unit of analysis for research in language socialization (Ochs, 1988), a
view that implies that researchers should analyze activity as a unit of meaning as seen by
the participants. Ochs uses the term “activity” to describe “both a behavioural unit, in the
sense of a sequence of actions associated with particular motivations and goals... and a
process, in the sense of praxis” (Ochs, 1988, p. 14). Like Ochs, a number of researchers
who wish to describe activity as a unit of meaning refer to activity in terms of knowledge
as well as action, as we will see in the next section.
3.6.3 Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Activity

Halliday’s text and context model implies that an activity is something that is done, something that occurs in a context of culture, and something that instantiates the context of culture. Instantiation is a continuum which ranges from the local and specific to the global and general. Similarly, Mohan defines an activity as a “mode of thought and conduct” that “has a pattern of action” involving “background knowledge” (Mohan 1986, p. vi). An activity has “practical and theoretical aspects” (Mohan, 1986, p. 43). In this respect, an activity is not seen just as action, but as a combination of practical and theoretical understanding, a combination of knowing and doing. One might therefore say that an activity has a theory and a practice, particularly since the contrast between theory and practice is a familiar idea. Other scholars have described activities in rather similar ways.

The ethnographer Spradley (1980) views activities as “streams of behaviour” that are culturally interpreted (p. 41). He discusses the division between theory and practice in an activity in terms of cultural knowledge and cultural behaviour in ethnographic research. For Spradley, cultural knowledge refers to what people know and cultural behaviour refers to what people do. Although cultural knowledge is often hidden from view, it is crucial to study cultural knowledge because it is “the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behaviour” (p. 5).

In similar terms, the philosopher Harré (1993) claims that a resources/acts relationship exists in all activities. Harré et al. (1985) consider resources as “the body of knowledge of legitimate projects, rules and conventions appropriate for persons of our
sort in specific social situations” (p. 85). An act is “behaviour that somebody intended” (p. 83). The relation between two aspects of activity, theory/practice, cultural knowledge/cultural behaviour, and resources/acts is graphically presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Two Aspects of an Activity

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context of culture</td>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>Cultural knowledge</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity in context of situation</td>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Cultural behaviour</td>
<td>Acts</td>
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It is important to note that both theoretical and practical aspects of an activity are matters of cultural meaning. A recent film *Gua sha, the treatment* (Zheng, 2000) will be used to illustrate this point in concrete terms. The film is centered on a young Chinese couple who immigrated to the United States with their five-year old son, Dennis. Dennis was sent to a hospital for a minor bump on his head. The doctor who treated Dennis found a lot of scarring on his back and assumed the boy was abused by his parents. Social services stepped in and a legal battle dragged the parents to the courts. The marks were in fact from an ancient Chinese medical treatment called *gua sha*. Dennis’ grandfather treated him with *gua sha* when he was suffering stomachache. For the American doctor and social services worker, the abusive *gua sha* treatment (the practical aspect) produced scars, so Dennis’ parents must be abusive and neglectful (theoretical aspect). For the Chinese parents, the normal *gua sha* treatment (another practical aspect) is to a Chinese family what chicken soup is to a Jewish family. It was a common and painless Chinese medical
treatment (another theoretical aspect) used when a family member was coming down with something.

The point that both the theoretical and practical aspects of an activity are matters of cultural meaning is significant to the present study. According to Spradley (1980, p. 7), members of two different groups can observe the same event or "stream of behaviour" but have quite different cultural interpretations based on different theories or models. Typically, an activity is contained within a wider context; for example, Parents' Night is part of the school and the educational system. Parents and teachers bring their own "mental models" (Senge, 1990) or sociocultural interpretations into Parents' Night. In this multicultural, multilingual discourse community, teachers and parents may have divergent interpretations of the educational process, and of the teacher-parent communication process. These divergent interpretations may be traced to divergent theories and models. Parents may have different beliefs about how the ESL program should operate. They may come to Parents' Night with different expectations of how a Parents' Night should run. They may interpret the activity of Parents' Night differently.

3.6.4 Reflection Discourse and Action Discourse within an Activity

How is the activity of Parents' Night interpreted by its participants? What resources of cultural knowledge do the teacher, parent and student bring to the social action of Parents' Night? The theory/practice dimension provides a way to looking at the multitude of discourses connected with Parents' Night. Smith, Harré, and Langenhove
(1995) emphasize the central role of language and discourse in empirical research. For Harré and Gillett (1994), discourse is any intentional use of language. They argue that discourses contain the sociocultural knowledge of people engaged in linguistic exchanges, through which people display their attitudes and create a social status. Discourse/linguistic exchanges should therefore be treated as the focus of empirical research that aims to "make explicit all that is tacit in a form of life" (Harré, 1993, p. 107). A major task of this study is to make explicit the meaning of Parents' Night activity that teachers and parents bring with them.

Harré’s (1993) distinction between “acts” and “accounts” in discourse is useful to study the theoretical and practical aspects of an activity. He contrasts two kinds of discourse: “there is that with which social acts are accomplished and there is that with which we comment upon and theorize about those social acts. Accounts are discourses of the second kind....some of the norms of social action are made explicit in accounts, though for all sorts of reasons. In a first order discourse, the norms of action are implicit” (pp. 116-117). Harré (1993) calls the discourse reflecting the practical aspects of activity acts. Acts are “language in use as the accomplishments of acts or as attempts at their accomplishments” (Harré & Gillett, 1994, p. 32). Discourse acts are language for doing the activity. Social acts are accomplished with discourse acts. Harré (1993) calls the discourse reflecting the theoretical aspects of activity accounts. Accounts are language people use to comment upon and theorize their social acts. Accounts provide explicit rules and conventions for people to act appropriately in social situation. Discourse accounts are language for talking about activity. Account is a “discursive practice, almost always
accomplished directly with words” (Harre, 1993, p. 121) and have a key role in social action. Harre recognizes that accounts can arise in the natural course of enacting an activity.

Mohan (1987) discusses the two kinds of discourse of activity in terms of theory texts and practical texts. To use Mohan’s example, an actual meeting at a particular time and place, from parliamentary governments to university departments, is an example of practice, and the “rules of order” at meetings are an example of theory. Theory texts explain the rules of an activity and practical texts enact an activity when it is in operation. However the term “theory” is restrictive and excludes discourse that people use to comment on their social acts if they do not also theorize in a general way about the acts. It would be helpful to have a broader term. Consequently, Mohan et al. (1998) use the contrast between reflection discourse and action discourse to provide a broader and more inclusive distinction. Though, as Mohan points out, the contrast between reflection discourse and action discourse is used in a much wider range of senses in much of SFL theory. Using the example of formal meetings, the researcher can label actual meetings as action discourse and all other discourses that reflect on meetings as reflection discourse.4

This is not to say that the distinction between action and reflection discourses is that straightforward (see Low, 1999, for an in-depth discussion of reflecting-on-action and reflecting-in-action). An action discourse can have a reflection discourse, and a reflection discourse can have an action discourse. The reasons that the researcher is using action/reflection discourse analysis are twofold. First, it offers a theoretical framework

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4 It is important to note that reflection is not restricted to reflection of past events. It also refers to reflection of present and future events.
that enables the researcher to link discourse data from observation data, and interview, focus group discussion data. Second, it allows the researcher to better understand the complexity and inter-relatedness of different layers of discourse of Parents’ Night. For example, in the action of teachers’ presenting at Parents’ Night, they are reflecting on the ESL program. In their individual interviews and focus group discussions, teachers are reflecting on both the ESL program and Parents’ Night. The meanings of Parents’ Night activity are made more explicit through both discourse acts/action discourse, and accounts/reflection discourse; it is therefore important to collect and analyze both types of discourse. This point will be illustrated from the following discourse data.

Our earlier text of parent-teacher interaction at Parents’ Night can now be compared not only with research discussion in the focus group, but also with a text taken from observation of student interaction in the ESL program.

1. The ESL Program in Operation
   Student cooperative learning. (Mandarin is shown in italics, English is in plain font; S refers to student):
   S1: *Hurry up.* Michael said one. *I said one. It’s your turn.*
   S2: *We said earlier they on their own send the news to Canada.*
   S3: (Reading from the paper written in English) They decide to send the news to Canada even though it's illegal.  

2. Parents’ Night
   Interaction from “Parents’ Night” at a secondary school:
   Discussion about the program.
   Parent of an ESL student: “In class are you insisting that all students are speaking English when you are teaching and asking questions?”
   Teacher: “Lily, would you like to answer that question?”
   Student: “Most of the time we speak English because in my group we have Mandarin and Cantonese speakers. We speak English because we don't want the

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5 I am grateful to Dr. Liang for her permission to use the data.
other people to feel alone. In class, we speak English, but at recess and lunch time we speak Mandarin”.

3. Research Interview
Interview: Teacher explanation about Parents’ Night:
Teacher: The purpose of Parents’ Night is to educate parents and students. Hopefully they will understand there are philosophical differences between ESL and mainstream classes. In ESL, we look at a broader picture, things like how good a learner is. It is not assessed by tests. We are not only looking at memorization, but the quality of learning. There is more to learn than grammar and vocabulary in English. Students will be able to use the language and communicate, to express their opinions in writing, to talk to native-speakers, and to discuss and listen to class discussion.

Text (2) is an example of Parents’ Night in action. The researcher examining Parents’ Night can rightly consider it to be action discourse of Parents’ Night. In text (3), the teacher reflects on Parents’ Night, presenting the teachers’ viewpoint. Text (3) is therefore an example of reflection discourse of Parents’ Night. But notice that reflection is occurring in Text (2) also, though it is in connection with another activity. The student in text (2) is reflecting on the ESL program. How can this be? Earlier it was said that text (2) both enacts the social activity of Parents’ Night (field one) and talks about the ESL program (field two). To sum up, text (2) is an action discourse (field one), with contributions by a parent, a student and indirectly by a teacher. Text (3) is a reflection discourse about Parents’ Night (field two) by a teacher. Text (2) contains a reflection discourse about the ESL program (field two) by a student.

3.6.5 Divergent Approaches to Parents’ Night

It was already pointed out that parents and teachers bring their own “mental
models” (Senge, 1990) or sociocultural interpretations to Parents’ Night. In this multicultural, multilingual discourse community, teachers and parents may have divergent interpretations of the educational process and of the teacher-parent communication process. Moreover, teachers and parents may participate in an activity in divergent ways. This can now be related to the discourse of Parents’ Night.

To repeat, text (2) both enacts the social activity of Parents’ Night (field one) and talks about the ESL program (field two). Parents and teachers might diverge in their participation in the social activity. Parents and teachers may have divergent interpretations (different theories) of the social activity. In addition, parents and teachers may have divergent interpretations of the ESL program. In each case, the reflections of parents and teachers are valuable evidence of their interpretations.

Furthermore, if there is a divergence of interpretation between parents and teachers in either case, there is a conflict under the definition of conflict given by Ting-Toomey that was mentioned in Chapter 2, and the possibility of intercultural conflict negotiation. If parents and teachers have divergent views of the ESL program, Parents’ Night would appear to be a possible site for the “diversity dialogue” envisaged by Taylor. Taylor’s approach would seem to apply to differences between participants in discourse with respect to the content of the discourse, or field two. If parents and teachers have divergent views of how the activity of Parents’ Night might be conducted, particularly about the negotiation of conflict, Ting-Toomey’s view of culture and conflict would seem to apply. Thus Ting-Toomey’s approach would seem to apply to certain cases of differences between participants with respect to the social activity, or field one. But it
should be pointed out that divergences about the negotiation of conflict are only one of many possibilities for divergence.

Halliday’s model of text and context can accommodate divergence by noting that different participants can bring different contexts of culture (or frames of interpretation) to the interpretation of discourse in a context of situation, including field one and field two. Scollon and Scollon (2001) similarly refer to the contextual interpretation of discourse when they provide a general discussion of divergence in intercultural communication. Scollon and Scollon (2001, p. 77) note that: “The anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972) pointed out some years ago that every communication must simultaneously communicate two messages, the basic message and the metamessage. The idea of the basic message we are familiar with. The metamessage is a second message, encoded and superimposed on the basic, which indicates how we want someone to take our basic message. ... According to the anthropologist John Gumperz, each successful message carries with it a second metamessage which tells the listener how to interpret the basic message...Gumperz (1977, 1982, 1992) uses the term “contextualisation cues” for the ways in which we convey metamessages in ordinary conversational discourse. ...this way of talking about communication is simply another way of saying what we have said repeatedly throughout this book: to interpret not just the sentence meaning but also the speaker’s meaning, we must make reference to the context.” Later in their book, Scollon and Scollon (2001, p. 244) use the example of discourse divergence between men and women, “intergender discourse”: “As we will see, in many situations, men and women have different interpretative frameworks and this leads them to draw the wrong inferences.
from language which in another situation would be quite clear and unambiguous. It has been discussed in Chapter 4 in the section on metacommunication, the problem in discourse between men and women, and between members of any two different discourse systems, most often lies in the signalling and interpretation of metamessages. Behind everything we say is a set of standing interpretative frameworks. The boss who tells a joke forgets that people are laughing because he is the boss, not because he is very funny. Within that framework, his position of power makes his employees more responsive than they might be if he was the mailroom boy. In order to understand intergender discourse, we will have to look at the standing interpretive frameworks within which the discourses between men and women take place. All of us are the products of our histories and our socialisations, and for men and women the most significant aspect of that history is the asymmetrical differentiation of the roles and statuses of men and women.”

Scollon and Scollon (2001) emphasize the importance of frames of interpretation in intercultural communication. Deborah Tannen, whose work on frames the Scollons refer to, has noted that there are two kinds of frame, and that researchers should keep both in mind. In Tannen and Wallat’s (1993) *Interactive frames and knowledge schemas in interaction*, the authors suggest a model for integrating two senses of ‘framing’ in a single analytic framework. ‘Knowledge schemas’ are associated particularly with work in linguistics, cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence and are structures of expectations associated with situations, objects, people, and so on. ‘Interactive frames’ are associated particularly with figures such as Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman and are what people think they are doing when (e.g. joking or serious?). Tannen and Wallat
illustrate the interaction of these two types of frames by analysis of a videotaped encounter in which a pediatrician examines a cerebral palsyed child in the presence of the child's mother. For example, two of the interactive frames are the examination frame of the pediatric examination and a consultation frame in which she answers the mother's questions. At the same time, there are conflicts between the doctor's and the mother's knowledge schemas (their expectations about health in general and cerebral palsy in particular). Their analysis reveals the complexity of the doctor-mother interactions. To the extent that interactive frames can be related to Halliday's first order field, and that knowledge schemas can be related to Halliday's second order field, Tannen and Wallat's analysis suggests that the complexity of interactions cannot be adequately revealed until both first order and second order fields are analyzed and their interpretative frames/schemas are taken into account.

In sum, Mohan's action/reflection model constitutes an integrated framework that helps to foster a greater understanding of how the participants act and interpret the social activity of Parents' Night. The actual process of data analysis was 'messy' and always moving back and forth between detailed line-by-line micro-analysis, generating initial categories, classifying categories, examining relationships among categories, and searching for a coherent framework that can be used to explain the phenomena investigated. The data analysis, after all, is the fluid "interplay between researchers and data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 13).
3.7 Data Presentation

The data for this study are presented as a distinction between field one and field two of a socially organized activity (Halliday, 1978, 1999b) and as “social representations” of Canadian ESL teachers and Chinese ESL parents (Cranach, 1992; Doise et al., 1993; Kruse & Schwarz, 1992).

As discussed in Chapter 2, systemic functional linguistics (SFL) views language “as a resource for meaning, centrally involved in the processes by which human beings negotiate, construct and change the name of social experience” (Halliday & Hasan 1989, p. vi). Halliday’s (1978, 1999b) separation between field one and field two is useful to uncover the meanings of the socially organized activity of Parents’ Night. Field one is the social activity being pursued, and field two is the ‘subject matter’ of the activity that it is concerned with. Chapter 4 of the study presents the subject matter of Parents’ Night (a possibility for field two), that is, ESL teachers’ and parents’ views of the ESL program and of the education of immigrant students. Chapter 5 of the study presents the social activity of Parents’ Night (field one and how field one actualizes field two).

In Chapters 4 and 5, the data are also presented as “social representations” of Canadian ESL teachers and Chinese ESL parents. As pointed out in Chapter 1, Cranach (1992), a Swiss social psychologist, considers social representations as “social images, ideas or theories of the world that “provide their members with patterns for the interpretation of the world and thus enable the construction of a common social reality” (p. 10). Building on Durkheim’s (1915/1995) idea of ‘représentations collective,’ Moscovici (1984) develops the concept of social representation as one of the new
perspectives that affected the shift in social sciences from study of the individual
behaviours to investigation of community shared knowledge. Social representations are
"subjective theories, interpretive schemata, belief systems" that exist beyond individual
variations as "properties of a community or society as a whole or at least of larger social
group" (Kruse & Schwarz, 1992, p. 23).

The study considers Canadian teachers and Chinese parents as two cultural
groups, and their beliefs and perceptions of the ESL program and Parents’ Night activity
are presented as reflections of social representations of the two groups. According to
Spradley (1980), culture is “the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience
and generate behavior... Culture, as a shared system of meaning, is learned, revised,
maintained, and defined in the context of people interacting” (pp. 6-9). Teachers’ and
parents’ behaviors at Parents’ Nights and their interpretations of each other’s behaviors
are conditioned by their cultural knowledge that they acquire within their communities or
social systems. Using this type of data presentation, the study by no means rules out the
fact that individuals differ in their opinions, and interpretations. For example,
observations of teachers’ planning meetings for Parents’ Nights showed that teachers had
different ideas about how to run the event, and sometimes these differences generated
heated discussions. However, social representations can be seen as principles that
organize inter-individual and inter-group differences (Doise et al., 1993). The individual is
neither “an isolated fighter” nor “a marionette at the strings of the social
system...Individual action is steered by social cognition which comes from the social
representations of the social system” (Thommen, Cranach, & Ammann, 1992, p. 200).
With this understanding, the views of individual Canadian teachers and Chinese parents in this study are generally considered for the social representations of the Canadian ESL teachers' and Chinese ESL parents' point of views as two cultural groups rather than individuals within and between the two groups.

3.8 Research Trustworthiness

There have been extensive debates as to which criteria should be used in judging a qualitative study (Garratt & Hodkinson, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1989, 1994; Seale, 1999). The debate sometimes takes the form of qualitative research versus positivist research. It has come to be known as “the paradigms debate” and it is “rooted in philosophical differences about the nature of reality” (Patton, 1990, p. 477). Guba and Lincoln (1982) state that unlike positivist researchers who search for the single ‘truth’ in reality, qualitative researchers

…focus upon the multiple realities that, like the layers of an onion, nest within or complement one another. Each layer provides a different perspective of reality, and none can be considered more “true” than any other. Phenomena do not converge into a single form, a single “truth,” but diverge into many forms, multiple “truths.” (p. 57)

Qualitative researchers believe in pluralistic, and interpretive perspectives of reality (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) demonstrate that the conventional standards of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity are inappropriate for qualitative research. Instead, they argue that credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability should be used to judge the trustworthiness of a qualitative research.

The present study’s credibility involves strategies such as lengthy data collection,
use of participants’ language, and the use of triangulation. Triangulation is a means to “relate different sorts of data in such a way as to counteract various possible threats to the validity of analysis” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 322). Marshall and Rossman (1995) explain that the triangulation of multiple sources of data in a qualitative research can enhance the credibility of research findings and reduce the risk of observer or interviewer bias and other threats to validity. Patton (1990) suggests four kinds of triangulation that contribute to verification and validation of data analysis. These are methods triangulation, sources triangulation, analyst triangulation, and theory triangulation. The present study applied all four types of triangulation. First, methods triangulation was applied through the use of multiple data-collection methods such as observations, interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Second, sources triangulation, also called data triangulation (Denzin, 1978), refers to the use of a variety of data sources in a study. Source triangulation was applied to cross-check the consistency of data derived at different times and by different means. Following Patton (1990), the study adopted the following four steps for source triangulation. These are (1) comparing observation data with interview data; (2) comparing what participants say in individual interviews with what they say in focus group discussions; (3) checking for the consistency of what participants say about the same thing, the ESL program and Parents’ Night, over a three-year period; and (4) comparing the perspectives of people from different points of views, such as teachers, parents, and bilingual assistants.

Third, analyst triangulation was adopted by discussing the findings with colleagues, thesis committee members, and participants. As mentioned earlier, the
researcher was part of a study group which met about once or twice a month for a couple of years. We often shared our work in progress and criticized it, sometimes helped with theoretical and analytic tough spots. The investigator also shared findings with colleagues who conducted research about different aspects of schooling, such as learning styles, teaching styles, extracurricular tutoring, and parents' perceptions at the same site. The bi-weekly discussions provided complementary information as well as triangulation for the data analysis. The researcher also shared her analysis with her thesis committee members who played 'devils,' offering insightful input for the drafts of the thesis. Moreover, member checking was also used for triangulation of the findings of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checks as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). It involves taking data and the researchers’ interpretations back to the participants so that they can confirm the credibility of the findings. A focus group discussion was offered in the present study to invite participants to reflect on the anonymous data collected. Their verbal reactions to the research findings then also became part of the discourse data. Finally, theory triangulation involved using multiple theoretical perspectives of learning organization, negotiation of intercultural conflicts in a multilingual situation, language socialization, and sociocultural views of activity to interpret the data. All these four triangulation strategies were used to reduce systematic bias and gain credibility of the findings.

Transferability refers to the applicability of one set of findings to another context. Transferability is always relative and may be problematic because qualitative researchers believe in contextualized perspectives toward reality (Creswell & Miller, 2000). That
means each research project is sensitive to place and situation. Qualitative researchers do not intend to make generalizations about their research findings, but rather leave it to the reader to judge the transferability (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The present study provides sufficient description of the theoretical framework, the activities investigated, and the contexts of the findings so that readers may decide if they are transferable.

Dependability in qualitative research parallels with the traditional concept of reliability. Reliability refers to the extent to which “independent researchers could discover the same phenomena and to which there is agreement on the description of the phenomena between the researcher and the participants” (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993, p. 385). Qualitative researchers posit that the concept of reliability is problematic because the social world is always changing. Instead, qualitative researchers should “account for changing conditions in the phenomenon chosen for study as well as changes in the design created by increasingly refined understanding of the setting” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 145). The researcher invested sufficient time to familiarize herself with Parents’ Night phenomenon and did not manipulate the conditions of the study. She noted the moments of unexpected acts and accounts of the participants during their planning and enactment of Parents’ Nights. The application of overlapping methods, and inquiry audits or the use of well-informed participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) also enhanced the dependability of the study.

Confirmability is equivalent to the traditional concept of objectivity. Resisting the possibility of researchers’ objectivity, qualitative researchers ask the question: “Do the data help confirm the general findings and lead to the implications?” (Marshall &
Rossman, 1995; p. 145). Acknowledging her own biases, the researcher used member checks to ensure the confirmability of the findings. The themes reported in the study were not imposed by the researcher, but emerged from the discourse data of the participants. Confirmability of the study was also built on audit trails or a “residue of records stemming from inquiry” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 319) and involved the application of written field notes, memos, process and personal notes, and a reflective journal. The researcher took the above steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the study; however, she was aware that her interpretations were grounded on the knowledge she gained from her life experiences and theoretical reading.

3.9 Summary

This chapter discusses the methodological issues relevant to the present study. The researcher argues that the nature of the research topic, and the ontological assumptions that human beings are active agents in responding to problematic situations, determine that qualitative research is appropriate for the study. The chapter shows that Parents’ Night is a socially constructed activity which contains multiple layers of subactivities within wider social contexts.

Figure 7: Halliday’s (1999b) Text and Context Model Applied to a Sociocultural Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context (Halliday)</th>
<th>Sociocultural Activity</th>
<th>Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context of Culture</td>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>Reflection discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of Situation</td>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Action discourse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The specific analysis in this study of Parents' Night as a sociocultural activity is based on Halliday's (1999b) text and context model, as elaborated by Mohan for activity and discourse (see Mohan et al. 2001) and summarized in Figure 7. A central point of this model is to express a sociocultural view of language and discourse, emphasizing that discourse (language as text) occurs in a cultural context. In Figure 7, Context of culture is "instantiated" in Context of situation, just as Theory is "instantiated" in Practice. Action discourse can provide evidence of the practice of an activity, and reflection discourse can provide evidence of the theory of an activity. Context of situation includes Field of discourse. First order field is "the social activity being pursued e.g. instructing somebody in how to prepare a dish...second order field is the subject matter the activity is concerned with (e.g. the ingredients and methods of cooking ...)" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999, p. 321).

In relation to Parents' Night, the first order field is the social activity of Parents' Night as a speech event; the second order field is the subject matter of Parents' Night which is the ESL program. This chapter has suggested that parents and teachers may have divergent interpretations of the social activity of Parents' Night, and it has suggested that they may have divergent interpretations of the subject matter of Parents' Night, the ESL program. To state this in terms of the Text and Context model of Figure 7, parents and teachers may draw on different contexts of culture to interpret the Field of Parents' Night. The model can thus be elaborated to account for intercultural conflict and to accommodate both Taylor and Ting-Toomey.

The next chapter, Chapter 4, will examine whether there is divergence between
parents' and teachers' views of the ESL program. Then Chapter 5 will examine whether there is divergence between parents' and teachers' views of the social activity of Parents' Night where the ESL program is discussed.

It is appropriate to close this chapter by noting the close connection of two major concepts of this thesis to the text and context model of Figure 7. Language socialization can be informally defined as learning not only from what is said, but also from how it is said and the context in which it is said. To state this in terms of Figure 7, learning is based not merely on the subject matter of discourse, the second order field, but also on the social activity of discourse, the first order field, and the wider context in which it is situated (context of situation, context of culture). When the researcher examines language socialization in intercultural terms, as she does in this thesis, more than one context of culture comes into play. In such cases, as the reader will appreciate, the model of Figure 7 is a helpful reminder of the complexity that results.

A second major concept of this thesis is learning organization. The researcher can look at a learning organization as a discourse community, and look at its learning processes as discourse processes. Central to these learning processes is reflection upon the activities of the organization. Parents' Night, for example, is an occasion for teachers and parents to reflect on the operation of the ESL program and the educational development of ESL students. To state this in terms of Figure 7, organizational learning involves reflection, and thus reflection discourse.

The concepts of language socialization and learning organization are of course connected with each other. The learning organization learns through discourse processes;
language socialization provides a view of what learning through discourse processes entails, stressing that people learn not only through discourse but also through social context as well. Parents’ Night is intended as an occasion when the school community, teachers and parents, operates as an organization that learns. It is not adequate therefore to look only at the discourse of Parents’ Night, and to examine only what was said. It is necessary to look at the sociocultural context of Parents’ Night as well, not only in terms of the activity and setting of the event itself, but also in terms of the cultural frameworks of interpretation that teachers and parents bring to the event.
CHAPTER 4: ESL TEACHERS’ AND PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVES OF AN ESL PROGRAM

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of research questions one (What are teachers’ and parents’ perspectives of the ESL program and education, and what are the differences between them?) It focuses on the possibility of what teachers and parents may discuss at Parents’ Night (field two). The first part of the research findings is based upon teachers’ presentations at Parents’ Night and their reflection in their interviews, and the focus group discussions. The second part of the research findings is based upon parents’ responses to Parents’ Night survey questionnaires, designed by the ESL department, and the bilingual assistants’ informal interviews with parents. The nine teacher participants are coded subsequently by T1 to T9, and the six bilingual assistants are coded by B1 to B6.

4.2 Teachers’ Perspectives of the ESL Program

As we will see, in the teachers’ views, the ESL program helps students socialize into Canadian school and social cultures, teaches students prerequisite skills, fosters appropriate attitudes, and integrates language and content. In other words, the program prepares the students well for mainstream classrooms.

4.2.1 Language Socialization: Teaching Canadian Social Culture

Many of the ESL students are new to the country and are unfamiliar with the
Canadian culture. The ESL Department developed an ESL social studies and an ESL core course to meet the needs of the immigrant students. According to a course planning booklet distributed at a Parents’ Night, the ESL social studies was designed to introduce students to Canadian culture, geography, history, politics, and economics. In addition, a core course was developed to teach ESL students Canadian social culture, evident in the following statements by teachers:

"Core class helps students adapt to school situation. We explain how the school is organized, the Canadian culture and the school culture. We also teach study skills that students need to be successful in Canadian school. We take students on field trips. Sometimes we have guest speakers to come in and explain safety regulations, for example. We take them to youth theatre, and cross-country skiing. (T1, Parents’ Night presentation)"

"They [ESL students] will also learn about Canadian history, Canadian laws, Canadians’ rights and responsibilities. (T2, interview)"

Another teacher told me she taught her ESL students Canadian history, which students would not normally get in their regular social studies:

"We are doing a unit on racism and prejudice. They have just begun to read a novel. We saw a film which is a racist event in Toronto in 1930s on a history channel. I obtained it and showed it to them because they think they are coming to a free country, and this is a democratic country, and they know nothing about the history of this country, they wanted some history. So I figure they are going to get Canadian history in Social Studies. I already taught them the laws, as a citizen what right do you have and what responsibilities, what are the legal implications, I talked different kinds of law, and I got stuff on the court system and took them to the court, they watched natural trials. Now they want to know more about Canadian history. I think let me give them in core that they are not going to get the history that is not usually told. (T3, interview)"
4.2.2 Language Socialization: Teaching Canadian School Culture

As well as teaching Canadian social culture, teachers reported that it is important to teach ESL students Canadian school culture. They stated that:

It [the ESL program] is a foundation that not only they must learn the grammar but they are learning the culture, the school culture, the community culture that surround them, they are learning how to, what is expected in a Canadian school system, as well as language. It is all tied together. To be successful they have to learn not only language, but also how to conduct themselves, what is expected. Also I see the kids put, take responsibilities, which is really important in this school system. (T2, interview)

Figure 8 compiled from a handbook distributed at a Parents’ Night, shows what teachers reported on the projects, presentations, group work, research, and reports of the Canadian educational system. It is necessary for the ESL students to learn this new system in order to be successful in Canadian schools, because these students came from a very different educational system.

Figure 8: Skills and Attitudes Required for Canadian Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Canadian Educational System</th>
<th>Skills Required</th>
<th>Attitudes Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Projects</td>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>Accept responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentations</td>
<td>Time management skills</td>
<td>Be confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Work</td>
<td>Organization skills</td>
<td>Be optimistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Group problem-solving skills</td>
<td>Be cooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports</td>
<td>Research skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developing creativity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Note taking skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.3 Teaching Students Prerequisite Skills

Specifically, the teacher participants reported the ESL program is to assist students to develop prerequisite skills, such as communication, research, and cooperative learning to facilitate their success in school:

Well being able to use the language for communication, to express and communicate in both writing and speaking. If you can’t do that, then the language is not learned. To be more specific, you have to be able to talk to native speakers, be able to ask questions, to able to watch the TV news, and listen to radio, be able to read the newspaper and understand. The ESL program starts them on this, being able to communicate with native speakers when you leave the program. It is teaching techniques for how to accomplish these tasks. (T3, interview)

My emphasis is more on skills than on the history itself. So for example, when students did their projects on regions of Canada, I wanted them to be able to look at maps, to get information, to look at news, to read stories, and songs, to interview people. (T4, interview)

For example, one teacher asked her students to conduct two research projects before Parent’ Night. The first project was “What should ESL students do to get into mainstream as quickly as possible?” and “What should ESL students do to be successful in mainstream classes?” The ESL students interviewed the mainstream teachers to find out what their requirements for success are. The second project was “How can parents help their child to succeed in ESL?” Students then reported their research results at Parents’ Night in three groups, respectively in English, Mandarin and Cantonese. The teacher explained that her students learned it was not easy for ESL students to be successful in the mainstream classes without the foundations they built in the ESL program. At the same time, the students also learned the skill of interviewing and doing
oral presentations of their research projects.

Another teacher reported she learned from her teaching experience in Asia that her students were not used to group work. She then deliberately taught her students cooperative learning skills:

One other thing I do want to mention, was talking about group work, and that’s something I know from having taught in Taiwan for a year, and taught in Japan for 3 years at high school level, and I know group work does not play an important part in education in the Orient and working together in groups is a skill that we all teach in ESL classes. It is essential for success in all mainstream classes. It is a very different approach to education. (T5, interview)

Students also presented to the parents the importance of the skill of group problem solving:

In Taiwan we are used to do our own work, but here our teachers often ask us to do group work, for instance, project, so you should know how to work together in a group. Quite often you don’t disagree with each other, you have to learn how to communicate with each other. (student presentation at Parents’ Night)

4.2.4 Fostering Appropriate Attitudes

The teachers also reported they attempted to create opportunities for students to build their confidence, enhance self-esteem and accept responsibility for learning through language development. The following excerpts were taken from handouts distributed at a Parents’ Night for students, listing attitudes expected of students and parents in Canadian culture:

ATTITUDES
1) Accept responsibility (Be responsible)
2) Be flexible
3) Respect and tolerate other cultures
4) Be confident
5) Be optimistic
6) Be cooperative

One of the teachers highlighted the importance of ESL students being confident:

I think the most important thing we do, and I think the kids will agree, because they talk about it so much, is to give them confidence, confidence to speak to mainstream teachers, confidence to speak to mainstream students, and confidence to communicate with the wider world, just out there. That’s probably number one thing we do. (T2, interview)

4.2.5 Teaching Four Language Skills in Contexts

Teachers reported that they were teaching four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing together with critical thinking, independent learning, library exploration, and portfolio projects. They stated that:

ESL Writing covers basic writing skill, from sentence to paragraph writing. Social Studies teaches current events, including local and Canadian geography, and students also use internet for projects. In ESL Literature students study all kinds of genre, including short stories, novel, poetry, and Canadian literature. ESL science teaches basic scientific terminology and methods. Transitional Science takes some of the regular content and modifies it to suit the students. Their ESL Drama has a lot of role play, and it teaches speaking skill in front of people. (T1, Parents’ Night presentation)

Oral skill, reading skill and writing skill are all taught specifically in ESL science but also in all our other ESL courses, and in mainstream science it is assumed basically students come in with grade level English. If they are in ESL program, they are not at grade level at that point, and our aim in ESL programs is to get them to the point where they have enough English that they can be successful in mainstream science courses. (T5, interview)

The ESL department emphasizes the importance of drama and uses it an educational
method to help students in presenting their ideas and developing their oral presentation skills. Teachers reported that:

Our ESL Drama has a lot of role play, and it teaches speaking skill, speaking in front of people (T1, Parents’ Night presentation)

I think our purpose is to prepare our kids to communicate in English, not to learn English grammar, but to prepare them with the communicative aspect which is important, and also of course, we also have to prepare them with academic English, which is much harder. We really do that by using an academic approach. Drama for communicative aspect. I think every single course stresses the communicative aspect, through themes, through presentations. I don’t think a single teacher in this department gives grammar exercises. That’s not part of the philosophy of our department. (T2, interview).

4.2.6 Integrating Language and Content

Teachers also reported that they were integrating language and content instruction so that as ESL students learn content, they acquire language as well. Specifically, they were teaching ESL students regular science, social studies content, language skills, and high orders of thinking skills simultaneously. They said:

We have a number of ESL classes, ESL Literature, ESL Science, ESL Social Studies, Drama, Writing. We do different things in each of those classes. In Literature, students study different stories in English, and part of the reason we feel that is important is they are also learning about the culture, and language and culture have a marriage. English language has a culture attached to it and I think it is much better to learn the language in that context. (T1, Parents’ Night presentation)

They [ESL students] don’t know how to write a lab report, how to do labs. I am trying to teach them how to write definitions, and their reading and writing skills in English need improvement and speaking, you know, their speaking skill in English. That’s the reason why they are in ESL and learning some of these skills. I am trying to teach them all the skills at same time teaching them the science content. (T5, interview)
4.2.7 Preparing Students for Mainstream Classes

The teachers reported that the major purpose of the ESL program is to prepare ESL students for mainstream classes. For example, one ESL social studies teacher presented Figure 9 at Parents’ Night. Figure 9 clearly shows how the ESL social studies prepares ESL students with oral, listening, written communication, reading skills, and critical analysis for mainstream social studies. Moreover, the ESL teacher also spent more time on one task so that her students could have some background knowledge and develop some concepts and basic vocabulary.
Figure 9: Comparing the Differences between ESL Social Studies and Social Studies 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills Covered</th>
<th>ESL</th>
<th>Social Studies 11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral Skills</td>
<td>Research and report on group members' opinions on current news items.</td>
<td>Class discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Answer questions on referendum, a distinct society, &quot;yes&quot; and &quot;no&quot; sides.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Communication</td>
<td>Write a letter to Quebec voters. Summarize main ideas from referendum speeches.</td>
<td>From CBC radio: &quot;If Quebec is a distinct society, then so are the Gulf Islands, Saskatchewan, and any other area of Canada that wants to be.&quot; Discuss using specific examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Analysis</td>
<td>Agree/Disagree with an opinion statement and give a reason.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening Skills</td>
<td>CBC newscast closure activity. Identify main ideas in referendum speeches.</td>
<td>Watch and listen to news at home. Bring information to class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Comprehension</td>
<td>Read CBC news transcript and identify main ideas.</td>
<td>Globe Mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vancouver Sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maclean's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background Knowledge</td>
<td>None assumed</td>
<td>Social 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary and Concepts</td>
<td>Worksheet/quiz on referendum and government leaders</td>
<td>Leaders’ and parties’ names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Whether federal or provincial &quot;Distinct society&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Referendum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent in class on activities</td>
<td>2-3 weeks</td>
<td>1-1/2 hours in class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In sum, the teachers reported that the ESL program provided opportunities for students to learn Canadian social and school culture, develop study skills and appropriate attitudes, and learn the four language skills in context and through mainstream content. They considered the program to be “reflective of current research in ESL development, as well as a creative adaptation of some of the most interactive methodology in current use” (T5, interview). The first part of this chapter presented the teachers’ perspectives of the ESL program. But what are parents’ perspectives of the ESL program? Are there any differences in the perspectives of the teachers and the parents of the ESL program?

4.3 Parents’ Perspectives of the ESL Program

As will be shown below, in the parents’ views, the current ESL program has many problems. Such problems include the overly long periods (two to three years) ESL students spent in the program, inadequate homework, lack of examination, mixed grades, lack of grammar instruction, the segregation of ESL students from mainstream classes, and low level of content.

4.3.1 Length of Time in ESL

Parents expressed their dissatisfaction with the length of time that their children spent in the ESL program. According to their responses to Parents’ Night questionnaire, the parents’ main questions are:

- Why do they have to waste so much time studying in ESL?
- We understand the program but it’s useless.
- Students have improvement, but they still stay in ESL?
• My daughter was in ESL in elementary. Why is she still in ESL at high school? I don’t think she needs to be in the ESL program.

Some students also shared their parents’ perceptions. One ESL student wrote the following reflection about the ESL Parents’ Night. While she was saying how much she learned from the night, she also unconsciously indicated that she does not need to stay in the ESL program:

We want to go to ELC [English Language Centre, a transitional program], we should study hard and speak more English, then we will feel comfortable in mainstream and probably we will go to ELC, because we don’t need to stay in ESL. (student journal)

ESL teachers were aware that parents did not want their children to stay in the ESL program, as the statement below indicate:

They [parents] want their kids to get out of ESL as soon as possible. I think they think their kids need to learn English but they think they can do it by studying hard, they don’t appreciate the amount of time they take. (T5, interview)

Bilingual assistants also reported that parents were concerned with the ESL program and they wanted to get children out of the program as soon as possible:

Some parents asked how the ESL program works? The teacher explained roughly they do have to stay 2 full years, most of them, and then again I started explaining what the teacher said, and they said oh, we were blaming our children for not getting out soon, it looks like it is not that. It is the school’s fault. (B4, interview)

One mother was asking me what happens if her kid has some courses left before she graduates. She is in grade 11. If she stays in the ESL for two years, what happens if she can’t complete all the courses? Does it hurt her chance to go to university? (B1, interview)

Associated with the length of the periods their children stayed in the ESL program,
parents were also concerned that their children are getting into bad habits. One bilingual assistant noted:

Parents feel their children stayed in ESL ‘too long’, then they started to hang around with bad kids, and they start to skip school because they feel ESL is too boring and not challenging enough. So they are worried about their children’s academic achievement, and their children’s socialization skill of getting into bad habits. (B2, interview)

4.3.2 Need for More Homework

In their return invitations to Parents’ Night, many parents made the following statements:

• Why don't they have much homework?
• Give more homework.
• Force them to do more homework.

Parents' desire for more homework was also conveyed by one of the bilingual assistants:

One parent asked me why the students have so much free time because his older daughter is in grade 12 and she has tons of homework every night, but his other son or daughter I forgot doesn’t do any homework. He was wondering why. (B1, interview)

4.3.2.1 Reasons for Wanting More Homework

Parents expressed a number of reasons why they wanted more homework for their children, which will be presented below.

4.3.2.1.1 Work Habits

Parents perceived homework as a way for their children to foster good work
habits, and for the parents to be informed about what their children were learning:

One parent told me her daughter’s friend just moved to mainstream Grade 9 and she said there are tons of homework for her to do every night. In ESL it is too easy for the children, they don’t have much homework, so they start to have bad habits by being lazy, but when they go to mainstream, all of sudden they have so many homework, then they are not well prepared to do that. Why don’t the students have more homework in ESL? (B2, interview)

One parent said: “In China I knew exactly what my son was learning because he had textbooks and homework. I use to check on his assignment every day. If he does something wrong, I know exactly how to help.” (B4, interview)

4.3.2.1.2 Different Kinds of Homework

Parents complained about the inadequate amount of homework in the ESL program. Teachers, on the other hand, think there are homework assignments all the time.

The following message from the handouts distributed at a Parents’ Night shows a variety of homework that teachers were expecting:

Homework assignments include:
- projects - individual and group
- presentations
- reading and writing
- research

To the teachers, homework may include:

Practising English by listening to radio, watching TV programs, movies, reading books, newspapers, comics, writing journals, synopses of books and or movies, letters, editing and re-writing completed assignments, speaking to friends for say, 15 minutes a day, practising talking with siblings and parents, and joining community centre activities. (handout to parents at Parents’ Night)

Another teacher said reading a novel was not perceived by her parents as homework.
I once asked my students to read two chapters of the novel we were studying, but most of them did not do it. Yet, their parents complained that I didn’t have homework for them. (T5, focus group discussion)

One bilingual assistant explained that parents had different understanding of homework.

There is always the concern that they don’t have enough homework, because they feel that in order for their kids to progress they really should be sitting for hours of time each evening doing their homework, although I think their understanding of homework is not the same as the understanding of the teacher. Their understanding of homework is more like practice homework. (B2, interview)

In sum, parents perceived homework as a way to communicate with school, to cultivate good work habits for their children, and a means to monitor their children’s academic progress. But they seem to be helpless and confused about the different kinds of homework.

4.3.3 Need for More Tests

Parents said they wanted exit tests as benchmarks for their children to move out of the ESL program, illustrated in the following parent questionnaire responses:

- Make some tests in ESL/ELC programs to test what level they are at. If they escape from ESL, the school must give them opportunities to escape it.
- Why don’t they have a test?
- Because we know that there aren’t any programs or exams that could judge students’ ability, where are they at the standard of ELC or Transit?
- Give a final exam.

Parents also wanted regulating tests in order to understand their children’s English progress. Parents viewed scores and grades as indicators of their children’s academic
One parent said: “My daughter has been in ESL for two years, but I still don’t know how well she is doing. Why don’t they have some tests in ESL/ELC programs to test what level the students are?” (B2, interview)

4.3.3.1 Reasons for Not Giving Tests

All the teacher participants were against standardized tests. Instead, they argued for a holistic evaluation:

We not only look at language and marks students get on assignments, but also their ability to do assignments. We also look at how good a learner is this student, how successful as a learner. And that’s something can’t be assessed and evaluated with exams and marks. Really it is more than that. (T4, interview)

This holistic evaluation is also reflected in the ESL Department policy:

Language acquisition (reading, writing, listening and speaking), attitude development (responsibility, co-operation, respect, compassion) and content comprehension are evaluated. Continuous individual, peer and teacher assessments are carried out on in-class and homework assignments. (handout to parents)

The ESL Department also adopted a team evaluation approach. The decision about a student’s readiness to leave the ESL program was made by the department as a whole. They had a file for each student. For instance, if a teacher felt that one student in her class was ready to move, she would put her opinions in a student form. Teachers circulated this form among all the teachers who taught this student. Then they discussed if the student was ready or not by identifying the student’s strengths and weaknesses. This team evaluation approach was illustrated by the following interview excerpts (T= Teacher, R= Researcher):
T2: If you are doing a standardized test, test scores don’t always reflect the true performance of the students. We sit down in October, any teacher who teaches that student, can put that student’s name forward for consideration for possible movement. By Christmas time, we formed a list of names and we decide in another meeting whether that student can move or not, the student may move out before Christmas, or wait in January. If it is not reached in October meeting, we will do it in December. That’s when students can move to transitional ELC program.

R: You just mentioned any teacher, for example, ESL Writing teacher will evaluate the student’s writing ability, and ESL Literature will evaluate the student’s performance in literature. They will have a meeting to discuss individual students, one by one, Right?

T2: Yes, sometimes the Writing teacher will say this student writes very well, that may be the case. But the Drama teacher will say well, the oral language skill, the student is quite reluctant to speak in front of the group, or they are not willing to take risk, you know. You’ve got to hear from all perspectives, where the student’s strengths and weaknesses are. If that is the case, a couple of teachers say we don’t feel they are successful, we will wait and see. The homeroom teacher is communicating with the students, letting them know their strengths and weaknesses.

Students were also encouraged by their teachers to evaluate their own learning. One teacher said:

We also encourage students to evaluate their own learning. We help them analyze what they have achieved and what skills need to be improved. (T3, focus group discussion)

Teachers also stated that students learn better without the pressure of tests:

It is good though we don’t have a letter grade, you are more relaxed so you can spend more time learning English but it is bad that you lose some motivation, that you are not challenged. (T2, focus group discussion)
4.3.4 Levelling of Classes

Parents also expressed confusion with the multilevel, multi-age grouping system of the ESL program and their desire to place their children in appropriate graded levels.

The various views expressed in their informal interviews include the following:

- One parent told me, “My son has been in ESL for three years. Every time I went to talk to the teachers, they told me he was making progress. But he’s still in ESL. They can’t tell me which level he is in.” (B2, interview)

- One parent said, “I know in Richmond they have Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3, then parents can see their children are improving from one level to another. In this school, they don’t have levels. That’s difficult to judge how well my child is doing at school.” (B3, interview)

- Actually one parent said, “It is not fair to my daughter. Her English is better than most of the students in the class. Her teacher asked her to help other students. That’s why it took her so long to graduate from the ESL.” (B4, interview)

4.3.4.1 Reasons for a Multilevel Grouping System

The teacher participants in the study reported that it was easier to place students into regular classes because of the multilevel system. One teacher said:

The ESL Program is set up on a multilevel basis. Students in each class are of different levels of English proficiency and grade. This not only makes it more accessible for you coming into the program, but also makes it more flexible in linking you with the mainstream class as soon as you are ready pending available space. You don’t need to start from the bottom level and work through to the top level before you can move into the mainstream. (T5, Parents’ Night presentation)

In addition, the multilevel system creates a cooperative learning environment. The ESL teachers believe that such a multilevel grouping system provides support for less advanced students who do not feel intimidated to participate in class, and more advanced students who gain enrichment by helping beginning students.
4.3.4.2 Reasons for Tests, Homework and Levelling: Pressure for Success

Need for More Pressure

The parents place much pressure on their children because they want them to be educationally successful. They think that both parents and teachers should push the students to work hard. For them, tests, homework, and clear levelling are components of pressure for their children’s academic success. Two of their comments make this clear:

- One parent asked me when her son is going to be out of ESL? ESL is too easy, no pressure. In China it is the teachers who make sure the students learn. Here they say students have to be responsible for their own learning. ESL is too easy, no pressure at all, it is ok for those students who are responsible, but for others, who are not responsible, they do need external pressure because they are children. After all, they will play whenever they can. Can you ask the teacher to give them more homework? (B3, interview)

- Chinese teachers keep putting pressure on the kids. When there is no pressure, they don’t study. If they don’t have tests, they will not have any pressure. (B2, interview)

This finding is consistent with the research findings of Lin and Chen (1995), and Yang (1995), who report that high school students in Taiwan and China spent four to six hours per day doing assignments. These parents believe that the only way their children can be helped is by much homework and a great deal of pressure.

Yet, another parent had a different view. She spoke about how she had changed from putting too much pressure on her daughter to being relaxed:

At the beginning, I was anxious for her to move out of ESL into mainstream. I pushed her to work hard and to read a lot in English. After she entered this school, I began to relax as I started to see she was working hard on her own. I no longer had to push her to read.... If you want your children to do well, please encourage them to read, write and watch TV in English. DON’T PUSH TOO MUCH
PRESSURE ON THEM. (parent representative’s speech at Parents’ Night, emphasis in original)

4.3.4.3 Need for Less Pressure

All the teacher participants on the other hand expressed a need to give students less pressure. One teacher said:

Parents can help students in many ways, encouraging them as best as they can, but not giving them too much pressure because they receive a lot of pressure anyway. I think part of the department’s philosophy is not to give them too much pressure. Some students flourish under that, some don’t. I think coming as a new immigrant, and learning a new language, it is already a lot of pressure on them. (T2, interview)

Not giving too much pressure to students is also consistent with the ESL Department’s stated policy:

Parents can encourage their children to strive towards realistic goals. Parents would do well to refrain from putting excessive pressure on their children or comparing them with their peers. Their children may be working hard but may need more time to acquire the English skills necessary to attain better grades. (handout to parents)

Students seemed to internalize the idea of releasing pressure from Parents’ Night, as one student journal stated:

I think that parents should give their children less pressure is the most important advice I learned from Parents’ Night because I know most of the ESL students want to go to ELC and mainstream quickly but sometimes parents give them more pressure, sometimes they rather can’t do well. (student journal)

4.3.4.3.1 Reasons for Not Giving Too Much Pressure

Teachers explained that there were a variety of reasons why they did not put too
much pressure on their students. Some said students had already pressured themselves:

I think the kids pressure themselves. The kids are giving themselves a lot of pressure and a lot of stress. What the parents do is over above that pressure and stress that happened to their kids. When the kids say that their parents are pressuring them too much, maybe they mean here is more pressure I am getting which I don’t need because I pressure myself. The kids tell me they are under a lot of stress over their shoulders and they feel the pressure coming within themselves. (T2, interview)

I don’t want to be harsh because it is already hard enough for the kids. We are cautious. (T3, interview)

Some teachers said Chinese students are used to external pressure and that has to shift because self-motivation is more important:

The Chinese students are used to having external pressure, and when they come here, it is gone, and suddenly it is like a holiday. Unless you can kick that habit of depending on external pressure, they are not going to succeed. I mean I see it over and over. So I really want to make that point. Maybe they are not ready to hear it, but you know at least they are thinking there is another way of looking at this, and not be so optimistic that we give them homework, that’s not the answer. (T5, interview)

Another ESL teacher noticed that there should be a balance between external pressure and encouragement. She said:

The one we had is fun, getting people interested, some sense of enjoyment. Another word came up is encouragement, I think one thing, the research shows and our reality shows students work much better when they are encouraged in a positive way by teachers and by parents. You have two schools of thought, one is the pressure and the punishment, and the other is encouragement. One is softer than the other is. We like, I think the balance can be made. If the student doesn’t have encouragement, and doesn’t feel they are appreciated, then they don’t have good feeling about themselves. The students feel good about who they are so then they can perform and work very hard to succeed because they want for themselves, not to please somebody else. (T6, Parents’ Night presentation)
4.3.5 Explicitly Teaching Language: Grammar and Vocabulary Instruction

In their return invitations to Parents’ Night and informal interviews with the bilingual assistants, some parents made a request to increase grammar instruction:

- Increase more English grammar.
- Can school give them extra grammar or writing class on the weekend?
- Please teach our kid more English grammar and vocabulary.
- A couple of parents told me that they sent their kids to a tutoring school after school. They study English grammar there. (B4, interview)
- One parent said: “I hired an English tutor to teach my daughter English listening, grammar and reading and writing in order to help her prepare for TOEFL.” (B1, interview)
- One parent told me: “I heard there is a very good private school in the neighbourhood. It is famous for its TOFEL preparation. I am going to send my son there after school.” (B3, interview)

Many parents in this school hired tutors or sent their children to a private after-school tutoring school in the neighbourhood, especially requesting grammar instruction. They wanted their children to learn vocabulary and grammar in order to pass exams such as LPI (Language Proficiency Index Test) and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). LPI and TOEFL are two university entrance tests required for the immigrant students in the province.

This result seems to confirm the findings of Beckett (1999), Horwitz (1987), and Yang (1993). The ESL students in Beckett’s study reported that they wanted separate grammar and vocabulary instruction to pass exams such as LPI and TOEFL. Horwitz and Yang also report that ESL students regarded vocabulary and grammar learning as
important in language learning.

Parents also said they wanted the teachers to correct students’ grammatical errors in their writings:

Sometimes I checked my son’s homework, such as an essay. I found many errors, spelling and grammar mistakes. I wonder why the teacher doesn’t correct his errors. (Parents’ Night question)

I asked my son’s tutor to correct his grammar and spelling errors in his writing. I also asked the tutor to explain to my son why he did something wrong so that he wouldn’t repeat his errors. If you don’t correct the errors, he will get into a bad writing habit. (Parents’ Night discussion with B4)

My neighbour’s kid is in mainstream grade 11. I know his English teacher marked his essay down because of his grammar mistakes. (Parents’ Night discussion with B3)

4.3.6 Preventing Their Children from Learning English

Parents perceived the use of students’ native languages in ESL classes as a barrier to learning English:

- One parent said that her children were always speaking Chinese. Even in their classes they were speaking Chinese. She wanted to know how she could make them learn more English and speak more English. (B2, interview)

- I would like to make the rule to tell the students they have to speak English in class. If they don’t do it, the teachers could punish the students. (B3 interview)

- Force them to speak English all the time in school. (parent response to Parents’ Night invitation)

- How to encourage my daughter to speak more in English? (parent response to Parents’ Night invitation)

The school administrator was aware that ESL students spoke little English at school. He
said:

When I was teaching ESL, I asked my students how many minutes do you speak English in a day? Often they have to think about it. They told me they speak English when they answer the teacher’s questions, may be 1 or 2 minutes. Encourage your children to speak more English. (administrator’s speech at Parents’ Night)

4.3.6.1 Reasons for Students Speaking Their L1

One teacher reported that it is easier for students to speak their first language because of the large size of Chinese population in the school and in the community:

You asked what a parent can do, besides encouraging. One of the things we feel because we are a west side school and the Asian population is so strong, is having them take part in activities in English outside the school. That’s tough for parents. Maybe it is easier to carry on their activities in the native languages. (T7, interview)

Teachers also encouraged their students to use their first languages in their small group activities. One teacher said:

My students can speak Mandarin or Cantonese in their group work. They can also use their Chinese-English dictionaries if they want to. Actually I started to take Cantonese lessons in the evening in order to understand my students because I know the literature suggests L1 will help ESL students learn L2. (T6, interview)

Several researchers (Cummins, 1986; Wastie, 1995; Wong-Fillmore, 1991) posit that proficiency in first language learning is essential for the successful development of second/additional languages. Providing opportunities for first language use has been found to have a positive effect on the academic success of ESL students (Tikunoff et al., 1991). The teacher’s encouragement for her ESL students to use their first language is consistent
with the literature. Her practice also follows the provincial policy. An English as a Second Language Policy Framework in 1999 clearly states that “ESL services should be provided in a manner that respects students’ language and culture of origin” (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 10).

4.3.7 Low Level of Content

Parents regarded the ESL program as holding back their children’s learning of content area material. They complained about the low level of content:

- One mother told me: “in Taiwan, my children were always chosen to be in special Science and Math classes. Some of their classes were taught by university professors.... The math and science classes at Milton Secondary School are way too easy for them. They tell me that they are really bored in those classes.” (B2, interview)

- My neighbour’s daughter is in grade 11. The science my child learns is much lower than hers. (parent response to Parents’ Night invitation)

- Avoid to teach Grade 12 students with Grade 8 stuff. (parent response to Parents’ Night questionnaire)

4.3.8 Not Real Learning

Parents felt the ESL program was a holding place for real schooling. In the following excerpt, R refers to the researcher, and T refers to teachers:

R: What do you think the parents see the program?

T2: Well the parents won’t say this. They never said this to me but my students have told me that their parents see it as an obstacle to get through, to jump through the hoop in order to get the goal which is mainstream, that they in fact
feel ashamed, again this is individual, they feel ashamed if they are in ESL because in ESL, at least this is what the kids say, they are not learning anything, this is a holding place until their grammar is good enough to get into the mainstream. (interview)

T4: Unfortunately I think the parents see the program the same way as the students do, in that it is almost a holding place for real schooling. In fact, I have heard the children say it is not the real thing. I haven’t heard this from parents, I am sure parents feel this way as well, just from what I have heard from the students, the pressure that students have to move out of the ESL, that ESL is almost a waste of time because students are not getting credits for it. And they are not getting grades for it as well. And I know I have students say to me they would like to learn history, they would like to learn about Canada, they would like to do a real Social Study. So it is not real. And in a way, if you compare to mainstream, it is not. (interview, emphasis mine)

Some students also think that the ESL program was not real. This point is evident in the following excerpt from a student journal:

I think that the ESL program is a way to prepare for our future is the most important advice because it says we must do as hard as possible then as we feel enough, we can go into the real Canadian culture. (student journal, emphasis mine)

However, not all parents felt the same way. One parent representative at Parents’ Night expressed her positive view of the ESL program:

In ESL, she [her daughter] had to read stories, and then to interpret them with her own ideas. In this way, she developed her thinking skills. I think Core class, ESL Writing, ESL Literature and ESL Social Studies all helped her develop her thinking ability. ESL Drama also helped her develop confidence in speaking.... Be patient! Don’t rush to get into mainstream. You have great opportunities to learn. My daughter would not be on the Honour Roll Standing without the FOUNDATION she got in ESL at Milton Secondary School. The skills she learned in ESL were necessary for her success (parent speech, emphasis in original).
4.4. Possible Explanation: Colliding Worlds of Teachers and Parents

The findings of this chapter illustrate how members of two different cultural groups can observe the same event or “stream of behavior” but have different cultural interpretations based on different theories (Spradley, 1980). The findings show that there are significant discrepancies between ESL teachers’ and parents’ perspectives of the ESL program and the education of immigrant students in general. The differences center on the issues of their beliefs about the learning of English language, homework, and evaluation, and students’ progression from ESL to mainstream classes. The teachers’ perspective on the ESL program and on education is intentionally and explicitly a language socialization view: the students learn school culture as well as language. When the teachers reflect on this view on Parents’ Night, they are therefore reflecting on language socialization. It can be argued, too, that the parents’ perspective has language socialization implications: they are concerned not only with what their children are learning but also with how they are learning.

4.4.1 Teachers’ Perspectives and Dilemmas of the ESL Program

The teachers believe that ESL classes help students to acquire proficiency in the four language skills and develop such appropriate attitudes as responsibility, cooperation, respect, and compassion. Teachers also believe that ESL classes help students enter fully into the Canadian school system and the Canadian culture. It helps them further to acquire such basic skills as writing lab reports, doing library research, group work, and
oral presentations in order to prepare them for entry into regular classrooms.

The ESL program at Milton Secondary School is reflective of current research in ESL development. For example, the ESL teachers are practicing cooperative learning, integration of language and content, building student self-esteem, and student evaluation. These second language teaching approaches are well supported with theoretical and empirical evidence (Brown, 1994; Crandall, 1993; Mohan, 1986; 1990; Nunan, 1993; Snow & Brinton, 1997; Widdowson, 1993). The approach of integrating language and content derives from the functional view of language. In their review of ESL in the early days in England, Leung and Franson (2001) explain how the functional view of language dramatically changed ESL pedagogy from traditional grammar to the communicative approach in the mid-1970s, and more recently to the integration of language and content (Mohan, 1986). The purpose of language/content integration (also called content-based instruction) is to teach explicitly ESL students language through regular school subjects, such as science and social studies. The work of Tang (1997) is a good example of this kind of approach. Tang illustrates how a classroom teacher adopted the language/content integration approach to assist ESL students in comprehending both the contents of grade seven social studies, developing higher order thinking skills, and producing academic discourse. In the case of this study, the ESL science and ESL social studies teachers modified regular science and social studies content with ESL methodologies to suit the needs of the immigrant students. Teachers were also teaching ESL students some basic skills. For instance, they were teaching students how to do lab reports, library research, and oral presentations because they were aware that ESL students did not generally come
with these skills from their home societies. These skills are necessary for students'
academic success beyond the ESL program. The integration of language and content is a
recent development in ESL pedagogy and has become recognized in the past ten years
(Grabe & Stoller, 1997). As Snow and Brinton (1997, p. xi) declare, “since the publication
of Bernard Mohan’s seminal book *Language and Content* in 1986, interest in language and
content-based programs has increased dramatically.”

Empirical research shows that integrating language and content results in
“improved language learning, improved student motivation, and successful mastery of
content information” (Grabe & Stoller, 1997, p. 16). However, owing to its relatively
recent entry into the field, the value of language/content integration has not been fully
appreciated. For example, parents participated in this study questioned the low level of
content in the ESL program when they compared it with the mainstream curriculum.
They requested, instead, more grammar and vocabulary instruction.

The ESL program also contains intercultural dilemmas that are not fully
understood by the teachers and by the parents. For instance, the findings demonstrate
that ESL teachers believed that the multilevel grouping system in the ESL program has at
least two advantages. First, such multilevel grouping allows students to move into
mainstream classes any time of the year depending on the ability of the student and the
availability of space in the mainstream classes. Furthermore, it provides a good learning
environment. The teacher’s speech at a 1998 Parents’ Night illustrated clearly, through
the use of her student comments, that such multilevel grouping system provided support
for less advanced students who did not feel intimidated to participate in class and with
more advanced students who gained enrichment by helping beginning students. The teachers’ beliefs about the value of the multilevel system seem to be consistent with the School Board policy (Vancouver School Board, 1994). The School Board 1994 document states that the multilevel grouping can provide holistic learning environment and opportunities for assisting and sharing with peers, and can engender a sense of responsibility for the welfare of the group.

The teachers’ beliefs about the value of the multilevel grouping are also well supported by research (Slavin, 1990a, 1990b). Slavin (1990a), in his review of 29 studies on the effects of ability grouping of student achievement in secondary schools, concludes that between-class grouping provided no advantage for student learning compared with heterogeneous grouping. Slavin (1990a) therefore suggests secondary schools should consider to “adapt instruction to the needs of a heterogeneous student body” (p. 495).

Another dilemma that ESL teachers face is whether they should give tests or not in the ESL program. There was no specific test to determine a student’s readiness to leave the ESL program. Teachers questioned the validity of a standardized test because they believed test scores do not always reflect the true performance of the students (see section 4.3.3.1). Instead they practised a holistic team evaluation and student self-evaluation. Twice a year, all the teachers met to discuss each individual student’s achievement and then came up with the department’s consensus when they wanted to move students to transitional or mainstream classes. Teachers’ judgements were based on their observations and ongoing assessments of the student performance in each class. The team evaluation recognizes the contribution made by students, counsellors, and teachers
as a whole in determining student placements (Vancouver School Board, 1994). Also, one teacher said there was "no point of testing because the ESL program does not have any credit" (T5, interview). We have seen parents expressed their desire for tests and grammar instruction; it is easy to come hastily to a conclusion that these parents are traditional parents since they seem to follow a traditional formalist view of language and a traditional philosophical model of education.

4.4.2 Parents’ Perspectives and Concerns

In this section, the ESL program is examined primarily from the perspective of the Chinese parents. Nine parents’ concerns regarding the education of immigrant students in general and the ESL program in particular were found. First, the parents expressed their concern about the length of time their children stayed in the ESL program, indicated in the findings of section 4.3.1. Parents thought a period of two years was too long. As Peyton and Adger (1998, p. 4) point out, “immigrants in secondary school face a serious time challenge: They need to catch up with their native-English-speaking peers in order to graduate before they reach the age limit for high school.” In Vancouver, the limit for high school graduation is 18 years old (C. Eddy, personal communication, June 29, 2001). Those parents with older children were concerned about the time an ESL class took away from content classes. Many of the parents wanted their children to go to university or college. Parents indicated that the length of time their children spent in the ESL program slowed down the student’s progress through school and therefore the student would not
graduate at the correct age to be able to go to university. Eddy pointed out, the parents might need a lot of work to build the understanding that in Canada students could start college or university at any age; initially this fact was outside their realm of experience. On the other hand, the parents might be concerned that once their children reach the age limit, they could no longer receive free education. In addition, the parents were worried that it might damage their children’s self-esteem compared with their peers who had gone to university.

Second, the parents made a complaint about the inadequate homework of the program. Parents regarded homework as a way to communicate with schools. It was noted in Chapter 2 that Chinese parents keep track of their children’s academic progress through textbooks, homework and grades. In Taiwan, parents get much information about their children’s education. They know their children’s progress through daily homework assignments and frequent tests (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). The Chinese parent participants from China in Li’s (2000) study also reported that they tracked what their children are learning through daily assignments, specially-compiled textbooks reflecting the national curriculum, and test papers. Through the students’ work sent home for them to check, educated parents felt “clear at one glance” about where their children needed extra help. Owing to both a change in educational systems and language barriers, the Chinese parents who participated in this study experienced difficulties in tracking their children’s education in the ESL program. They seemed to feel helpless and confused (see Salzberg, 1998, for a similar finding). Parents also considered homework as a way of fostering good study habits for their children. They were worried that the little homework
that their children got from the ESL program would encourage laziness and little desire to work hard. It would be difficult for their children to get into homework habits once they are in the mainstream classes.

Third, the parents expressed a desire for regulating tests in order to understand their children’s English progress (see section 4.3.3). Parents also wanted exit tests for their children to move out of the ESL program. Parents viewed scores and grades as indicators of their children’s academic achievement. Without these benchmarks, they were left with no way of checking their children’s progress. In their eyes, the teachers’ holistic, performance assessment, and team evaluation appeared to be subjective. In a way this kind of evaluation was subjective.

Fourth, the parents did not appear to favor the multilevel, multi-age grouping system of the ESL program. They did not seem to see the benefits for their children (see section 4.3.4). Instead, they wanted to place their children in appropriate graded levels because they viewed the levelling as an indication of their children’s progress in English.

Fifth, the parents viewed that there was a lack of grammar and vocabulary instruction in the program. It seems that parents took a formalist view of language learning, focusing on language forms. Parents’ desire for explicit instruction of grammar and vocabulary seem to be influenced by their own cultural model of language learning which they brought with them to Canada. It is easy to dismiss parents as formalists, but they also have a legitimate concern. Their children have to prepare for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Language Proficiency Index (LPI, a test for written English) required for admission to university and other post-secondary
institutions. These examinations require a large amount of vocabulary and excellent grammar skills. Parents may view the ESL program as not adequately preparing their children for the LPI and the TOEFL. Furthermore, the parents may also be aware that it is very likely for Chinese students to make grammatical errors due to the interference from their L1. For example, “Chinese students often use prepositional phrases in front of the sentence to indicate time because the Chinese verb form does not have a… past, present, or future” (O’Byrne, 2001, p. 445). Yet, many high school English teachers still believe “three major grammatical errors on a high school English paper meant failure” (O’Byrne, 2001, p. 442). Parents may be aware of this assumptions held by mainstream teachers (see section 4.3.5). Parents may want the ESL teachers to correct their children’s grammatical errors in order to prepare them for mainstream classes.

Sixth, the parents were concerned that their children’s second language learning was not enhanced through separate ESL classes because of the use of L1. Parents felt that too many students spoke the same language. One parent whose first language is Mandarin said, “my child learned more Cantonese than English in the ESL classes.” This confirms Cumming’s (1995) research finding that Chinese immigrant students in another Vancouver school learned more Cantonese than English during their ESL classes. The ESL students in Cumming’s study explained that there were too many Chinese students in the classes. There was no chance to practice their oral skills in English. Harklau (1994) also notes in her study the Asian immigrant students communicated in their native language almost exclusively out of the classroom. In the present study, parents wanted their children to learn English in class and interact with native speakers at school because they were aware
that their children communicated with their peers mainly in their L1 outside the school.

Goldstein (1994) questions the assumptions that learning English
“unproblematically provides access to economic power” (p. 36, italics in original) and social advancement. In her study of bilingual life and language choice of Portuguese immigrant women, Goldstein demonstrates how the use of English on the production lines was associated with costs rather than benefits. Many Chinese immigrant parents in the present study, however, believe that learning English is crucial for their children as it will promote more rapid access to higher education and employment opportunities.

Furthermore, aware that English is one of the official and dominant languages in Canada, parents may perceive that “dominant languages are associated with authority or the legitimate exercise of power” (Grillo, 1989, cited in Goldstein, 1997, pp. 27-28). Parents believe that learning English may allow their children to gain access to “economic, social and personal power” (Goldstein, 1997, p. 231). They are not concerned that their children will forget their first language because their adolescent children have already reached a high level of L1 literacy. But Chinese immigrant parents may see the ESL segregation as problematic for they believe it hinders their children from learning English quickly and becoming immersed in Canadian culture. They believe, in Coelho’s (1998) words, that “the fewer opportunities their children have for interaction with their English-speaking peers, the more socially isolated they are likely to be” (p. 35). They may also see that separating ESL students from their mainstream classmates could constitute a denial of equal educational opportunity (see Chicago Board of Education, 1991; Garcia, 1991; González, 1981, for a similar finding).
Seventh, the parents also complained about the low level of content in the ESL program. Comparing mainstream content with what their children learned in the ESL program in the same grade, they found that the content level their children was learning was below their respective grade level. When grades 8-12 students were placed in the same class, it would be difficult to teach all levels of content. Parents therefore stated that “avoid to teach Grade 12 students with Grade 8 stuff.” When comparing the science and math content of the same grade with their home societies, parents said the content in the ESL program was too easy for their children. They may see that their children were not learning high school content for university. Since they perceived that the program was not academically challenging for their children, they thus expressed a concern that their children got bored. As a result, parents were anxious to integrate their children to mainstream classes and may regard the ESL program as unnecessary.

Eighth, the parents seemed to view the ESL program as useless, for there was no credit. ESL was seen as a barrier to getting ahead. When they compared the ESL program with the mainstream classes, parents tended to find there are more similarities between their home educational system and the mainstream classes. Parents were familiar with the standard tests, lots of homework, and competition in the mainstream classes. They were also familiar with scores as a benchmark of their children’s academic achievement in the mainstream classes. The uniqueness of the ESL program was exemplified in these words of one teacher, “if you compare the ESL to mainstream, you will see we have a different philosophy...because in mainstream students are considered successful, based on their marks, whereas we look at a broader picture. We not only look at language and the marks
students get on assignments, but also their ability to do assignments. We also look at how good a learner he or she is, how successful as a learner.” For many parents, they could not understand why their children had to go through the ESL program if they would eventually shift back to their more familiar educational system of the mainstream classrooms.

The parents also questioned the ESL program, for learning was not taking place in the way in which they were familiar. Parents therefore ran their own “school” system. They either sent their children to private schools or hired tutors at home. Informal interviews confirmed that some parents in the ESL program hired two to three tutors for their children. In some cases, parents were helpless with their children’s academic work owing to their limited English. In other cases parents who were capable of supervising their children’s homework, hired tutors not because they could not help their children, but because they wanted to put external pressure on them.

Ninth, the parents perceived that there was not enough pressure on their children in the ESL program. Instead, the parents placed tremendous pressure on their children to advance through the mainstream credit. Even though some of the parents did not push their children to get out of ESL, students put pressure on themselves because ESL carries a social stigma. Anyone who is in ESL is regarded by society as “slow,” “inferior,” or just not working hard. Unlike French immersion programs that are seen as enrichments in Canada, ESL, such as ESL Level 1, becomes a sort of a remedial program. In England, ESL was also seen as a “liability” or “deficit” instead of an asset (Calderdale Report, 1986; Leung & Franson, 2001). Immigrant students and their families may refuse ESL help
because of what Harklau (1994) calls a “perceived remedial stigma” (p. 241). Even though recent literature in second language education has replaced the term of ‘ESL learners’ with ‘English language learners’ (ELL), the “inferior” stigma still exists in society. This stigma may be another reason why Chinese parents want their children to get out the ESL program as soon as possible.

Well aware of the stigma attached to ESL, the parents put equal pressure on the teachers to move their children out of the ESL program. The parents made comments such as “Why do they have to waste so much time studying in ESL?” “Because we know that there aren’t any programs or exams that could judge students’ ability, where are they at the standard of ELC or Transit?” “Students have improvement, but they still stay in ESL?” “My daughter was in ESL in elementary. Why is she still in ESL at high school? I don’t think she needs to be in the ESL program” (section 4.3.1). These comments appear to criticize the ESL program for lack of a clear benchmark. Deep in their heart, the parents may express a strong desire to move their children out of the ESL program. This result supports the research findings of McKay and Wong (1996), who report that the Chinese immigrant parents pressured their ESL children to succeed and took drastic measures to pressure teachers as well. One of the Chinese parents personally visited the ESL teacher to ask that her son be moved out of ESL at the end of the eighth grade. Another Taiwanese parent offered the ESL teacher a week in Hawaii over the Christmas break in order to pressure the teacher to move the child out of the ESL program.

Another interpretation of the pressure Chinese parents place on their children is that Chinese parents believe in the importance of effort rather than in the innate ability in
children's academic achievement (Stevenson & Lee, 1996; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992).

One recalls the parents said that students would not study if there were no pressure (see section 4.3.4). When parents made these comments, they may indicate that children will be more willing to work hard if parents, teachers, and other adults point to the virtues of hard work. It is generally believed in Chinese culture that all children possess the necessary capacity for advancement in school to higher level of development (Morris, 1996; Stevenson & Lee, 1996). This kind of belief is supported by philosophical and anecdotal evidence. The Chinese philosopher, Hsun Tzu, wrote that “achievement consists of never giving up…. If there is no dark and dogged will, there will be no shining accomplishment; if there is no dull and determined effort, there will be no brilliant achievement” (cited in Watson, 1967, p. 18). The roughest piece of iron, says the Chinese proverb, can be transformed into a sharp needle through daily polishing. The maxim of Mao, “Study hard and make progress every day,” becomes popular in every Chinese household. There is also ample empirical evidence that Chinese parents, teachers, and children adhere to this credo (Chan, 1992; Hess, Chang, & McDevitt, 1987; Salili and Hau, 1994; Stevenson et al., 1990; Yamauchi & Li, 1993). The Chinese interpretation of the relation between ability and effort may differ from that in Western societies. Chinese parents, teachers and students believe that “working hard not only leads to success, but also increases one's ability” (Stevenson & Lee, 1996, p. 137).

The parents' views of the ESL program seem to be consistent with the immigrant parents' perceptions in the studies by Gougeon (1993) and Salzberg (1998). Some local parent groups and members of the media present these parent-teacher differences as the
familiar traditional versus progressive views of education (Coleman, 1998; Hirsch, 1996; Pynn, 1998). The Chinese immigrant parents in this study demanded more structured curriculum, more homework, more grammar instruction, more exams, and more pressure from teachers. This seems to be consistent with the requests made by Asian immigrant parents in local districts who put forward a controversial proposal for a traditional school (Sullivan, 1998). The traditional school parent representatives also asked for teacher-directed instruction, homework policy, phonetic instruction, letter or percentage grading, regular study and conduct reports, and frequent meetings between parents and teachers. Chinese parents in this study appeared to have more in common with the Asian immigrant parents who supported the traditional school proposal.

However, the researcher considers it oversimplified and unhelpful to treat the parent-teacher differences as the familiar traditional versus progressive views of education. The researcher believes instead that the study shows a more complex picture. As mentioned earlier, the ESL program is consistent with much of the recent research and current practices in second language education, but the ESL program also contains intercultural dilemmas which are not fully understood by the teachers and the parents. The parents are not simply following a “traditional” model, but are responding to the breakdown of their ability to monitor carefully and guide their children’s educational progress, which is of vital concern to them.

Tung (2000) explains that immigrant Chinese parents “invested all their hopes in the children’s formal education. After all, the children’s achievement is the reason why these parents came to this country in the first place” (p. 30). Furthermore, according to
Wu (1996), for many Chinese people, a good parent is “one who is responsible about his or her child receiving a good education, [and] who is conscientious about his or her child’s schooling and achievement” (p. 151). Wu’s large-scale survey study shows that many parents in Shanghai, Taiwan, and Singapore shared this view.

The parents involved in the present study may feel frustrated because they are unable to play such a role of a good parent in Canada owing to language and cultural barriers. As mentioned in the literature review, Chinese parents are actively involved in their children’s education. They support their children’s efforts by organizing the home environment to make it conducive to studying. Li’s (2000) study shows how the two educated Chinese immigrant parents provided all kinds of rich print materials for their children within their constrained living space. In this study, many parents are able to provide their children with rich materials at home, but they are unable to intervene in their children’s education at school due to, among many other factors, loss of linguistic capital. Coleman (1988, 1990, 1991) discusses family environment in terms of physical, human and social capital. Physical capital refers to the material resources at home. Human capital is the individual’s level of educational attainment, and social capital is the network of social relationships in the family and in the community. In this study Chinese parents may not lack these three forms of family capital since many parents came to Canada as business immigrants, with university or higher education, and through some connections with the large Chinese community in Vancouver. However, without the linguistic capital, Chinese immigrant parents may feel powerless to provide guidance towards their children’s education in the host country. Moreover, lack of cultural capital may also
prevent parents from being actively involved in their children's education. Many Chinese parents may not be able to provide full support to their children, as they used to do in their home countries, due to not understanding the expectations of the North American educational systems.

4.4.3 Impact of Teachers' and Parents' Discrepancies on the ESL Students

The incongruities between ESL teachers and parents affect ESL students academically and psychologically. Even though this study does not focus on the students, it is important to note the impact of the discrepancies between ESL teachers and parents on the students because the major purpose for parent-teacher communication is of course to improve the education for immigrant students.

For young ESL children, the conflicting expectations about what to learn and how to learn held by parents and teachers cause confusion (Fitzgerald, 1993). ESL adolescents equally feel disoriented while they are experiencing cultural shock. For example, Chinese students used to take assigned courses appropriate for their grade levels, but when they come to Canada, particularly for secondary students, they have to choose their own courses. Videotape of interviews where ESL students identified cultural differences in skills and attitudes revealed that students need certain guidance. One student said, “There is more freedom here. You are free to choose what to do. But I don’t know what to choose” (Mohan et al., 1996). The issue of academic dilemmas faced by adolescent immigrant students who are caught between the Chinese and Canadian educational
systems have been addressed most insightfully in sociolinguistic work by Liang (1998) and Beckett (1999).

Another effect of the meeting of the cultures on ESL students is family tension. Many children and their parents cannot communicate with each other, since they both literally and figuratively speak different languages. One ESL student writes: “You have to let go, mom, because you lost me the minute I landed on Canadian ground. You can’t have an obedient Chinese son because I have become deeply rooted in Canadian culture. Please, just let go. I don’t belong to you anymore” (Porter, 1991, p. 94). In this study, many of the students are able to maintain their first languages, but they seem to be driven away from the traditional cultural values that their parents still cling to.

ESL students often feel torn between home and school values. The experiences that ESL students have in the school culture may be different from their home cultures. This gives rise to some attitudinal differences between parents and their children. Due to the strong tendency of assimilation in public schools, peer pressure, and Canadian society’s racial discrimination, some Chinese immigrant students may want nothing to do with the Chinese culture. They feel that their parents are in a different world. Their parents’ inability to speak proper English embarrasses them. As we will see in the next chapter, the Chinese immigrant students start to challenge their parents’ authority after they have learned the Canadian cultural values. As Cheng (1987) points out, many Asian immigrant children “rejected their home culture, yet they were not accepted into the mainstream culture. They could not fit into either the majority or the minority culture, resulting in identity problems and marginality” (p. 11).
Excessive pressure to succeed at school can be devastating to students’ emotional and social development. Some parents hold such high ideals for their children that they may overlook or deny physical, mental, or social limitations. Evelyn Lau, a famous Canadian writer who ran away from home at 14 and became a street prostitute in Vancouver, is a good example.

The following excerpt, taken from the ESL handbook distributed in 1997 for ESL parents, is another good example of this kind of pressure:

Mother, mother. You are angry with me. I am not the perfect son you wish for. Mother, my mother, your beautiful eyes used to look on me with such glowing pride. Mother, my beautiful mother, your words were once kind and your voice gentle as an evening breeze in Taiwan.

Alas, now that I am nearly grown, all that is in the past. Now your eyes are two black mirrors of disappointment. When I appear, a deep furrow marks the once smooth space between your arched brows. Silently you read my report card. I stand before you, fearing what I know will come next. I can hear my heart beat in my ears, and feel like running away. I fear the angry yet cool words you pierce me with. They are like blades of finely tempered steel, each one stuck in my heart. You aim is excellent, my mother. Your purpose is clear.

You want me to speak that infernal language, English, like a native. You want, no demand, that I earn only A’s in English. And I try, my mother, I really, truly try. And often, I fail.

Mother, if you tried to understand me as much as I try to speak and write this dreadful difficult language, you would not say these accusing words to me. Your voice would not sound like a broken 45 r.p.m. record. No, my mother. If you tried to understand my problems with this accursed language, you might realize that it is not all my fault. You would give me another year to feel more at home in the house of English.

To build the foundation takes two years. I have done so, diligently, slowly, painfully. To erect the frame, put it in the writing and plumbing, takes another year. I have done this. And to finish the house of language and move in takes more than five years. My house is still under construction. There are still a lot of unfinished parts. I don’t really understand the layout. I’m still learning how to
find my way around here.

Please, my mother, just think of me as four-year-old, still learning how to speak. Give me more time. And more understanding. And I beg you to soften those looks that are like daggers. I promise you, that in return, I will be diligent and learn to love English. Yes, I will. Really. Truly. I mean it. (an interior monologue written by a former ESL student)

The above example best colors the pressure that ESL students are experiencing in the process of learning a new language and a new culture. Chinese adolescent students who are studying in a second language frequently face enormous challenges. On the one hand, they are under their parents’ pressure to move into mainstream classes as quickly as possible. On the other hand, they must master the content of different subjects through the medium of a language which they may not fully command. In Halliday’s (1980) terms, they are learning language at the same time they are using language to learn. They are also learning about language. This process may be common for many immigrant students across cultures. However, Chinese students must do this “within an educational and cultural context quite different from their own” (Kirby, Woodhouse & Ma, 1996, p. 141). They are frequently caught between conflicting sets of expectations and attitudes at home and at school.

4.4.4 Teachers’ and Parents’ Common Goals

Sometimes teachers and parents are not necessarily in conflict. It is important to keep in mind that both sides are “trying to climb the same mountain,” according to Taylor (1997). In this case both ESL teachers and parents aim to provide the best education for
the immigrant students. Teachers are filling the educational gaps of the immigrant students with necessary study skills in order to assist them in socializing in Canadian schools. Such new skills as research and oral presentations are important for immigrant students if they want to be successful in secondary and post-secondary institutions.

On the other hand, parents believe they can help students achieve their best in school and life by asking for more homework. Many studies have commented on the practice of homework in Chinese families as a way to facilitate children's school performance (Chen, 1996; Chyu & Smith, 1991; Li, 2000; Schneider & Lee, 1990; Slaughter-Defoe et al., 1990; Wong, 1990; Yao, 1985). The Chinese immigrant parents in Chen's (1996) study attributed their children's success in Canadian schools to the good working habits, fostered throughout the years by devoting many hours each day after school to homework before they came to Canada. The giving of homework is motivated by a firm belief that "practice makes perfect," supported by one of the Chinese proverbs.

The Taiwanese parents in the study of Chyu and Smith (1991) also believed the commitment to homework contributes to the potential academic successes of their children. Homework is seen as "a vital part of the learning process of the high school student in Taiwan" (p. 128). High school students normally spend three to four hours each night on their homework. The educated immigrant Chinese parents in Li's (2000) study were not satisfied with the insufficient homework in their children's schools in Canada, they thus invented their own homework for their children.

The findings presented in this chapter clearly show that both teachers and parents care a great deal about the education of immigrant students. However, they have different
ways of caring. One teacher participant said that “parents are really concerned about their children. It helps to know that their ideas about homework and pressure are indications that they care.” Teachers showed their care by not pressuring their students because they believe students have to feel relaxed in order to learn. Teachers believe that learning a second language is a complicated process that takes a long time. They are also concerned that students are already under pressure to adjust to the new learning environment. Aware that excessive pressure may lead to psychological maladjustment on the part of the students, the teachers in the study explained that they are cautious not to place pressure on the ESL students (see section 4.3.4.3.1).

In conclusion, the discrepancies between the teachers’ and the parents’ perspectives of the ESL program and the education of immigrant students are real and profound. The teachers and the parents are deeply divided on both what students learn and how they learn in the ESL program. In other words, this is not simply a disagreement about language learning. It is a disagreement about language socialization. What can we do with these differences? Charles Taylor, a prominent Canadian philosopher, offers approaches to dealing with the differences. In Taylor’s work on multiculturalism, one of the themes of multiculturalism is that the institutions of democratic government make room--or should make room--for recognizing the worth of distinctive cultural traditions (Taylor, 1994). Schools, as examples of multicultural and democratic organizations, should consider how they deal with multiculturalism and recognize the democratic rights of ESL parents. For Taylor (1994), it is desirable and possible for different parties to negotiate their differences through dialogue. The next chapter will explore how teachers
and parents negotiate their differences at Parents' Night.
CHAPTER 5: ESL PARENTS’ NIGHTS: MEETINGS WITHOUT DIALOGUE

We have noted that parents and teachers have different points of view about the education of immigrant students in Chapter 4. One might assume that Parents’ Night, and events like it, are occasions for communication and for the resolution of such differences. Indeed, as we will see, the teachers assumed that it is. Thus it is reasonable to ask questions such as how did the participants at Parents’ Night communicate? Did they move towards consensus? As an educational community, how did they move towards sharing the values and understandings that underlie their educational agendas? How did they collaborate to achieve mutually agreed goals (Sleeter & Montecinos, 1999)? What was evidence of the “fusion of horizons” that Charles Taylor (1994) identifies as an important goal for modern societies and for multicultural communities? We shall seek answers to these questions in this chapter by examining the features of Parents’ Night as a speech event that might be relevant to the “fusion of horizons.”

This chapter presents and discusses the findings of research questions two and three, namely, how do teachers and parents negotiate their differences at ESL Parents’ Night? What are the difficulties of intercultural negotiation of conflict? The chapter examines the teachers’ purposes for and different approaches to Parents’ Night (5.1). It then explores the parents’ expectations and reactions to Parents’ Night (5.2). Following that, the chapter investigates the conditions that may have hindered or promoted intercultural negotiation between parents and teachers (5.3, 5.4), concluding with a brief summary (5.5).
As mentioned in Chapter 3, Halliday makes a distinction within field of discourse between the first order field ('the social action') and the second order field ('the topic of discussion'). In examining Parents' Night in context, the researcher will focus on the speech event as an activity (i.e. the first order field of what is being done), and particularly as an example of a genre. The researcher will not ignore what is being talked about at Parents’ Night (i.e. the second order field) but she will examine it in terms of its relevance to what is being done. She will particularly note an interesting kind of relevance where there is parallelism between what is said and what is done (e.g. where speakers talk about their mutual cooperation while cooperating with each other). She will be mindful of Halliday’s categories of the context of situation (the immediate context of the speech event) and the context of culture (the background of cultural knowledge which is brought to bear on the speech event). As was pointed out in Chapter 3, Scollon and Scollon (2001) offer a list of 'components for a grammar of context' which is a helpful reminder of the broad range of contextual factors which may enter into a speech event and which contains such categories as scene (including purpose, topic and genre), participants, message form, and co-occurrence patterns. The researcher will see how, from the teachers’ point of view, Parents’ Night is an educational event, and she will see how it is organized in the physical and institutional context of the school by school personnel in school spaces.

However, Parents’ Night is also an intercultural event, and teachers and parents are likely to interpret it through different cultural frames (refer it to different contexts of culture), frames which may reflect a variety of differences, including national differences
as between Canada and China, differences in the roles of teachers and parents, differences in the knowledge of educational systems, and differences in familiarity with the Canadian scene. There is therefore the possibility that teachers and parents will construct different interpretations, resulting in mutual misunderstandings. Spradley (1979, p. 9) provides a striking example of such misunderstanding. He describes an incident in an inner city district of New York where a woman has a heart attack in the street and is lying on the sidewalk. Two policemen come to her aid and kneel over her, trying to revive her. A crowd of onlookers gathers, assume that the policemen are beating the woman and angrily threaten the policemen. Spradley explains how the actions of the policemen are given two different cultural interpretations, one by the policemen and the other by the crowd. Policemen and crowd apply different cultural frames to the same event. Both groups are trying to help the woman, but they end up at cross-purposes with each other, and the woman is endangered. Therefore, when two groups apply different cultural frames, the stage may be set for a ‘tragedy of good intentions’ which puts mutual cooperation at risk.

5.1 Parents’ Night from Teachers’ Window

The term “window” emerged from the teachers’ discourse. It was chosen because it best captures the essence of the first two major sections of this chapter. The first major section will investigate Parents’ Night from perspectives of the teachers, and the second major section from perspectives of the parents. The first major section will discuss the teachers’ purposes for Parents’ Night, and then examine their approaches to Parents’ Night.
5.1.1 Teachers' Purposes for Parents' Night

The teachers identified five purposes for Parents' Night. First, Parents' Night was to educate parents and students about the teaching philosophy of the ESL program. Second, it was to promote understanding for parents of students' language acquisition and learning and the progression from ESL to mainstream. Third, Parents' Night was to encourage parents to support student learning and language acquisition. Fourth, it was to demonstrate student strengths in reading, writing, listening, and speaking through presentations/activity. In other words, student involvement was one of the priorities. Fifth, it was to improve communication between ESL students and parents.

Here, the researcher will provide three examples to illustrate goal one, and will discuss other goals as needed. For example, the teachers said:

I see that [Parents' Night] as just providing general information about the ESL program for parents. (T4, teacher planning meeting)

Really this [Parents' Night] is a kind of education for the parents and students. (T4, interview)

Our students are primarily Chinese from either Hong Kong or Taiwan, where the predominant mode of instruction is rote learning. Students are motivated by demanding and strict teachers who give tests regularly and expect students to memorize what is said in the classroom. Our more lenient approach, based on developing thinking skills and creativity is already a huge shift for parents to grasp. When we throw in non-graded ESL classes where grade 8's are mixed with grade 12's and where beginners are grouped with advanced English speakers, parents are sometimes bewildered.... As professional educators, teachers in the ESL department recognize the need to educate our parents, as well as our students, to the goals and philosophy behind our system.... As they (parents) continually ‘push’ their children to ‘work hard’ and get out of ESL, we feel it essential to organize a Parents’ Night every year to introduce our parents to these new ideas. (T5, interview)
As the first example shows, in the teachers’ eyes, the purpose of Parents’ Night was to provide “general information about the ESL program for parents.” The last example illustrates how the teachers felt that Parents’ Night was to introduce the parents to their “developing thinking skills and creativity” approaches in the Canadian educational system, as well as the multilevel system in the ESL program. It seems that the teachers approached Parents’ Night as an educational event in an attempt to help the parents understand the educational philosophy of the ESL program.

5.1.2 Teachers’ Approaches to Parents’ Night

In the section above, the teachers’ five purposes for Parents’ Night were presented. These purposes represent the teachers’ theories and beliefs about Parents’ Night. This section investigates how the teachers approached Parents’ Night in action. As we will see, the teachers’ theories and practices are matters of cultural meaning. Since the notion of genre is now widely discussed in the intercultural communication literature, it may be helpful to approach Parents’ Night as a social activity through the concept of genre, broadly conceived. Genre is a term that refers to “different conventional forms of speech events” (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p. 33). Within the systemic functional approach it has been defined as “a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture” (Martin, 1984, p. 25).

The teachers’ main goal is “to educate the parents and students about the teaching philosophy of the ESL program.” This points in the direction of the general genre of Parents’ Night--broadly, teaching about the program. This section will focus on a central
element in this genre, namely, providing a rationale for an educational program. For example, the ESL program handbook is a written monologue example of one variant of such a rationale. Parents' Night is a spoken example of another variant of such a rationale. As a face-to-face meeting, Parents' Night can be considered as a dialogue, though the opportunity for true dialogue in a large meeting is likely to be small. As a rationale, Parents' Night will be examined both from the teachers' standpoint and the parents' standpoint.

As a rationale, the teachers are explaining the program in the sense that the teachers are giving reasons for what the teachers do in the program, that is, giving reasons for the policies of the program, and particularly those policies which are of concern to the parents. According to Green (1971), "By giving reasons, then, I mean a 'because' response to the question: 'Why did (does) A do X?' that includes an appeal to rules or principles of conduct for the purpose of justifying, vindicating or establishing the propriety of a certain act" (p.160). Therefore, the researcher will discuss features of the program, not as a reflection of teacher perspectives, which was a theme of Chapter 4, but as part of a rationale in responding to the concerns of the parents ("Why do you do that in the ESL program?"), and as targets of justification ("We do that for this reason").

The researcher will present the minutes of Parents' Night in 1998 in order to illustrate the genre, and then discuss a variety of teachers' justified aspects of the program. The minutes, taken from the researcher's field notes, record time, speakers, and what was said briefly:
ESL Parents’ Night, Feb 17, 1998

(Setting: The Milton Secondary School’s String Orchestra played while parents assembled on the stage in the auditorium.)

7:00-7:30 Introduction

7:00 The principal made a welcome address and spoke about the importance of the ESL program.

7:05 One area superintendent made a special address regarding the Vancouver schools as an ESL district and the provincial ESL policy.

7:10 The ESL counsellor spoke about the ESL counselling services.

7:15 Three multicultural liaison workers, one Chinese, one Korean, and one Filipino, introduced briefly their services.

7:20 One ESL specialist from the Vancouver School Board talked about the value of the ESL program at the Milton Secondary School.

7:25 One president and two ESL representatives of the student council, and one student of the Friendship Club talked about the activities they organized for students.

7:30-8:00 Speakers

7:30 One Chinese parent of former ESL students talked about her daughter’s experience in the ESL program. (translated into Mandarin and Cantonese by the Chinese liaison worker)

7:40 One former ESL student talked about her own experience in the ESL program and parental pressure. (translated into Mandarin and Cantonese by the Chinese liaison worker)

7:45 The English Department Head addressed various ways of learning English.

7:50 The Science Department Head addressed the requirement for regular science courses and the importance of the ESL science.

7:55 One teacher from the Social Studies Department talked about the
importance of parent involvement and actively learning about Vancouver and Canada. (All the three speeches above were translated into Cantonese by the Chinese liaison worker)

8:00-9:00 **Core Class Presentations** (Parents, teachers and students moved to seven individual homerooms)

8:10 In the homeroom I observed, the ESL teacher explained the multilevel system, how students moved from ESL into ELC, skills needed to be successful in the mainstream classes, and answered two questions from the parents.

8:50 Students showed their portfolios of their work from all their classes to their parents.

9:00-9:30 **Refreshments in the cafeteria**

As can be seen from the above field notes, the speakers at Parents’ Night can be considered as providing a rationale, giving justifications for the ESL program and particularly for aspects of the program which are of concern to the parents. While there are a number of concerns that the parents have, perhaps the central concern is with the length of time that students stay in the ESL program. This central concern has two aspects: Time in the program is time taken away from mainstream courses which must be completed for graduation; and time in the program may not be time well spent on essential learning. The examples that follow (see section 5.3.1) show how the speakers address this central concern in a variety of ways, sometimes by endorsing the value of program in general, sometimes by mentioning specific aspects of the program. They also show how the speakers justify the program, sometimes by explicitly giving reasons for the program and its features. Sometimes, however, the justification is based on the roles or nature of the speakers themselves, or their experiences, or even by a parallelism
between what the speakers say and what they do. Finally, in many cases speakers provide both types of justification of explicit reasons and the roles of the speakers. The researcher will begin with examples where explicit reasons are more prominent and then move to examples that include both reasons and justification based on the speakers themselves, stressing that these differences are matters of emphasis rather than clear-cut distinctions.

5.1.2.1 Examples with Explicit Reasons

Justification for the length of the ESL program was made by one teacher’s explanations in her classroom. In her presentation, one ESL teacher used Cummins’ (1991) basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) to explain to parents why students generally stay in the ESL program for 2 years:

It was more difficult to understand the textbook and to write an essay than just to talk to your friends on the phone about what you want to do on Saturday night. Conversation skills take about 1 to 2 years to master, academic language proficiency 5 to 7 years. So really 2 years in ESL is a minimum…. These are things like thinking processes, reading for information from textbooks, organization of information, writing an essay, answering questions, making a presentation, whereas in conversation you get context. It is easier when your friend is talking to you, you can see their facial expressions, and you can see their body moving. You know they are eating an ice cream and they are talking oh, this is great… So they are developing their thinking skill and trying to learn a new language, all the same time. Not easy. That’s the main reason why most people spend approximately two years in ESL and one year in transitional. (T5, Parents’ Night presentation)

The teacher’s reason for the length of time immigrant students need to acquire
conversational and academic English is based upon empirical research (Collier, 1987; Collier & Thomas, 1989; Cummins, 1991). Research indicates that it takes less than two years for immigrant students to acquire conversational language proficiency, whereas it takes as long as five to seven years to acquire academic language proficiency. Collier (1987) notes that “arrivals at ages of 12-15 experienced the greatest difficulty and were projected to require as much as 6-8 years to reach grade level norms in academic achievement when schooled in the second language” (1987, p. 617). Notice how the teacher’s reason appeals to the authority of empirical research and assumes the parents will respect that authority.

The teachers also explained the multilevel grouping system to the parents at Parents’ Night. For instance, while pointing to the transparency on the overhead projector, one teacher said:

Here are some comments from the beginning students. They said some advanced students can speak their language and it helps a lot. They get more challenge. The advanced students push them to get more English skills. The more advanced students can tell them about their experience and help them solve problems. They can learn faster from advanced students. How about the advanced students? How can that benefit them to be with beginners? Well, here are some of the students’ comments. If they work with beginning students, they can use simple language to explain things. For example, one said, “if I teach him, it will help me to remember and understand more.” Sometimes it is the best way to learn something. If you explain to somebody else, you can learn how to describe things to other people. Another said, “it helps me to learn lower students’ problems and learn how to explain. I can teach him and answer his questions and my English will be better. If I am helping them, we get to review the material.” Absolutely, this is what the research has found, if you get students in different levels, the lower level students’ benefits, they learn faster, and the higher level students also learn faster. That’s why we don’t have levels. (T5, Parents’ Night presentation)

In her explanation above, the teacher discussed the advantages of the multilevel system
based on research she did from her own former ESL students. Her student comments about the benefits of this system confirmed the existing published research (see Slavin, 1990a, 1990b). The teacher’s explanation is supported by the ESL counsellor, who said “this [multilevel grouping] is one of the finest systems in the city.” Her justification is also supported by the ESL Handbook, which explains the rationale for the multilevel system in written genre, based on sound educational principles (see section 4.4.1 in Chapter 4 for detailed discussions).

The teachers also attempted to speak to the parents’ concern about evaluation. The following parent-teacher interaction at Parents’ Night is an example of such an attempt:

Parent: “How do you decide when a student can move to ELC/Transitional courses?”
ESL teacher: “When the student grasps certain skills and is emotionally ready. The ESL program has the same curriculum as the mainstream. As soon as we feel a student is ready, maybe not in every aspect, for example, not as vocal as we expect, but has a good grasp of grammar, we would start discussing about moving him or her into the transitional or ELC. The decision is made by the department as a whole.” (T3)

It seems that the teacher was explaining the process of team evaluation for student readiness to move to mainstream classes in order to address parents’ concerns regarding exit tests of the ESL program.

5.1.2.2 The Nature of the Speakers and Reasons

Testimonials for the ESL program are also achieved by different kinds of speakers at Parents’ Night. As we will see, all the speakers endorse the value of the ESL program at Milton Secondary School. Specifically, this section will attempt to address the
following questions: Who are the speakers at Parents’ Night? Why are they chosen to speak at Parents’ Night? How are the views of different speakers organized as rationales to convince the audience?

5.1.2.2.1 Guest Speakers from the School Board, School Administrators, Mainstream Department Heads, and Mainstream Teachers

As the minutes show (section 5.3), justification about the length of the program was first made by an ESL specialist from the Vancouver School Board for all the parents in the school auditorium. She said:

You are very fortunate that your children are at this school. I am very familiar with the ESL program and it is one of the finest in the city. I’d also let you know it takes a long time for students to learn English. I work with all elementary and secondary schools in this area, and the average time students spend in the ESL program or with the ESL support in this area of the city is 2 to 3 years. So learning a language is not an easy task for students. (ESL specialist’s speech at Parents’ Night)

The speaker stressed that the ESL program at Milton Secondary School is “one of the finest in the city.” She also implied that two-year is a miminum for an ESL student to learn the language. Another guest speaker, the area superintendent, also endorsed the value of the ESL program and the importance of parent participation. His support for the value of student involvement in the process of Parents’ Night becomes evident in his speech:

It is very important that this evening you come and take part in this program. I hope it would be for your benefit and you will learn a lot. And the students will be able to play a significant role in trying to explain what goes on in their lives at school and you will be able to have all your questions answered. (the area superintendent’s speech at Parents’ Night)
The top officials from the schools are also invited to address the parents. For instance, the principal and a vice-principal of Milton Secondary School said:

Our school ESL program is really, really a fine program... the ESL students are fairly quickly integrated into classes and made to feel very welcome at school... Also I think our program is very unique multilevel program and I think tonight it is going to be a very informative evening for you. (the principal’s speech at Parents’ Night)

Our ESL program is very important because it provides a foundation for our students’ English. Our ESL program provides cultural background as well as language learning. (the vice-principal’s speech at Parents’ Night)

As the excerpts above show, according to the principal, the ESL program at Milton Secondary School was “really, really a fine program.” Its multilevel system was “unique,” because it allowed students to be “fairly quickly integrated into classes.” The vice-principal, on the other hand, supported one of the ESL program’s teaching philosophies, namely, that the ESL program is a language socialization process for immigrant students who are learning English language as well as the Canadian culture simultaneously.

With respect to the content of the speeches, the guest speakers from the Vancouver School Board and the school administrators all provide reasons about the importance of the ESL program. Another way in which we can talk about speakers is in terms of the roles they play at Parents’ Night. It is reasonable to argue that these people represent an authority from the high levels of the School Board and the school. They are authoritative figures outside the ESL program who endorse the ESL program.

Three mainstream teachers were also invited to speak at Parents’ Night in 1998. One was the head of the Science Department, another the head of the English
Department, and the third teacher represented Social Studies. All three mainstream
teachers endorsed the value of the ESL program. For example, the head of the English
Department highlighted the value of English proficiency for building students’ confidence,
students’ active participation in class, and taking responsibility for learning. She also
reinforced the idea that “it takes patience to acquire the language. It is not something that
comes quickly.” She stated that the English communication skills and critical thinking
skills that ESL students learn in the ESL program are crucial for student success in the
mainstream classes. Like the English teacher, the Social Studies teacher also asserted the
value of reading a variety of topics about Canada in order to become familiar with
Canadian culture. In addition to the explicit reasons for justifying the ESL program, the
head of the Science Department, the head of the English Department, and the Social
Studies teacher, like the guest speakers from the Vancouver School Board and the school
administrators, are figures of authority. Moreover, all the speakers demonstrate their
support of the ESL program from outside the program.

Furthermore, all the speakers mentioned above gave individual addresses. Other
formats also occurred. For example, one ESL science teacher and one mainstream science
teacher jointly explained how ESL science prepared ESL students for the mainstream by
comparing the differences between ESL science and mainstream science at Parents’ Night:

The Mainstream science teacher:

-- There is prerequisite knowledge which students must have in each course. This
knowledge may be briefly reviewed but is not re-taught in the next course. If
students miss this knowledge, it will be difficult for them to acquire while learning
new material.
-- Even though some may think that science involves less English, actually there
are many new vocabulary terms and students must be able to read and understand textbooks and the teacher’s notes. Also, assignments must be written using an acceptable level of English.

The ESL science teacher:

-- What we would like to do now is just to show you how ESL science prepares the students coming into this program to be able to be successful, ...in mainstream classes, and some of the skills...For example, definition writing. In ESL science I teach students step by step how to write definitions. In mainstream science it is expected that students already know. Note-taking skill, again, I teach step by step in ESL science and it is assumed in mainstream classes that students can take notes from the text and then add in extra information given orally by the teacher. In ESL science I teach students how to write lab reports step by step, and in mainstream classes it is taught in grade 8, but by the time students are getting into other grades it is assumed that they know. Unless students come in grade 8 level, they learn it in ESL science, or they don’t learn it basically. (T5, Parents’ Night presentation)

We have noted in Chapter 4 that one of the parents’ concerns was that their children did not learn anything useful in the ESL program. This collaborative demonstration between the ESL and mainstream science teachers addressed that concern. It shows how ESL science gives students prerequisite knowledge and necessary skills such as definition writing, note taking, and lab reports. These skills are assumed in the mainstream science classes, which require a high standard for English proficiency. Since the prerequisite skill students learned in the ESL science prepared students for mainstream science classes, ESL teachers are preparing students for mainstream classes, and ESL is thus valuable. Moreover, this joint explanation also demonstrates how the ESL science teacher collaborates with the mainstream science teacher. This means that the teachers are not only discussing the benefits of collaborative work, but also showing the parents how they
actually collaborate with each other.

5.1.2.2 A Chinese Parent Representative

A Chinese parent of a former ESL student was also invited to speak to the whole audience at Parents’ Night in the big assembly in the school auditorium:

I would like to give this message to ESL parents and students. Be patient. Don’t rush to get into mainstream. In fact, congratulations that you are all in ESL at Milton. You have great opportunities to learn. My daughter would not be on the Honour Roll without the foundation she got in ESL. The skills she learned in ESL were necessary for her success. (parent representative’s speech at Parents’ Night)

The parent representative was discussing how successful her daughter is now in the mainstream classes. Specifically, her daughter had been in the ESL program before and at the time she gave the speech, her daughter was on the Honour Roll in the mainstream classes. She said her daughter’s success in the mainstream classes would not be possible without the foundation she built in the ESL program. It is very likely that this particular parent has been chosen to speak at Parents’ Night because she is one of the Chinese parents. She carries conviction because she speaks from a standpoint of first-hand experience from the parents’ perspective.

5.1.2.3 Former and Current ESL Students

This subsection quotes liberally from student speakers. Such detail might appear unnecessary, but they have been included here for two reasons. One is that these examples demonstrate clearly one of the teachers’ goals for Parents’ Night, that is,
student involvement is one of the priorities of Parents’ Night. Another reason is that student participation carries a number of messages.

We have seen that various speakers were appropriate to speak at Parents’ Night because they spoke from personal experience. On a similar basis, former ESL students were also invited to speak at Parents’ Night. For example, a grade 12 former ESL student from Taiwan made the following speech to the parents:

When I first came to Canada 3 years ago, I took all the ESL courses and the next year I jumped from ESL Socials to the regular Socials. That’s really tough for me. These are the problems I encountered in the regular classes,

1) I don’t understand what the teacher said;
2) I don’t understand the textbook;
3) I don’t know how to write an essay; and
I don’t speak at all. I just sit and listen quietly.

The student was discussing the difficulties he had in mainstream classes. But the student’s speech also indirectly stressed the value of the ESL program. More importantly, this student was likely chosen to speak at Parents’ Night because he can offer his first-hand experience from the former ESL students’ perspective.

Furthermore, current ESL students did their oral presentations in a group, illustrated in the following excerpts (S here refers to student):

S1: The teachers here like students to be responsible, like students to ask questions, like students to tell their own doubts, and also let students participate.

S2: The homework is also different. In Taiwan, all homework is copying, copying everything from the textbook, but here teachers give students homework by presentation, or read newspaper, or to prepare for a presentation. You have to go to the library and do all the work by yourself.

S3: The teachers here have students do group work. They often divide students different groups and discuss a topic. In my home country, Taiwan, we all sit in our own seats, and listen to the teacher.
S4: We also have TV and video in our classroom, sometimes we watch movies to learn things.

The students were discussing the differences of the educational systems in British Columbia and in their home countries. In an indirect way, the students convey to their parents the teachers’ views of the importance of student-centred instruction, different kinds of homework, cooperative learning, and learning language in context.

The students were also sharing their first-hand experience in the ESL program from the perspective of current ESL students. Moreover, they were demonstrating their oral English skills because the teachers felt it is important for students to show what they were “capable of doing,” illustrated in the following example, as the teacher said:

We want the parents to feel welcome in the classroom and get the information they want, as presented by their kids, they sort of see through the presentations what their kids are capable of doing, hopefully the kids will make these presentations and enjoy making them, and it would be very informal. (T2, interview)

The students also showed their strengths in speaking in other formats, such as individual oral presentations, poster presentation, and role-plays. For example, at Parents’ Night one group of students presented the following poster, which they prepared before Parents’ Night:
As Figure 10 shows, the students were presenting their strategies for building their confidence. This presentation itself also demonstrates how the students worked together as a group. Their collaborative effort became evident from the fact that one student was holding the poster, another student was elaborating the different strategies that may help ESL students boost their self-esteem, and the third student was pointing to different places on the poster while the second student was talking.

In the role-play below, two students played a conversation between a teacher and
a mother. In the following excerpt T refers the teacher and M refers to the mother.

T: Hello. Nice to meet you.
M: Nice to meet you too.
T: What can I help you with? I enjoy having your son in class. He is a good student and he is doing his best.
M: Is his English good enough to go to ELC?
T: I’d like to show you some of his work. In some skills he is still struggling. He is afraid to ask questions and answer questions in class and his grammar needs to improve.
M: But he has been in ESL for two years!
T: I think he is doing very well. He came to Milton Secondary School with very little English. He has worked very hard in the last two years.
M: Really?
T: Yes. I wonder if your son is feeling too much pressure right now.
M: No, I don’t think so.
T: That’s good. What about less pressure and more help. Maybe we can work together to solve the problems.

The message from the role-play is obvious. The teachers and students asked the parents to give students less pressure and more help. Compared to oral and poster presentations, the role-play is more challenging because the students were not simply discussing in English. The fact that they were acting in English may demonstrate a higher level of oral English proficiency.

As was pointed out earlier, the experiences that ESL students get in the school might be different from that in their home cultures. For example, a group of students presented the following messages to their parents:

Privacy
We want to have our own privacy.
(Please don’t come into my room without telling me or knocking!)

Freedom
We want the freedom to manage our time.
We want the freedom to talk to our friends.
We want the freedom to choose our tutors.
(Please don’t nag me. I want to be responsible.)

We noted in Chapter 1, understanding of cultural ideologies and moral values through the medium of language is a crucial part of language socialization (Ochs, 1988). Language socialization theorists regard cultural learning as an inseparable part of language learning. When Chinese immigrant students were learning English, they were also socialized into the value systems and behaviour patterns of the Canadian culture.

In addition to demonstrating the students’ presentation skills, the teachers also had an implicit purpose for involving students in the process of Parents’ Night. One teacher explained to the researcher that their intention was to improve the communication process, not only among the teachers and the department and the school, but also between adolescent teenagers and their parents. For example, one teacher said:

And so what we wanted to try to do is to set the stage, to give the message that this is a normal process of trying to communicate teenagers with parents, and that our culture wants to encourage that. So, you see what we’re getting at here, right, we’re getting at not only the teachers, and the department, and the school communicating with parents, but we are attempting to have the students themselves communicate with their parents and with other peers’ parents. (T8, interview)

Parents’ Night provides an opportunity for students to communicate better with their parents about some attitudinal and perceptual differences between students and their parents.

For teachers, it is important for students to participate at Parents’ Night. Several reasons can be suggested. The teachers’ emphasis on student involvement in Parents’
Night reflects their strong belief about “student-centered” educational philosophy. Additionally, the teachers hope to see that the parents might feel proud of their children’s achievement, demonstrated through their oral presentations. Moreover, the teachers attempt to ease the intergenerational tensions between the immigrant parents and their children. The teachers intend to establish a way for immigrant students to inform their parents about their cultural learning process in order to build understanding between students and parents.

In sum, at Parents’ Night, the teachers addressed parents’ concerns in a variety of ways, from the use of explicit reasons to the use of a range of speakers. The teachers’ reasons were based upon empirical research. Furthermore, reasons were also provided by a range of speakers from the Vancouver School Board, school administrators, and mainstream Department Heads. The speakers, signalling an authority, demonstrated their support of the ESL program from outside the program. Moreover, a parent representative of a former ESL student showed her support of the program based on her first-hand experience from the parents’ perspective. Similarly, former and current ESL students exhibited their support of the program from their first-hand experiences from the students’ perspective by means of oral, poster presentations, and role-plays, individually or in a group. The teachers are doing an effective, creative job of explaining the reasons that justify the ESL program and the school’ policies.

5.2 Parents’ Night from Parents’ Window

So far the chapter has discussed teachers’ purposes for Parents’ Night and their
different ways to address parents’ concerns. Nothing has been said yet about the parents’ agenda for Parents’ Night. How do parents respond to Parents’ Night? This section will examine Parents’ Night from perspectives of the parents. Specifically, it will discuss parents’ purposes for and their reactions to Parents’ Night.

5.2.1 Parents’ Purposes for Parents’ Night

The parents expressed expectations about Parents’ Night which were different from the teachers’. Three kinds of expectation were identified. First, some parents wanted to talk to teachers about their individual child’s progress. Second, some parents wanted to ask specific questions about the ESL program. Third, some parents wanted to voice their concerns. The following examples illustrate these three kinds of expectation:

One parent said: ‘I would like to meet the teacher individually to discuss how well my child is doing in ESL. I don’t feel I should go to Parents’ Night unless I can talk to the teacher’. (conveyed by B6, interview)

My mother enjoyed Parents’ Night because she knew what we learnt at school and she met some of my friends, but she thought one on one will be better to know about me in school from teachers. (student journal)

When we explained to the parents the agenda for Parents’ Night, they would like some question-answer period. (B2, focus group discussion)

I want to talk to the teacher about my son’s behavior. I am very concerned about his performance at school. (conveyed by B4, interview)

The parents have a lot of concerns that they want to discuss at Parents’ Night. They want to know why there is no test and no adequate amount of homework, and why their kids are still in ESL, and when they can move out of ESL. They asked, ‘Why do they have to waste so much time studying in ESL?’ (B3, focus group discussion)
We have noted that the teachers reported that one of the purposes for Parents’ Night was to provide parents with general information regarding the ESL program. However, the above excerpts reveal that some parents wanted to talk to the teachers individually about their own children. The data therefore indicate that there were mismatched expectations between the teachers and the parents about Parents’ Night. Such a mismatch could make their communication difficult even before meeting at Parents’ Night.

5.2.2 Parents’ Reactions: General

The parents showed a range of reactions to Parents’ Night, from positive to negative, which will be discussed below. The most positive reactions seemed to be from “new” parents. These parents were relatively new to Canada. Their children were relatively new to the ESL program. They usually did not know much about the Canadian educational system, had a high level of anxiety about their children’s progress in school, and did not speak English well. This group of parents seemed to be happy with the general information about school policies and the ESL program provided at Parents’ Night. This is evident from the fact that many of the parents who attended Parents’ Night expressed their appreciation. They asserted that the energy and effort put into it was very worthwhile. It appeared that Parents’ Night was appropriate for them as an educational event. The “new” parents were a difficult group for the teachers to communicate with, for obvious reasons. It is no mean achievement that Parents’ Night
had success with them, and this success underlines the importance of making parents aware of the underlying assumptions of the ESL Program.

In what follows, the researcher will concentrate on the more negative reactions. In doing so, she does not wish to give the impression that parent reaction in general was strongly negative, or to diminish the value of Parents' Night. Rather, her intention is to analyze the negative reactions in order to gain greater understanding of the communication difficulties that Parents' Night faced, and to raise the question of alternative ways of arranging communication. This is a case where negative reactions can perhaps be more illuminating to analyze in detail than positive reactions.

5.2.2.1 Parents' Reflection on the Student Oral Presentation

Across all the parents there was one particular mismatch that should be noted. The particular mismatch lies in the student oral presentation. The teachers' practice of involving students at Parents' Night was justified well (see section 5.3.2.3). But it was not well received by parents in general. The parents' views in the following excerpts are conveyed by the bilingual assistants:

I don’t want to drive all the way here to listen to my kids. I can ask them at home. I want to hear what the teachers have to say. (conveyed by B4, interview)

We don’t need those students to talk in the evening. I understand that they are working hard, and we as parents should not push them, but the time is too short, so we can cut students’ talk because we don’t have time to ask questions. (conveyed by B3, interview)

In my child’s class, students talked and talked. I waited for the whole evening but the teacher just introduced the students and we rushed to the cafeteria at the end. I was very disappointed because I wanted to hear what the teacher had to say.
The above data suggest that the parents are not happy with student presentations. Parents also expressed a concern about their children telling them what to do. One parent said:

If I let my child choose what he wants to do, he would choose to play and hang around the shopping malls with his friends. He doesn’t want to study. (conveyed by B2, interview)

Chinese parents are usually strict with their children and they often give their children independence at a much older age than children in the West (Gow, Balla, Kember & Hau, 1996; Ho, 1996; Wong, 1995). Parents appear to express four points of dissatisfaction with student presentations. The researcher will list them, then discuss them in more detail. One is the content of the children’s presentation, which the parents did not like to hear. For example, as in Section 5.3.2.3, the ESL children talked about Western cultural values of privacy and freedom. The children’s presentation on such topics to parents can be problematic because, in Chinese culture, it can be seen as a challenge to their parents’ authority. Two, the parents may not have been happy about the fact that the students were demonstrating their oral skills in their presentations. Three, the parents may not have been happy about the way the children were presenting, that is, telling parents what to do. Four, the parents may have been unhappy that their children were presenting instead of the teachers.

First, parents may not like the messages from the students’ presentation. They may not like the concepts of privacy and freedom embodied in “please don’t come into
Traditionally Chinese parents do not have to knock at their children’s doors if they want to talk to them. In a Chinese home the house is collectively owned by all the members of the family. The degree of individual privacy is not as strong as that in the Canadian culture. Also, the parents may have checked on the backgrounds of their children’s friends in order to protect them. This may be common in many cultures, but Chinese immigrant parents are likely to be more cautious in protecting their children, particularly in a new country, an environment with which they are not familiar. As one Chinese proverb says: “jin zhu zhe chi, jin mo zhe hei,” which literally means one who stays near vermilion gets stained red, and one who stays near ink gets stained black. This proverb means one takes on the colour of one’s company. One recalls a bilingual assistant reported in section 4.3.8 of Chapter 4: “Parents feel their children stayed in ESL ‘too long’, then they started to hang around with bad kids, and they start to skip school because they feel ESL is too boring and not challenging enough. So they are worried about their children’s academic achievement, and their children’s socialization skill of getting into bad habits.” Chinese parents may be concerned that their children get into bad company. As a result they may want to assert their parental control over their children’s choice of friends.

Secondly, in the students’ presentations, individually or in a group, in the format of role-plays or poster presentation, the students demonstrated mainly their oral English skills. However, we have noted in Chapter 4 that some parents wanted to see the evidence of their children’s written English ability (see section 4.3.5). The students’ oral presentations may not appeal to the Chinese parents because, as Tung (2000) posits,
Chinese people usually do not value verbal communication.

Thirdly, the way students were talking to their Chinese parents is culturally inappropriate. In Chinese culture, children are expected to show their filial piety (xiao) and obedience to one’s parents and elders (Ho, 1996; Wong, 1995). Respect for parents is an important virtue in Chinese culture (Ghuman & Wong, 1989). Chinese children must address elders properly (Wu, 1996), which means Chinese children do not talk in the manner that these students talked to their parents at Parents’ Night. The students used “We want...we want...we want...we want” in their speech. The repetition of “want” (a sensing process, in Halliday’s (1994) words) is likely to be interpreted by the Chinese parents as a series of demands, not simply a report on feelings. Telling parents what to do can be seen as inappropriate in many cultures. However, such behaviour can be problematic because, in Chinese culture, it can be seen as a lack of respect for parents. Such behaviour may have also caused more tension between the Chinese parents and children. Tung (2000) reminds us that it would be “a mistake for the children to confront the [Chinese] parents, to put them on the spot. Confrontation requires stark individuality. To maintain their dignity or to save face, the parents would then have to stand their ground” (p. 16). Smith (1991), on his study of the pattern of communication between parents and children in Taiwan, also concludes that a child’s verbal challenge to a parent was considered as disobedient behaviour and a disruption to the family harmony.

Fourthly, as we have seen at the beginning of this section, one parent said “I don’t want to drive all the way here to listen to my kids. I can ask them at home. I want to hear what the teachers have to say.” When parents make comments like this, they indicate
that they wanted to hear the program from the teachers, not from the students. This may be true for parents in other cultures. However, in Chinese culture, teachers are seen as experts of knowledge, and students as consumers of knowledge (Pratt, 1992). The Chinese parents may have felt that students did not have the right to explain the ESL program to them. Instead they may have wanted to hear the program from the teachers who are more knowledgeable and accountable. It seems that cultural differences between home and host countries result in different appropriate forms of presentation. In sum, when students make presentations in public to challenge their parents’ views, this is problematic in terms of the content of the message, and the format.

5.2.3 Parents’ Reactions: Range

Many of the parents who attended Parents’ Night expressed their appreciation. They asserted that the energy and effort put into it was very worthwhile. Yet, the study also revealed that Parents’ Night resulted in mismatches with some groups of parents, perhaps two groups in particular, which the researcher might call “new” and “experienced” parents.

5.2.3.1 “New” Parents: Their Mismatches

This section will deal with the mismatches specific to “new” parents. As noted above, these parents were relatively new to Canada. Their children were relatively new to the ESL program. They typically did not know much about the Canadian educational
system, had a high level of anxiety about their children's progress in school, and did not speak English well. This group of parents seemed to be happy with the general information about school policies and the ESL program provided at Parents' Night.

Nevertheless for them, Parents' Night also operated under difficulties. There were communication problems that were likely based on mismatched purposes of Parents' Night. The "new" parents were unfamiliar with Parents' Night as a speech event, and they did not share the teacher's view of its purposes. For instance, as one of the bilingual assistants pointed out, in Taiwan the parents were used to learning about their own child by means of marks on report cards. Parents' Night was a new concept for them. They came to Parents' Night to learn about their own children, not to learn general information about the program. Simply put, their question was "Can you give me information about my child?" For instance, as one of the bilingual assistants pointed out that many parents were initially unwilling to come to Parents' Night, often not understanding what the evening was about. Since the parents knew little about the ESL program, it was difficult for them to recognize that the educational assumptions of the ESL program were different from those in Taiwan. Hence it was difficult for them to recognize the need to understand these differences.

5.2.3.2 "Experienced" Parents: Their Mismatches

The "experienced" parents were people who were fairly familiar with the ESL program. Their children had typically been in the program for at least one year or more. The parents were more familiar with Parents' Night as a speech event and more aware of
the teachers' view of its purposes. But there were other mismatches that probably operated to make them dissatisfied with Parents' Night. They were not completely convinced by the teachers' explanations at Parents' Night, and had concerns. Some had controversial questions that they wanted to debate. Some parents said they would not come to Parents' Night again, and there were parents who were invited to come who said that they would not come because they claimed “it’s a waste of time.” Simply put, their question was “Can you tell me how I can get my child out of the ESL program?”

The “experienced” parents did not seem to be satisfied with Parents' Night. The following excerpts became particularly relevant. Again, the parents’ views were conveyed by the bilingual assistants:

This is the second year my daughter is in ESL, and I know she is going to ELC in September, but I still don’t know how well she is doing, after Parents’ Night I still did not get my questions answered. (conveyed by B4, interview)

I would not come to Parents’ Night because I have been to Parents’ Night before, but my concerns were not addressed. It was useless to come because what I really wanted from the teachers was to ask them to give ESL students an exit test so that I would know when my children were ready to move to the mainstream classes. (conveyed by B2, interview)

The above data indicate that some parents felt their concerns “were not addressed” at Parents’ Night. On the other hand, the teachers did address the parents’ concerns. For example, we have seen in section 5.1.2, the teachers addressed the concerns of the parents in a variety of ways. Why were the parents and teachers saying things differently?

Among many factors, perhaps there are two major factors that need to be noted. First, certain reasons justifying the aspects of the ESL program may be convincing for the teachers, but not convincing for the parents. For example, at the three annual Parents’
Nights being examined, the teachers used research to explain that the ESL program is a fine program and it takes more than two years for students to acquire academic English proficiency. For the teachers, empirical research is an authoritative basis for educational policy. But for the parents, it may be difficult to convince them because they may not be part of research culture. The teachers also cited their student's comments as part of their justification for the multilevel system, but the parents did not seem to value the student's comments to the extent that the teachers did. In response to the teacher's explanation of evaluation methods in the ESL program (see section 5.1.2), one parent made comments such as "but I still don't know how well she is doing, after Parents' Night I still did not get my questions answered" (the first example above). The parent did not seem to be convinced by the explanation that "as soon as we feel a student is ready," (see section 5.1.2) because for the parent this kind of evaluation tended to be "subjective," as admitted by one of the teachers (T4, interview). The teachers stressed the value of their holistic team evaluation based on students' performance. The parents, on the other hand, seemed to be worried about their children's progress through the school and their own lack of control of their children's education. They thus wanted test scores that show their children's academic achievement.

The parents do not seem to see evidence of their children's progress in the ESL program. For instance, the teachers explained that they were using a process approach to teach academic writing, intentionally not correcting student errors so that students could express their creative ideas freely. But one parent asked at Parents' Night why the teacher did not correct his son's spelling and grammatical errors in his writing (see section 4.3.5 in
Chapter 4). According to this parent, the evidence he saw of his son's written English at home was not good. Student grammatical errors seemed to have two different cultural interpretations. In the teacher's eyes, grammatical errors could be tolerated because they may create room for creativity. In the parent's eyes, grammatical errors could not be tolerated because they may signal the student's poor writing ability, and possibly, the teacher's irresponsibility. It seems that one stream of behavior can be given two culturally different interpretations (see Spradley, 1980, for a similar finding).

It seems that even if the teachers respond to the concerns of the parents and justify features of the program, it does not necessarily mean that the parents will understand and agree that their concerns have been satisfied and features of the program have been justified or vindicated. Even if a speaker responds to concerns, it does not mean that a hearer accepts the response. Even if a speaker states a rationale, it does not mean that a hearer accepts the rationale.

The second factor is that some parents expressed a need for dialogue and negotiation. Such need was embodied in the parent's comment "what I really wanted from the teachers was to ask them to give ESL students an exit test" (see the second example above). Some parents might feel dissatisfied because they were unable to follow up a question in detail, beyond general discussion about the program. Part of the problem for these parents is that a large public forum like Parents' Night may not be the best place to talk over controversial issues, explore ideas, and develop creative insights. In addition, since public debate is already using the rhetoric of traditional versus progressive, a public forum invites slogans, mis-labeling and simplistic solutions. Public forums are not good
places to debate controversial questions, and can increase polarization rather than reduce it, if people get into an argument.

"Negotiating in public" is widely recognized as something to be avoided by those engaged in the formation of educational policy. In a recent newspaper report concerning bargaining about a public schools teachers' collective agreement, two of the parties made this point explicitly. The head of the B.C. Public Schools Employers Association said: "I think it's fair game to deal with generic issues, but when you get very close to the actual wording then it does raise the possibility of negotiating in public, and I don't think that it's in the interest of the education system to do that". Similarly, the President of the B.C. Teachers Federation said: "Our proposals are put forward at the bargaining table to the employer. We don't think it is productive to debate them in the media" (Steffenhagen, 2001, p. A1).

For the "experienced parents," Parents' Night seems to be an intercultural conflict negotiation event, both in the sense of sharing views and considering action. In this sense Parents' Night seems to be ineffective in satisfying some parents, especially the "experienced" parents. These parents were looking for intercultural negotiation but were disappointed. They seemed to be looking for a dialogue, action by parents and teachers as well as sharing views.

Parents and teachers drew on different frames of interpretation for the subject matter and for the speech event of Parents' Night. In other words, they differed about their views of education, and they differed about how to resolve these differences. This 'double difference' creates a major difficulty for intercultural negotiation of conflict. In
these circumstances, pre-conditions aiding dialogue and negotiation become vitally important.

5.3 Conditions for Intercultural Negotiation

This section will deal with the possible reasons why the “experienced” parents were unable to articulate or negotiate their concerns at Parents’ Night. These reasons may apply to these parents in particular since they had controversial issues to discuss with the teachers, but they may also apply to other parents as all the parents were affected by the conditions at Parents’ Night.

With respect to the reasons for the parents’ inability to negotiate, the researcher observed that there was very little dialogue at Parents’ Night, noting in her field notes:

Researcher
During the night, there were two questions from the parents. Most of the time, the parents were sitting there, quietly. I was wondering why they did not ask their questions because in our telephone conversations they asked us many questions regarding the ESL program and the Canadian educational system. (field notes, 1997)

The following excerpts from interview with teachers and bilingual assistants supported the researcher’s observation:

Researcher: In the classroom, was there any question or comment from the parents?
Bilingual Assistant: No, there wasn’t. There wasn’t any chance for that. There were at least ten student group presentations. (B1, interview)

Teacher
The other thing is that I would like to see them [parents] participate more. I would like to hear more questions or have more comments. I’m not sure why they didn’t. I tried to make them feel relaxed. (T4, interview)
It is important to investigate why there was little dialogue between parents and teachers at Parents’ Night. We need to be sensitive to the question of the communicative conditions for a “fusion of horizons” (Taylor, 1994). What are the features of Parents’ Night as a speech event that might be relevant to the “fusion of horizons”?

5.3.1 Contextual Conditions

In the next sections, guided by Halliday’s text and context model, the researcher will zoom in to examine the local and immediate context of Parents’ Night to explore the conditions that may have hindered intercultural dialogue between teachers and parents.

5.3.1.1 Room arrangement

We will look at the room arrangement first. As the minutes show, Parents’ Night usually had two parts (see section 5.3). The first part of the evening’s meeting was held in the school auditorium. The room was arranged in a format that would be good for providing general information. For example, at the 1999 Parents’ Night in the school auditorium, all the speakers sat on the stage. On the audience seats, the ESL teachers sat in the front row in the middle of the auditorium. Mandarin-speaking parents sat as one group on the west side, with Lisa (pseudonym), a multicultural liaison worker, as their interpreter. Cantonese-speaking parents sat on the east side and one parent volunteer translated for them. Those parents who could understand English sat in the middle. It would be difficult for parents and teachers to exchange ideas in such room arrangement.

The second part of the evening’s meeting was held in different classrooms
simultaneously. Figure 11 is taken from the researcher’s field notes. The drawing captures the setting of Parents’ Night in one of the classrooms she observed.

Figure 11: Room Arrangement of Parents’ Night
As Figure 11 shows, the setting of Parents’ Night is similar to that in a typical classroom at the school where the data were collected. With respect to the communication at Parents’ Night, one bilingual assistant recounted her observation:

All the parents were supposed to be observing the children, you know perform… But I felt like I was in the classroom rather than in a parent-teacher meeting. I expected to have more communication going. But instead I felt I was in the classroom. I did not have any chance to talk to the parents or the teacher much because there are many student group activities going. (B1, interview)

The above data suggest that the communication at Parents’ Night seems to work rather like the communication in classrooms. We have noted that there were various speakers from different levels of the Vancouver School Board and Milton Secondary School. The teachers’ points of view about the philosophy of the ESL program were well presented. Only one parent representative spoke at Parents’ Night, and her views seemed to support the teachers’ position. The data suggest that the arrangement of the room did not seem to encourage interaction between teachers and parents.

5.3.1.2 Timing

Timing is another factor relative to the conditions that may have hindered intercultural dialogue between teachers and parents. As the minutes show (see section 5.3), the agenda on Parents’ Night did not appear to allow time for the parents to ask questions. In 1998 the big assembly ran from 7:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. in the school auditorium, and there was no time for parents to ask the administrators questions before they rushed to seven different classrooms for the second part of the evening.
In the classrooms, the bilingual assistant noticed that parents did not have time to ask questions either:

In the classroom, my class, there were basically just the presentations. The teacher did not allow any kind of dialogue between parents and the teacher. In fact there were; the teacher did a very short introduction about what they were going to do that night, and then the students made their presentations. The parents as I saw them were very amused by the presentations.... But at the end, the teacher ran out of time. In fact, no parents asked questions or made a comment in her room. That was very unfortunate, I felt. (B2, interview)

The bilingual assistant reported that in this classroom, the students occupied the whole evening with oral and poster presentations. The teachers also felt that they did not have enough time to talk to the parents. One teacher said:

I felt when we broke for the refreshment, there were quite a few parents wanting to talk to me individually and there really wasn’t too much time because one father was having a very lengthy conversation with me. That was kind of necessary because his son had a kind of problem and he wanted to have a word with me. I was very glad to speak to him about his son. But there were several parents who wanted to speak to me. I just didn’t get the chance to talk to them individually, which I really wanted to do. (T1, interview)

In addition, the parents expressed their desire to talk to the teachers. In their feedback to teachers, some parents wrote:

- Let the parents share their ideas and experience with the teachers as well.
- I suggest parents should have few more minutes to talk to the teacher.
- The meeting should be longer so that we can express our ideas.

The above data suggest that the parents seemed to have limited time to ask questions or raise their concerns at Parents’ Night. When examining the local and immediate context of Parents’ Night, the study seems to suggest that the conditions for dialogue in the large group were not conducive to exchange between parents and teachers.
We note that Parents’ Night was run in classrooms in the school, and conditions were similar to classroom teaching. There is a parallel to be drawn between the participation of these immigrant parents and the findings on the participation of ESL students in what Cazden (1988) calls Initiation-Response-Evaluation classrooms. In this pattern of interaction, the teacher initiates (I), the student responds to the initiation (R), and the teacher evaluates the correctness of the student’s response (E). Harklau (1994), Morita (1996), and O’Byrne (2001) report that there is a lack of classroom participation by ESL students. Describing the paradox of high school English classes, O’Byrne (2001, p. 441) delineates that many of the ESL students are “conspicuously silent during whole-class discussions.” There is a parallel between ESL students not participating in classroom discussions and parents not participating at Parents’ Night, since the communication at Parents’ Night may reproduce some of the conditions of the communication in an IRE classroom. It thus appears that the parents had limited opportunities to ask questions or to respond to students’ and teachers’ presentations at Parents’ Night.

In sum, the room arrangement and lack of time for parents to ask questions may have contributed to the lack of dialogue between teachers and parents at Parents’ Night. The contextual conditions of Parents’ Night may not provide for the negotiation necessary to resolve the vast differences between parents and teachers.

5.3.2 Contrast Between Big and Small Groups

We noted that there was little dialogue going on at Parents’ Night. However, at the end of the night, a dialogue between a small group of Chinese parents and a bilingual
The contrast of parent participation between big and small groups was evident in the following field notes of the researcher:

- In the big group, the teacher talked about the ESL program and four former and current ESL students talked about their experiences. There were two questions from parents during the 2-hour Parents’ Night. (field note, 1997)

- After Parents’ Night, there was a small group of parents talking to one of the bilingual assistants. They asked her many questions regarding the ESL program and her personal experience. (field note, 1997)

The Chinese parents in the small group asked the bilingual assistant all sorts of questions:

- How many levels are there in ESL? Why don’t they have a clear level?

- Why don’t my children have much homework?

- How can teachers motivate students?

- What about exit from the ESL program?

- Why do the students have so much free time? My older daughter is in grade 12 and she has tons of homework every night, but my son who is in ESL doesn’t do any homework. Why?

- Why don’t they give grades in ESL?

- How about the students who did the presentations? How long did they stay in ESL? Did they skip the ESL program?

- What happens if my kid has two courses left before he graduates? He has to leave high school at 19. What happens then? Other options if you can not graduate with the system?

- Did you go to school here? How long did you stay in ESL? What do you think of the ESL program? Do you think the ESL program slowed you down in the process of going to university?

These questions are similar to the parents’ concerns that were discussed in Chapter 4.
The questions may sound repetitive; however, the researcher is using these questions to make a new observation. The observation is that the parents who were silent most of the time in the evening suddenly became vocal. It appears that there is a sharp contrast between parents not talking in the “official” part of Parents’ Night and parents flooding the bilingual assistant with questions and comments in the small group. Why was there little dialogue in the big group but much in the small group?

5.4 Conditions for Parent Participation

This section will look at the possible conditions that may have promoted parent participation in the small group.

5.4.1 Use of Native Language

In response to the question of what can be explained to help parents participate in the small group dialogue, one bilingual assistant said:

They [parents] have a very limited proficiency in English. I think they had a lot of questions but because of the large group setting, they couldn’t ask a lot of the questions. As soon as I sat down in the small group and told them I could speak Mandarin, they were asking me all sorts of questions, like how many levels are there in ESL, they are asking me about homework, they told me they wish the teacher would check more homework. Remember the first task on what motivates students? I don’t think they’ve got what they are supposed to do even though I was asking what motivates students, they want to talk to me about how the teacher can motivate the students. They are giving me ideas and suggestions on what we could say and I ended up taking notes for them. (B1, interview)

The above example seems to suggest that the parents had many concerns, and they wanted to discuss these concerns. They were unable to discuss their concerns because of
their “limited proficiency in English.” As one parent said: “I didn’t look at my son’s folder. I don’t understand what it is anyway” (conveyed by B4, interview). The bilingual assistant was speaking in Chinese. The fact that she shared the same L1 with the parents made it possible for the bilingual assistant to interact with the parents. It appears that when the native language of parents was used, the parents volunteered more questions and provided more information (see Wong & Teuben-Rowe, 1996, for a similar finding).

5.4.2 Roles of Bilingual Assistants

The role of bilingual assistants is another factor that may have contributed to the dialogue in the small group. The bilingual assistants reported playing various roles in the process of Parents’ Night, such as ‘helper’, ‘linguistic interpreter’, ‘cultural interpreter’, and ‘intermediary’. The functions in each role the bilingual assistants played in the process are discussed below.

5.4.2.1 Helpers for Parent Participation

In the role of ‘helper’, the bilingual assistants assisted the parents’ attendance at Parents’ Night. The bilingual assistants followed up the teachers’ written invitations to parents and guardians by telephoning them. The bilingual assistants explained the agenda of Parents’ Night and reminded the parents of the importance of their attendance. Some of the parents who had initially refused to come to Parents’ Night changed their minds when they had the opportunity to talk with the bilingual assistants in Mandarin who could
explain what the evening was about. This is evident from Figure 12:

Figure 12: Contrast Before and After Telephone Follow-ups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Class</th>
<th>Assistant</th>
<th>Before phone call</th>
<th>After phone call</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESL 7</td>
<td>Yingying</td>
<td>Yes 3 No 16</td>
<td>Yes 15 No 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL 2</td>
<td>Mei</td>
<td>Yes 12 No 4</td>
<td>Yes 15 No 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL 5</td>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Yes 15 No 3</td>
<td>Yes 17 No 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Figure 12 illustrates, in ESL 7, only 3 parents agreed to come to Parents’ Night before the phone call. After one of the bilingual assistants explained to the parents what the night was about, 12 parents changed their mind and eventually 15 out of 19 parents attended Parents’ Night. As one teacher put it “an essential element of Parents’ Night is the successful attendance, which was the result of telephone follow-ups by the University Research Team” (T5, interview).

This result is contrary to the finding of Constantino (1994), who found that the ESL teachers used procedures such as Open House, Parent Night, dinners, and dances to involve ESL parents, but they had little response from the parents. For example, one ESL teacher participant in Constantino’s (1994) study said: “I had Open House and out of fifty parents, two came.” The finding of the present study is consistent with the suggestion of Buchanan’s (2000) who proposes parent liaisons following up important
written communication with phone calls in the home language as one way to get ESL families to be involved in schools.

In the role of 'helper', the bilingual assistants also collected information from the parents, such as the reasons why some parents could not attend Parents' Night. With such information, the researcher informed the teachers about these reasons at one of the planning meetings. These reasons included the fact that some parents worked at night and had time conflicts. Some parents had more than one child in the ESL program and they had been to Parents’ Night before. This group of parents felt it was not necessary for them to come again. Some parents misunderstood Parents’ Night as a walk-about information night, which took place in early September. Some parents thought the program was too long (6:45 p.m. - 9:30 p.m.), and preferred to come for a part of it. Some were not in town, some did not like the format of Parents’ Night and preferred an individual meeting with the teacher, and some parents were surprised about the upcoming event because they did not receive any invitation. It seems that some Chinese students decided not to bring the notice to the their parents because they knew that their parents could not read it (Taylor, 1987). The information was useful for the teachers when they planned for future Parents’ Nights. Teachers could use this information to choose a time that is both convenient to the parents and teachers. They may include the agenda of the night in the invitations and translate them into parents’ first languages, and follow up with phone invitations by people who can speak the parents’ first languages.
5.4.2.2 Linguistic Interpreters

In the role of ‘linguistic interpreter’, the bilingual assistants acted as translators for those Chinese parents who had limited English. The parents said:

I don’t usually come to school’s meetings because I don’t understand what they are talking about. But if there are translators, I will be there. (conveyed by B5, interview)

The parents expressed their appreciation of the bilingual assistant’s translation:

One parent was nodding and taking notes. She came up to me and said ‘it was very helpful to have your translation’, and the guardian said that as well. ‘Oh, are you coming every time from now?’ I said ‘No,’ ‘Oh, it would nice to have you every time’. He was saying that. And one mother also came up to me and said ‘it was very helpful’. I said ‘you seemed to understand a lot of’, she said, ‘yes, but there were details I didn’t get, but after your translation I felt I understood all of them.’ (conveyed by B4)

Students reported in their journals that their parents found the bilingual assistants’ translation very useful:

My Mom enjoyed it (Parents’ Night) as she learned many more things from Parents’ Night because they were translated into Chinese. (student journal)

My grandma said she could have a translator was great. She didn’t feel bored all the time because she could understand what was going on. (student journal)

In the role of ‘linguistic interpreter’, the bilingual assistants also explained to the parents some of the jargon that the teachers used, such as BICS, CALP, Core class, A block, and so on. According to Derewianka (1998), jargon often leads to the exclusion of those not familiar with the field. The linguistic interpretation of the bilingual assistants may have helped the Chinese immigrant parents to become more familiar with the educational field.
5.4.2.3 Cultural Interpreters

In the role of 'cultural interpreter', the bilingual assistants went beyond literal translation to explain some idioms, colloquial expressions, and technical language of education that parents might not be familiar with. The comments of three of the bilingual assistants given below show how they explained these educational terms:

I did more than translating. I explained to parents some of the educational terms, for example. I explained to them what science and social studies mean here, because it is different from what they learned in their home countries. Social studies could include history, geography, political studies, law, current events. Parents found it very helpful because school languages are quite different. (B3, interview)

I think because they did not have the Core class in Taiwan, and they didn’t know what the students were doing in the course. It looks like it was quite an important course. So they wonder how much time students spent on this course. I did not just translate the Core class, I also explained what the students were learning in the course. (B6, interview)

I felt they [parents] may not understand me if I directly translated ELC [English Language Class]. Actually the district is not even consistent with what ELC is… In this school reading comprehension and vocabulary development are a large part of ELC. In addition, students learn grammar, paragraph writing, organization, outlines and basic essay writing. Parents said, ‘Oh, I know now what they are doing in ELC. (B4, interview)

The above data seem to suggest that the bilingual assistants explained the educational terms that had different meanings in Canada and their home countries, such as Social Studies and Science, which have broader meanings in Canada than they do in the parents’ home countries. The bilingual assistant also explained what Core and ELC mean. The assistants also took notes while the teachers and students were presenting at Parents’ Night and explained these to their group of parents after the meeting.
5.4.2.4 Intermediaries

In the role of ‘intermediary’, the bilingual assistants acted as a go-between for the parents and the teachers. They brought some cultural issues regarding parent-teacher communication to the teachers’ and the parents’ attention. For example, some Chinese parents said:

I would like to meet the teacher individually and more frequently to discuss how well my child is doing in ESL. But I don’t feel like that I should go to the teacher because back in Hong Kong it is usually the teacher who comes to us if our children have some problems at school. (conveyed by B4)

I have been waiting for the teacher to call me and come to talk to me. I didn’t know I should go to the teacher. (conveyed by B6)

The bilingual assistants then passed on the information that teachers usually take the initiative to communicate with parents in Chinese culture to the teachers. Such information enabled teachers to raise their awareness of the cultural difference in terms of parent-teacher communication. One teacher reflected in his interview:

I know that traditionally in Hong Kong, or in Asia, the teachers contact the home, but in Canada, generally we don’t do that, we are always dependent on the parents to contact the school unless you’ve got a real concern about a student, we will contact the home. Unfortunately the parents assume we will contact home. (T1, interview)

The bilingual assistants, after talking to the teachers, went back to explain to the parents that parent-teacher communication “works the other way around here.” Specifically, it is usually the parent who takes the initiative to contact the school if they have any concerns regarding their children.
In the role of ‘intermediary’, the bilingual assistants also notified the teachers that Chinese parents did not want to make critical comments in public:

Even if they [parents] have many comments, I know they do because they told me on the phone, nobody made any comments about the ESL program, or the educational system. Probably it is not in the Chinese culture. They are not supposed to criticize the ESL program in public. (B6, focus group discussion)

In sum, it seemed the bilingual assistants played significant roles in the present study. First, they assisted parent participation at Parents’ Night with personal telephone invitations in Chinese. Second, they acted as linguistic translators for parents. Third, they had in-depth knowledge about the two educational systems, and understood the experiences of the ESL students, the teachers’ experience at school, and the parents’ experience. In addition to translating educational terminology, they went on to explain the differences between the educational systems. Fourth, they also acted as intermediaries to raise cultural issues that are characteristic of Chinese and Canadian cultures, and presented parents’ concerns to teachers. As former EFL or ESL learners and current experienced EFL or ESL educators/researchers/parents, these bilingual assistants had a good understanding of the challenges facing the Chinese parents. They also had a good understanding of the challenges facing the ESL teachers. They served as a bridge between teachers and Chinese parents.

It appears that the bilingual assistants were seen as intermediaries in a conflict situation. Parents expressed many concerns regarding the ESL programs, but they did not want to challenge the teachers at Parents’ Night because of the great respect for teachers in Chinese culture. The Chinese immigrant parents in Li’s (2000) study reported that
they did not initiate communication with teachers because they believed that the teachers are the authorities and they should not challenge them. Parents also felt their English was not good enough to communicate what they wanted to say. Furthermore, the Chinese culture, unlike the North American culture that values assertiveness, welcomes interpersonal harmony. As Chen (cited in Samovar, Porter and Stefani, 1998. p. 84) asserts “According to Confucianism, the ultimate goal of human behaviour is to achieve ‘harmony’, which leads Chinese people to pursue a conflict-free and group-oriented system of human relationship.” This suggests that when the parents talked, as they did with the bilingual assistants, they were responding to the assistants’ intermediary role.

The parents seemed to perceive the bilingual assistant as being on their side. For example, we have noted that the bilingual assistant said in section 4.3.8 of Chapter 4, after the teacher explained why the students usually stayed in the ESL program for two years, the parents came to realize “it is the school’s fault.” Initially, the parent thought her child stayed in the ESL program for two years because she did not work hard. Later the parent felt that it was the school’s policy that requires the students to be in the ESL program. The parent told the bilingual assistant that she would not say that to teachers. As pointed out in the literature review of Chapter 2, Chinese people usually convey their concerns to an intermediary in order to avoid conflicts. Parents in the study seemed to feel more comfortable expressing their dissatisfaction to the bilingual assistants than to the teachers. It is the assistants’ intermediary role that appears to be particularly important in Chinese immigrant communication.

It is therefore reasonable to argue that providing an intermediary could moderate at
least some of the problems of parent-teacher communication. Nonetheless, the researcher would argue that an intermediary merely adds another link in the chain of communication between parent and teacher, and the effectiveness of the chain depends on the quality of parent participation. Moreover, while an intermediary may help to convey to teachers the way in which the parents’ opinions differ from the teachers’ opinions, that still leaves the problem that Taylor identified, the question of how to resolve or work productively with the differences. Putting the matter in a different way, Taylor’s dialogues assume that people are willing to talk about conflicts, but the findings of the present study indicate that this may not be so, and like Ting-Toomey, we have suggested cultural reasons for this. Ting-Toomey’s negotiations assume that the participants can participate, as do Taylor’s dialogues, but the findings of the present study show how communication situations differ in the opportunities they allow for participation.

From a learning organization (Senge, 1990) perspective, Parents’ Night raises important questions. An ideal image of learning organisation would be that people share different perspectives through “diversity dialogues” (Taylor, 1997). The reality of communication at Parents’ Night suggests that it is very difficult to achieve this ideal. Thus future efforts should be taken to reach this goal.

5.5 Conclusions and Summary

Chapter 5 examined the nature of Parents’ Night as a speech event and social activity. It asked whether teachers and parents apply different frames of interpretation (expectation) to the messages of Parents’ Night. It considered Parents’ Night as a
potential site for “diversity dialogues” between teachers and parents. This study found that there were major differences between the parents’ and the teachers’ frames of interpretation for Parents’ Night which jeopardised parent-teacher communication at the meeting. Teachers attempted to speak to the concerns of parents, but a number of parents did not hear their concerns being answered.

Teachers characterized Parents’ Night as an educational event for parents, aiming to help parents understand the basis for the ESL program. Considered as a genre, Parents’ Night was a rationale for the ESL program. The speakers described features of the program, related them to parents’ concerns, and offered justifications and testimonials for them. As an educational event, the teachers organized Parents’ Night very well and showed considerable professional expertise.

The parents showed a range of reactions, from positive to negative. They were not an audience with a single viewpoint, which made Parents’ Night more complex. Parents’ different reactions seem to suggest that as an educational event, Parents’ Night appears to be relatively effective in providing general information about the ESL program for some parents. But as an intercultural conflict negotiation event, Parents’ Night seems to be ineffective in satisfying other parents.

Many of the parents who attended Parents’ Night expressed their appreciation. They asserted that the energy and effort put into it was very worthwhile. However, there were mismatches that should be noted. For example, as for the format of presentation, the parents were not happy with the emphasis on student presentations at Parents’ Night because they wanted to hear about the ESL program from the teachers, not from the
Parents’ Night had mismatches for newly arrived immigrant parents. It appeared that Parents’ Night was appropriate for these parents as an educational event, but it operated under difficulties. They appreciated the general information they learned from Parents’ Night, but there were communication problems that were likely based on mismatches of interpretation. They were not familiar with Parents’ Night as a speech event and they did not share the teacher’s view of its purposes. Parents’ Night was not part of the parents’ experience in communicating with schools. They came to Parents’ Night to learn about their own child, not learn general information about the program. Since they knew little about the ESL program, it was difficult for them to recognize the need to understand the way in which the educational assumptions of the ESL program were different from those in their home countries.

Parents’ Night also had mismatches for “experienced” parents. They were more familiar with Parents’ Night as a speech event and more aware of the teachers’ view of its purposes. But there were other mismatches that operated to make them dissatisfied with Parents’ Night. There was evidence that they saw a need for Parents’ Night to be an event of intercultural conflict negotiation. They were worried about their children’s progress through the school and their own lack of control of their children’s education. They expressed mounting dissatisfaction saying that their concerns were not addressed and that they were unable to articulate or negotiate their concerns.

Considered as an intercultural conflict negotiation, Parents’ Night had a major weakness. Little dialogue was found between parents and teachers at Parents’ Night. As a
result, the teachers’ points of view were well presented, but the parents did not voice their concerns. However, there was a marked difference between the “official” part of Parents’ Night (big group) and an “unofficial” interaction with a bilingual assistant in a small group. Some parents, who were silent most of the time during Parents’ Night, became vocal in the small group.

When examining the local and immediate context of Parents’ Night, this study found that the conditions for dialogue in the large group were not conducive to exchange between parents and teachers. Parents’ Night was run in classrooms in the school, conditions similar to those of classroom teaching. Communication at Parents’ Night shows parallels with communication in a typical classroom. The teachers are responsible for presentation of information and opportunities for parents to interact at Parents’ Night are limited. The study suggests that room arrangement, timing and format of presentation do not seem to encourage productive dialogue between teachers and parents. It is evident that the way Parents’ Night was constructed as an educational event makes it difficult to provide for intercultural conflict negotiation and resolve the deep differences between teachers and parents.

Examining the conditions for dialogue in the small group, the study found that the use of native language and the four roles of bilingual assistants seem to contribute to the dialogue between parents and the bilingual assistants. Given that the bilingual assistants were speaking in Chinese, this does not suggest that providing a translation service at Parents’ Night would be sufficient, because the bilingual assistants were explaining matters that were difficult for parents to understand. But even if translation services were
provided, they would unlikely be sufficient, because it appeared that the bilingual assistants were seen as intermediaries in a conflict situation. As the study suggests, when the parents did speak, as they did with the bilingual assistants, they were responding to the assistants' intermediary role. Thus, the study arrives at the conclusion that the role of intermediaries is important for the negotiation of conflict situations for Chinese people (see Ting-Toomey, 1997, for a similar finding).

The researcher will end this chapter by considering how the teachers view parents' reactions and how their view relates to communication dilemmas that they face. Many of the teachers are well aware of a number of aspects of parents' reactions and take account of them, as the following quote suggests:

How much are they [the parents] changed by that? For example, a mother came up to me and said 'good night' and asked me if her daughter was going to ELC next year. I said ‘Yes’ and she was very happy. And I thought I spent, we spent the whole evening telling them what great stuff their children are doing in ESL, and yet I still have a parent who was so eager for her daughter to go to ELC. It is hard. I don’t know what kind of change we hope to get. (T4, interview)

This teacher is expressing a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, the teacher knows that parents and teachers see the ESL program differently, hence it is important to try to explain the ESL program to parents and to communicate the very different and unfamiliar assumptions about language and learning that it operates under. On the other hand, the teacher knows that many parents are not convinced by the explanation, so it is perhaps pointless to invest time and effort in trying to explain. Nevertheless, the teacher perseveres, probably because she judges that it would be irresponsible for an educator not to explain the program.
The contrast made in this chapter between new and experienced parents puts this dilemma in a different light. With a new parent who is unfamiliar with the program, it may well be worthwhile persisting and trying to explain, even if there is little initial understanding and reaction. The explanation may be of value to the parent at a later point in time. With an experienced parent who is looking for intercultural negotiation, it is better not to explain, but rather to pursue a very different strategy and create opportunities for dialogue, interaction and negotiation.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This study investigates communication between ESL teachers and parents through a focal communication event, Parents' Night, when they discuss their different views of the ESL program and education in general. It explores the differences between the key educational concepts and approaches held by Canadian ESL teachers and Chinese parents' concepts of education and examines the teachers' strategies for mitigating these differences. It examines the conditions and difficulties of intercultural negotiation. Three specific research questions are:

1. What are teachers' and parents' perspectives of the ESL program and education, and what are the differences between them?
2. How do teachers and parents negotiate their differences at Parents' Night?
3. What are the difficulties of intercultural negotiation of conflict (Taylor, 1994; Ting-Toomey, 1997)?

6.2 Summary of Findings

The present study identified the difficulties of intercultural negotiation between ESL teachers and parents at Parents' Night. Two major findings emerged from the analyses of data collected from observations, interviews, focus group discussions and documents. These two findings are, first, there is a great discrepancy between the teachers' and parents' interpretations of the ESL program, and such a discrepancy made
their communication difficult; Secondly, the conditions of Parents’ Night determine that while it has an important role to play, it may not be an appropriate way to address parents’ concerns. In other words, Parents’ Night may not resolve the “depth of differences” (Taylor, 1997) between ESL teachers and parents. Furthermore, it may not allow for culturally different styles in negotiation of conflict of opinions (Ting-Toomey, 1997). Finally, it was difficult for parents to participate in the communication of Parents’ Night, so that it may not provide even the pre-conditions for dialogue and negotiation that are assumed by Taylor and by Ting-Toomey. For these reasons, Parents’ Night is unlikely to result in significant learning by the school as a learning organization, and make an adequate contribution to the development of the education of the ESL students.

6.2.1 Differences Between Teachers’ and Parents’ Perspectives

The findings of Chapter 4 reveal that there are significant discrepancies between ESL teachers’ and parents’ perspectives of the ESL program in particular and education in general. Their differences center on the issues of their beliefs about English language teaching and learning, homework and evaluation, and students’ progression from ESL to mainstream classes. In the parents’ views, the current ESL program has many problems: lack of grammar instruction, inadequate homework, lack of exam, mixed grades, the segregation of ESL students from mainstream classes, low level of content, and the lengthy time ESL students spent in the program. The findings suggest conflicting expectations: Immigrant parents exert considerable pressure on teachers to move their
children quickly out of the ESL program which they claim “lacks examination and homework.” By contrast, teachers believe that ESL classes help students acquire proficiency in the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and develop appropriate attitudes such as responsibility, cooperation, respect, and confidence. Teachers also believe that ESL classes help students socialize into Canadian school and social cultures, help them acquire basic skills such as research, group work, and oral presentations in order to prepare them for entry into regular classrooms.

Some local parent groups and members of the media present these parent-teacher differences as the familiar traditional versus progressive views of education. However, rejecting this, the researcher believes in a complex picture: that the ESL program is consistent with much of the recent research and current best practices. The integration of language and content, multilevel grouping system, and holistic team evaluation of the ESL program are innovative educational approaches. But the ESL program also contains intercultural dilemmas which are not fully understood by the teachers and by the parents. Parents are not simply following a “traditional” model, but are responding to the breakdown of their ability to carefully monitor and guide their children’s educational progress, which is of vital concern to them.

6.2.2 Problems of Parents’ Night

The findings of Chapter 5 suggest that there are major differences between parents’ and teachers’ frames of interpretation for Parents’ Night considered as a speech
event and social activity. There were also mismatches at a more specific level, such as views of student presentations. There was little dialogue at Parents’ Night. As a result, teachers’ point of views were well presented, but not parents’ concerns. The ESL teachers at Parents’ Night were doing a fine, creative job of explaining the reasons that justify the ESL program and the school’s policies. Many of these explanations may be getting through to the parents. But even if the explanations were perfectly clear to the parents, they would not satisfy the parents concerns. There are “deep differences” (Taylor, 1997) here. That means we cannot assume that the discussion will resolve itself to the general satisfaction of both sides.

The study suggests that as an educational event, Parents’ Night appears to be relatively effective in providing general information about the ESL program for some parents. But as an intercultural conflict negotiation event, Parents’ Night is ineffective in satisfying other parents. It appears that Parents’ Night was appropriate for the newly arrived immigrant parents as an educational event, but it operated under difficulties, because they had different expectations. It seemed the “experienced” parents saw a need for Parents’ Night to be an event of intercultural conflict negotiation. They expressed mounting dissatisfaction saying that their concerns were not addressed and they were unable to articulate or negotiate their concerns.

It has been said that there was little dialogue at Parents’ Night. As an educational event, it was run under conditions similar to classroom teaching of second language learners, and these conditions did not seem to encourage productive dialogue between parents and teachers. However, there was a sharp contrast between the “official” part of
Parents' Night (big group) and an "unofficial" interaction with a bilingual assistant in a small group.

Examining the conditions for dialogue in the small group, the study found that the use of native language and the four roles of bilingual assistants (helper, linguistic interpreter, cultural interpreter and intermediary) seem to contribute to the dialogue between parents and the bilingual assistants. As the study shows, when the parents did speak, as they did with the bilingual assistants, they were responding to the assistants' intermediary role. It is their intermediary role that appears to be particularly important in the negotiation of conflict situations for Chinese people (see Ting-Toomey, 1997, for discussion).

The contrast between "official" and "unofficial" suggests more favorable conditions that would help parents to participate. Without participation by parents it is hard to see how the dialogues that Taylor recommends might be possible; without participation by parents, it is hard to see how the negotiation that Ting-Toomey recommends might be possible, for parents still have to communicate with their mediator. Thus the contrast between "official" and "unofficial" suggests some of the pre-conditions for the dialogues and negotiations that are assumed by Taylor and by Ting-Toomey.

Another, ultimately similar, way to see the relations between Taylor dialogues, Ting-Toomey negotiations, and preconditions for parent participation is as follows. The impression is sometimes created that the problems of parent-teacher communication can be solved by providing an intermediary. But an intermediary merely adds another link in the chain of communication between parents and teachers, and the effectiveness of the
chain depends on the quality of parent participation. Moreover, while an intermediary may help to convey to teachers the way in which parent opinion differs from teacher opinion, that still leaves the problem that Taylor identified, of how to resolve or work productively with the differences. Putting the matter in a different way, Taylor’s dialogues assume that people are willing to talk about conflicts, but cultures differ in the way they do this. Ting-Toomey’s negotiations assume that the participants can participate, as do Taylor’s dialogues, but communication situations differ in the opportunities they allow for participation.

In the light of the issues considered above, Parents’ Night is unlikely to result in significant learning by the school as a learning organization, and make an adequate contribution to the development of the education of the ESL students. Parents do not participate sufficiently (conditions of participation); differences of opinion between parents and teachers are not discussed openly (Ting-Toomey) and there are no diversity dialogues that could lead to a fusion of horizons (Taylor). In these circumstances, there is little evidence that the learning organization has learned from the experience.

The researcher should finally acknowledge the range of considerations which have not been discussed, such as parents’ psychological difficulties, including the lack of confidence and feeling of embarrassment in the presence of their children because of their limited English (Tung, 2000), or power relations between teachers and parents where teacher resistance to parent-framed questions can leave parents voiceless (MacLure & Walker, 2000; Wine, 2001). Although these possible lines of exploration would be important to investigate in future research on communication between ESL teachers and
parents, they have not been addressed in this study.

6.2.3 Theory and Methodology

The theoretical and methodological framework of this study drew upon systemic functional linguistics (SFL), and particularly Halliday’s ‘text and context’ conception of an occasion like Parents’ Night as a social activity within ‘field of discourse’ in the context of situation and the context of culture. In SFL terms, field of discourse includes both the social activity enacted (field one) and the topic talked about (field two). Thus on Parents’ Night the participants enacted a social event (field one) and talked about the ESL program (field two). Taylor’s work was related to field two, and Ting-Toomey’s work on cultural styles of conflict negotiation to field one. But field one includes not only styles of conflict negotiation but also a whole range of considerations which affect the way in which people participate in communication. Thus the conditions for parent participation are included in field one. Hence this thesis made a contribution to the study of intercultural communication. It showed how Halliday’s ‘text and context’ model could provide an inclusive framework which located the contributions of Taylor and Ting-Toomey within an approach to discourse in context.

The concept of field of discourse was also helpful in illuminating qualitative relations in the discourse data, through the link between field one and discourse as action versus field two and discourse as reflection. Just as Parents’ Night discourse contained reflections on the ESL Program, so research interviews contained reflections on Parents’
Night. As participants reflected, they reflected from their own standpoint and expressed their own perspectives about the ESL program or about Parents’ Night. Thus the same social activity was presented from different points of view. Looking at the discourse data in an SFL framework, the classroom interactions, parent-teacher communication, and teacher and parent views of their mutual relations and of the school appear as layers of contrasting reflections (see section 3.6.4 in Chapter 3 for discourse examples). These layers of discourse offered a portrait of the school as a learning organization.

By illuminating these qualitative relations in discourse data, this thesis makes two further contributions. One contribution is to the study of language socialization. It is important to note that many of the reflections on the ESL program were conscious and intentional reflections about language socialization. A number of the teachers were discussing language socialization as well as engaging in it. Parents’ Night was a landmark attempt by teachers to discuss with parents the language socialization of ESL students, and this brings to attention the role of reflective, conscious and intentional language socialization in education. A further contribution of this thesis is to the study of learning organizations as discourse communities. By providing a portrayal in discourse of the school at work as a learning organization, in failure as well as success, this thesis provides an example of how an SFL framework can provide the resources to investigate the processes of learning by organizations such as schools.

6.3 Implications for Further Research

The implications of this investigation move the study of ESL parent-teacher
communication in several new directions. First, as was already pointed out, parents and teachers differed about their views of education, and they differed about how to resolve these differences. This 'double difference' creates a major difficulty for intercultural negotiation of conflict. Further research needs to explore 'double difference' cases in the intercultural negotiation of conflict. Second, it uses a combined qualitative and discourse analytical approach, rare if not absent in the empirical literature of ESL parent-teacher communication. This approach should be used more in future research, since the data of parent-teacher communication is so complex. Third, it engages with Taylor's (1994, 1997) view that it is important that groups in a multicultural society such as schools should recognize, understand and negotiate differences through "diversity dialogue." This thesis has shown how communicative conditions can frustrate the possibility of "diversity dialogues" despite the good intentions of the participants. Further research needs to address the question of conditions that can positively promote intercultural dialogue and the fusion of horizons. Fourth, it expands current thinking in the field of second language socialization by raising the issue of reflective and intentional language socialization. Whereas Heath's (1983) language socialization study shows how practices of first language development diverge between home and school, the present study examines processes whereby teachers and parents come to recognize divergent practices of second language socialization and how teachers and parents attempt to negotiate that divergence by mutual reflection within the school as a learning organization. In this situation, reflective and intentional language socialization requires a two-way dialogue between teachers and parents who need to learn each other's perspectives and how to
work together. Implications of this study thus include the need to expand the boundaries of language socialization theory and research to give a greater role to reflective processes. Fifth, this thesis implies that learning organization theory and research should give more attention to multilingual and multicultural issues, and to intercultural conflict. It should give greater recognition to the learning organization as a discourse community, constructing new knowledge (or failing to construct it) through discourse processes.

6.4 Implications for ESL Parent-Teacher Communication

It has been suggested by Huang (1993) that one way to involve immigrant parents in the school is to offer a family literacy project that helps parents and children alike to become proficient in the English language. In the United States, an increasing number of federal and state programs are funding family literacy projects (“Family Literacy,” 1993). These kinds of programs are operating under the assumption that if immigrant parents are proficient in English, they will be able to communicate with schools effectively. The present researcher does not mean to trivialize the importance of family literacy. Helping immigrant parents learn English may benefit them and possibly their children in the long run; however, it will not solve the problems of intercultural conflicts in schools. At the annual conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (Mar 14, 2000), a member of the audience said “Just give parents grammar and tests, then they will be happy.” This is a simplistic view of reconciling the differences between parents and teachers. It seems to ignore the complexity and difficulty of intercultural negotiation. There is a need to create an education for ESL learners which builds on the strengths of

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what both teachers and parents have to offer. It is important to note that there are no
easy answers to the issues raised in this study.

Taylor (1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c) is right in suggesting that as our society is
becoming more and more multicultural, we have to learn to live together as equal citizens.
This requires people to build a shared common ground from deeply different
philosophical and cultural positions. This study shows that it is not a simple process for
teachers and parents to have an exchange of views. They are prone to offer very sharp
criticism of each other’s positions. The exchange requires understanding. There has to be a
deeper appreciation of each other’s perspectives.

What can we do about the ESL parent-teacher communication? The study
suggests that three recommendations could be offered. First, it should be recognized that a
Parents’ Night may be good as an educational event, but it is not likely to be adequate to
address parents’ concerns. Second, parent committees should be formed, since they may
be able to support intercultural conflict negotiation. Parents can talk among themselves,
select their own representatives, and express their concerns through intermediaries and
translators. The parent committee should deal with the general concerns of the parents,
but not with the specific questions, such as “When will my son be ready to move out of
the ESL program?” Third, in individual parent-teacher interviews, where teachers deal
with specific questions about the individual child with the individual parent, greater use
should be made of bilingual assistants, multicultural liaison workers, and tutors, to the
extent that this is possible. Each of the three recommendations will be discussed in detail
below.
6.4.1 Parents' Night as an Educational Event

The study shows Parents' Night that it examined was effective as an educational event for many parents. It had good attendance, and a number of the parents who attended expressed their appreciation. Particularly for newly arrived immigrant parents, the ESL Parents' Night appears to have value as an educational event. Parents' Night, held at the early part of the school year, is useful to provide them with general information about school policies and the ESL program. It is important to make translators available for parents if needed. Parents can also write down their questions in their first languages and ask the translators to translate their questions for them. The researcher is aware that not every school can find bilingual graduate students to act as translators, but it is crucial to provide translators who are not only both bilingual and fluent, but also who understand the educational systems of Canada and the country from which a student comes. In terms of translating, as one of the bilingual assistants suggests, it would be a good idea to get five to ten minutes for translating up to each period at Parents’ Night so that the translators can translate right away rather than wait until the end of Parents’ Night. By doing so, parents are more likely to write questions at each period. If possible, schools should move Parents’ Night to community centers or some places that are closer to the parents’ residences in order to reach out to the community.

In some schools, new parents are contacted by another parent who speaks their language, knows the school better, acts as a temporary “buddy” and may bring them along to Parents’ Night. This changes the communication set-up of Parents’ Night in that it provides one-on-one communication in the parents’ native language with a friendly and
An important issue for Parents’ Night is: how can parents gain evidence of progress of their children’s academic achievement? Various possibilities may be attempted. For instance, ESL students can read and explain to their parents about their reading materials. It would be possible to start with what parents consider as academic readings, such as scientific reading. Students can read scientific materials in their first languages and explain these materials to their parents. In this way, parents may see the indications of the children’s progress in their learning. These possibilities need further empirical research.

Parent interviews indicate that these parents feel that their children’s education is very important and that in their home country they usually take a very active role in supporting their children’s learning (see section 4.3.3.1.1 of Chapter 4). But in Canada parents find that they cannot play this role as they would wish, because of the change of language and the different, unfamiliar education system. This makes them anxious. This is a main issue underlying parents’ questions. Helping them to play this role better may relieve some of the pressure in parent-teacher communication.

It might appear be a good idea to combine Parents’ Night with individual interviews so that parents can get general information from Parents’ Night and get their specific questions and concerns addressed in the individual interviews with teachers. This would seem to be an ideal way of attracting ‘new’ parents who are specifically interested in individual interviews about their own child. But this leads to very difficult problems of time management. In fact, one teacher tried this idea. Following Parents’ Night general
presentations, she met her parents in her core classroom, but managed to talk to only three parents/guardians. The researcher and another bilingual assistant acted as interpreters. Since the individual interview was confidential, we had to do it in a separate room while the rest of the parents were socializing at the staff room for potluck dessert. The researcher was told later that other parents were disappointed that they could not talk to the teacher individually. The teacher reflected that “that was not the time. I needed to be with the parents in the staff room. It was like running out on your guests. Next time I won’t do that. I used the interview opportunity as a drawing card to get parents out” (T3, interview). It seems that the combination of Parents’ Night with individual interviews does not work well in this situation.

6.4.2 Parent Committees: Supporting Negotiation

In addition to the provision of Parents’ Nights, parent committees should be formed to which ESL parents could elect their own representatives. The parent committees should deal with the general concerns of parents, not the specific questions which are typically the focus of individual parent-teacher interviews. Usually an ESL parent committee would be a sub-committee under the Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) of the school. Typically, a PAC meeting involves parent representatives, head teachers and principals. According to Joy Salzberg (personal communication, July 26, 2001), an educational linguist fluent in Mandarin, English, and other languages, who is familiar with such committees, a normal procedure is for ESL parents to nominate and
elect their own parent representatives to form an ESL subcommittee. The ESL subcommittee then identifies general issues that many ESL parents are concerned with. They then explore solutions to these issues by means of discussions with parents, guest speakers, bilingual assistants, teachers, and students. With such information, the parent representatives raise their issues at PAC meetings, discuss these issues and make recommendations. At a separate meeting, the head teachers or principals discuss the general issues and recommendations raised by parents with other teachers, and consider possible actions. In the meantime the ESL parent representatives act as intermediaries to the wider parent group, interpreting and articulating issues and recommendations to ESL parents. At a following meeting, the head teacher or principal brings back the teachers' discussion to PAC, and discusses possible recommendations. The PAC then votes on the recommendations.

This process can continue for a number of cycles. In doing so, the ESL subcommittee and PAC provide a legitimized arena for negotiated discussion between parents and teachers. Salzberg points out that the ESL parents' voice is usually dispersed, but the ESL parent subcommittee provides a forum which helps ESL parents articulate common concerns.

An example of such negotiated discussion can be given for Milton Secondary School. Parents wanted tests, but from the teachers standpoint there were no tests suitable to the goals of the ESL program. Nevertheless, intermediaries pointed out that this left parents with no way of checking their child's progress. In order to address the parents' concerns, the teachers implemented an end-of-the-year exit test for students in
the ESL program, in addition to the existing student performance assessment.

6.4.3 Individual Parent-Teacher Interviews and Bilingual Assistance

Individual parent-teacher interviews are a vital part of communication between ESL parents and teachers, especially as they address specific questions about the individual child. Although they take much teacher time, they can be particularly helpful. In the researcher’s view it is important to draw on bilingual assistance where possible. Teachers can deal with specific questions from the individual parent and child through bilingual assistants, multicultural liaison workers, and tutors. The study shows how the bilingual assistants explained the school’s policy, the ESL policy, and other educational policies, in addressing parent concerns, and answering parent questions (Section of 5.4.4 of Chapter 5).

The teachers can deal with parent specific concerns through multicultural liaison workers, to the degree that they are available. The multicultural liaison workers are cultural resource staff of the Vancouver School Board, with professional training, who are familiar with the public school systems in Vancouver, and who are also knowledgeable about their ethnic communities (Vancouver School Board, 2000). Acting as a liaison between school, family and community, they help students and parents understand the Vancouver school system, and help school staff understand the concerns and needs of each community. However, according to Catherine Eddy, manager of District Reception
and Placement Center of the Vancouver School Board, there are 22.5\textsuperscript{6} multicultural liaison workers who cover 108 elementary and secondary schools in the Vancouver School District (personal communication, June 29, 2001). There are two points that need to be made here. First, the limited number of multicultural liaison workers makes it difficult to meet the demands from both schools and communities. Moreover, students in the Vancouver School District speak 136 different languages, but liaison services are available in nine languages: Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish, Vietnamese, Punjabi, Hindi, Tagalog, Korean, and Cambodian. Several multicultural liaison workers speak one or more dialects from their countries of origin. This means each worker has an enormous workload—the fewest number of schools that a worker has is nine schools, and several workers (e.g. Korean, Tagalog, and Cambodian) cover all the schools in the District. According to British Columbia Teachers' Federation (1993c), difficult access to such workers limited the effectiveness of the teacher's role because it hampered on-going communication between teachers and immigrant parents. The second point is that there are far too few languages represented by multicultural liaison workers for the schools and communities. For families for whom there are no VSB liaison workers, the District Reception and Placement Center has a contract with MOSAIC (one of the larger immigrant serving agencies and one which has both interpretation and translation departments) to provide the language speakers they need. If MOSAIC can not provide a worker, they try and find someone in the community who can speak the language or they ask the family to bring a trusted friend (their last resort). Schools can also call MOSAIC for language assistance, or

\footnote{0.5 is a part-time position—a worker who is 0.5 Vancouver School Board and 0.5 Health Board.}
can ask the family to bring a trusted friend to the meeting.

Tutors provide another bilingual resource. Those parents who have hired tutors for their children and who have limited proficiency in English might want to bring their tutors with them to the parent-teacher meeting. There is the danger that tutors and teachers could be at cross-purposes. But, as indicated by one of the bilingual assistants, some parents may prefer to use the tutors of their children over translators because they may trust their tutors more than the translators that the schools provide. In studying the language socialization process of Taiwanese immigrant students in Canada, Wu (in progress) finds that tutors were involved in the communication process between schools and immigrant parents. The tutors reported that they often accompanied parents to the parent-teacher conferences to discuss specific concerns that parents had, and in some cases fostered a mutual understanding between teachers and immigrant parents. Wu’s research also indicates that tutors and parents were discussing issues of clashes between home and school, regarding homework and grammar instruction. Why is the interaction between parents and tutors helpful in this way? She concludes that in tutoring some characteristics of parent-tutor interaction are ongoing, long term, and on a one-on-one basis in the parents’ home.

6.5 Implications for Teacher Education and Schools

Teacher education programs should increase their efforts to prepare teachers to communicate with ESL parents, for in British Columbia schools, as the B. C. Teacher Federation (1993b) intimates, there is a large number of immigrant children in most
metropolitan school districts. As Handscombe (1989) concludes, “every teacher is an English-as-a-second-language teacher, whether assigned that function or not” (p.12). It is not surprising that Faltis (1997) argues so passionately that there are too many stories about non-English background parents not knowing what was going on in their child’s classroom; or how to help their child at home; or not being included in school-related events. According to Faltis, many teachers have little or no idea about how to work effectively with parents from different cultural backgrounds; the need to upgrade teacher preparation is a must and it is urgent (Faltis, 1997). Nor is it surprising that Petit (1989), Rasinski and Fredericks (1989), also Faltis (1997), recommend a four-level approach to building bridges between multicultural communities and schools: teacher-parent contact, sharing information in the home about schooling, participation at home and school, and parental empowerment in curricular decisions.

Along those same lines, Constantino (1994) reports that one ESL secondary instructor adopted several approaches to increase parental involvement. For instance, the teacher used an ESL PTA in which the parents chose topics for discussion ranging from preventing children from joining gangs to what the students need to study every night. She also sent home a monthly newsletter and calendar to inform her parents of the students’ school activities. Gordon (1994) details a model which could add not only more students of color to the teaching force, but also better-trained teachers to work with a diverse student population. Information about the important role of the home in ESL students’ academic success also should be included in these recommendations. Student teachers should learn about the needs of ESL parents and become aware of their cultural
assumptions about education, as Kantor (1997) points out. Existing research studies center primarily on helping parents learn about schools. Further research is needed on how teachers can learn more about immigrant families.

6.5.1 Schools as Learning Organizations

From a learning organization perspective, Parents’ Night raises important questions. In an ideal image of a learning organization, participants share views and develop common objectives together (Senge 1990). The reality of communication at Parents’ Night suggests that it is very difficult to achieve this highly desirable ideal. The findings of the study reveal that parents and teachers had culturally divergent views of the ESL program and education in general. They also had different interpretations of the ESL Parents’ Night as a way of communication. As part of a “learning organization,” teachers and administrators have the responsibility to learn what parents’ perspectives are. Learning together with ESL parents is an important task for teachers in multilingual and multicultural schools. Schools and districts need to recognize that ESL is not a passing phenomenon; it is therefore crucial to adapt the educational system to reflect its multicultural and multilingual community. This view is also shared by Finders and Lewis (1994) who aver that in reality, the institutional perspective holds that “involved parents bring a body of knowledge about the purposes of schooling to match institutional knowledge. Unless they bring such knowledge to the school, they themselves are thought to need education in becoming legitimate participants” (p. 50). However, it is important
to remember that many ESL parents’ assumptions about the ESL program and its rationale does not match the schools’ assumptions.

This point is also supported by Gunderson (in press) who notes that “North American educators continue to view education within a ‘mainstream’ viewpoint, one that focuses on European values and beliefs, even though their school population grows increasingly multicultural” (p. 9). Specifically, Ovando and McLaren (1999) posit that minority students are disadvantaged by school culture, curriculum, teaching methodology, and assessment measures that serve the Euro-North American middle-class norm. This study shows that teachers intend to educate parents about the teaching philosophy of the ESL program. The study also indicates it is equally important to educate teachers and administrators as well as to educate parents.

Mutusov and Hayes (2000) argue that there has been a growing awareness that in the modern society, disagreements, misunderstanding, and diversity of goals and values are “meaningful and useful features of human communities that should be managed rather than minimized or avoided” (p. 237). The conflicts resulted from deep philosophical, educational, cultural and linguistic differences between teachers and parents are not necessarily negative. Rather, these conflicts can be seen a force that drives for productive thought (Billig et al., 1988), and for improvement and change (Cole, 1998; Mao, 1965). The fact that the parents made complaints about the ESL program suggests they were constantly comparing the differences between the home and host educational systems. The fact that the teachers were addressing parents’ concerns at Parents’ Night in a creative way indicates that teachers were thinking about these differences and taking
action to manage the conflicts. It is possible to argue that the existence of conflicts is a possibility for learning and improvement. As Mao declares, conflicts are "the essential and continuous principle in the development of all things" (p. 266). To put it in another way, no conflicts, no development. With this understanding, the conflicts between teachers and parents should be appreciated for their productive potential.

6.6 Reflections on the Study

The completion of this study invites the beginning of a new study of a similar nature on another aspect of it. This study offered some suggestions for ESL parent-teacher communication. It is possible to argue that if one provides the right conditions and intermediaries, then the problem will be solved, but the study shows a more complex picture. As pointed out in Chapter 2, listening to other voices is only the first step in negotiating and attempting to accommodate differences, as Taylor (1994) admits. He acknowledges that even to speak to each other and listen to each other is not an easy task (2001c). The purpose of dialogue is to see things from other people's point of view.

The researcher assumes that her ability to say what Parents' Night means to its participants is always partial and incomplete. She ends the dissertation with more questions than solutions. Can parents and teachers resolve their differences and conflicts, given the fact that they are from opposite philosophical, cultural, pedagogical, and linguistic positions? What differences are there within the group of teachers and the group of parents? How do they differ? Do teachers and parents change over time? Given that this study deals with a specific group of immigrant Chinese parents who have been in
Canada for less than four years, do the length of residence and familiarity with the Canadian educational system make parents change their perceptions? Do teachers just give parents what they want so that there will not be any conflicts? How can teachers and parents go beyond simply thinking their way is right and other ways are wrong (Taylor, 2001c)?

Comparing the Chinese culture of learning with that of the West, Cortazzi and Jin (1996, p. 174) conclude that “in principle, there is no reason to suppose that one culture of learning is superior to another. There are different cultures of learning which may be more or less appropriate to the larger societies in which they are located...Further, there is no reason in principle why different cultures of learning should be mutually exclusive. Rather, different ways might be reconciled or interwoven. This can be done only when we know what they are” (p. 174). For example, in this study, some parents noted limitations of the ‘traditional’ school and wanted a combination of strengths of both ‘traditional’ and ‘progressive’ education. In other words, they appeared to be looking for a balanced perspective of encouragement of both critical, creative thinking and basic skill development for their children. They objected to the ‘traditional’ school because they felt that the constant tests in their home societies were “killing their children’s talents”. Further research is needed to explore how different ways of learning can be reconciled.

The researcher will continue to ask questions, such as: Are parents and teachers ever going to resolve their differences? Or maybe the term of “resolving” is problematic. Won’t the differences enrich our world if we can build a shared common ground (Taylor, 1994)? Is it possible to form a sense of community that binds people together while at
the same time respecting differences?

The teachers and parents in the study shared a common ground: the better education of immigrant students. With its cultural and language differences, ESL Parents' Night is an enormous achievement born of considerable energy and commitment to immigrant students. The teacher participants are continuing to explore ways to communicate better with immigrant parents. In 1999, an ESL parent committee was set up at the school with two parent activists, one speaking Mandarin, the other speaking Cantonese. The parents are continuing to contact the researcher. The journey continues.
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