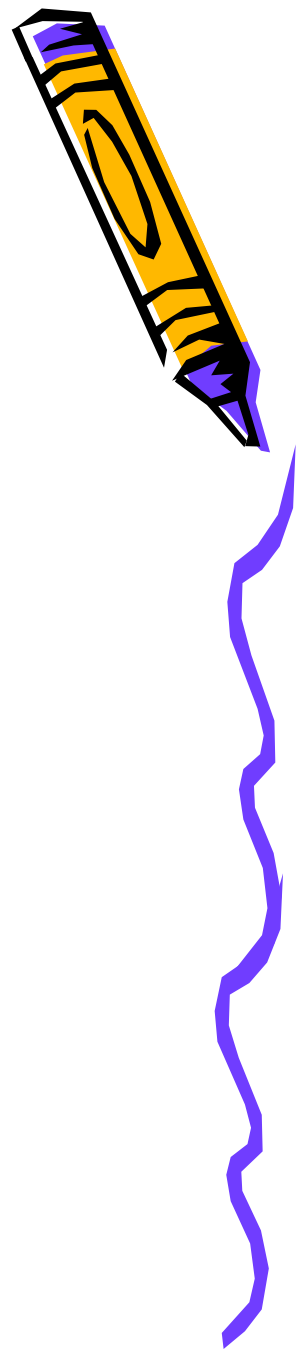# Language and Identity in Transition: Henan University Students in Australian Tertiary Academic Settings

Dr. Nira Rahman

Victoria University

Henan University Students in Australian Tertiary Academic Settings

- Often have high expectations,
  - well-specified career goals;
    - and diligent attitudes

Three Main Transitions

From

~~ *source* to *host* country ~~

~~ *Chinese Tertiary Setting to Australian Tertiary Setting*~~

~~ 'enduring' to 'situated' self via 'endangered' self ~~

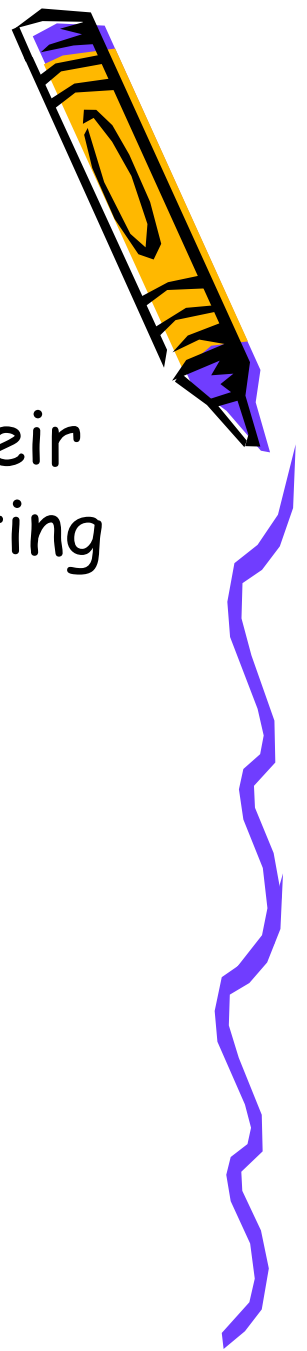~~~~~~

Three transitions:

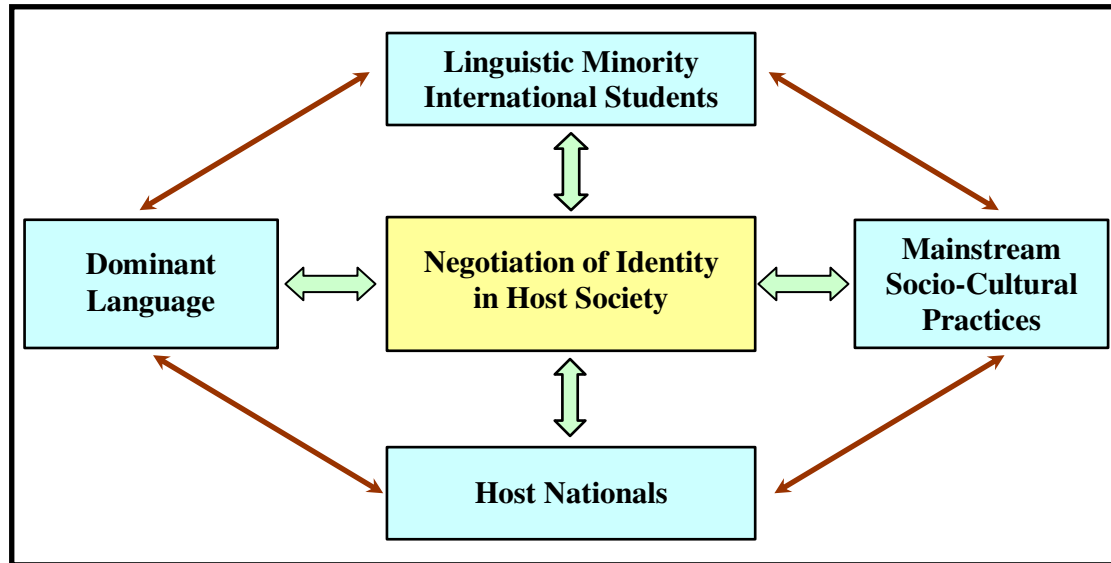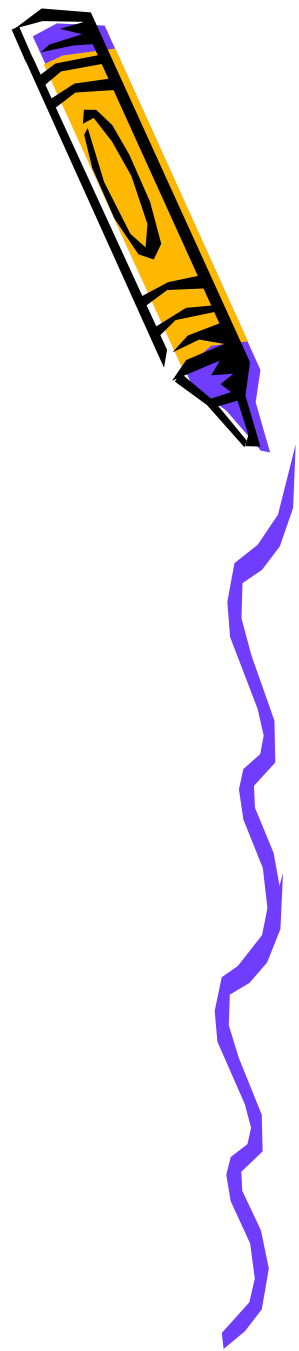Geographic, Linguistic, Psychological

Major Findings

- Negotiating identity (This refers to their felt experiences of continually negotiating their sense of who they are.)

- English language learning experience

- Unpacking academic expectations

- Adjusting to the host country
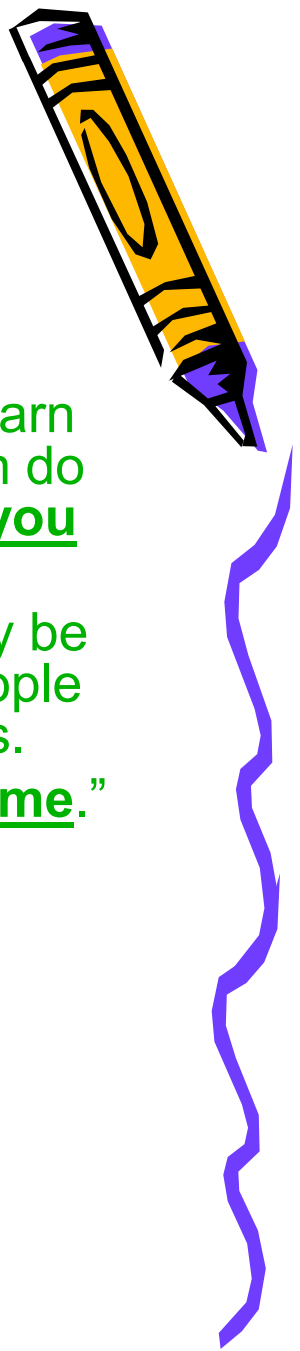
Negotiating identity

Personal and emotional investment

"If anyone want to survive here, live here, they should learn English. Back in China, if you know English well, you can do well in your life. But if you are not very good in English, **you still can become good** in other thing.

Here, if your English is not good, you can't survive. You may be stay here, work in a Chinese shop, mix with Chinese people only, then also you will need English to do other things.

It's not only in the university only; you need English **all the time**."

(Chan, China)

Personal and emotional investment

You know, in India, everyone thinks and I also think that my English is quite good. From very early age, I watch American movies. Sometimes my cousins or friends couldn't understand the movie, I used to explain that to them.
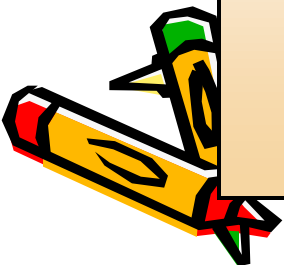
But this is not the case in Australia.

Oh, even at the airport, the day I arrived, I had problems to understand the people who were checking my baggage and passport. I was very nervous. But next day, when I was on train, people speaking so fast, very difficult to understand. I had problems everywhere. Even if I understand what they are saying, they don't understand me. Sometimes, I wanted to say something but couldn't find the word. Very difficult.

(Suraj, India)

Reasons for investment in learning English

Dominant and Subordinate Groups: exercise power in different degrees

"In our tutorial group, one student from Sri Lanka is good in English.

We all ask him any questions we have. We always ask his help for our assignment.

We all have his mobile number, but I don't have phone number of everyone in my class."

(Rasha, Mongolia, Focus Group 6)

Linguistic Competence and Power Relations

Relation between linguistic discourses and identity negotiation

Linguistic discourses

Source   Country

Personal identity

↕

Original sense of self

Cultural practices   Social resources

Transition to   new society

Cultural practices   Social resources

Changed sense of self

↕

Negotiated identity

Host   Country

Linguistic discourses

Language epitomises identity & identity is represented <u>through</u> language

"I was not a shy person back home. But now I don't feel comfortable as I can not express everything I want. People may be misunderstand me. So I think it's **better** to keep quiet.

So everybody here think I am a **quiet guy**. But when I am with other Vietnamese students, I **love** to talk.

Even when I go to Vietnam this time, I was more confident. I was feeling good to talk about my experience in Australia. But here, I always feel I am not very good in anything. "

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
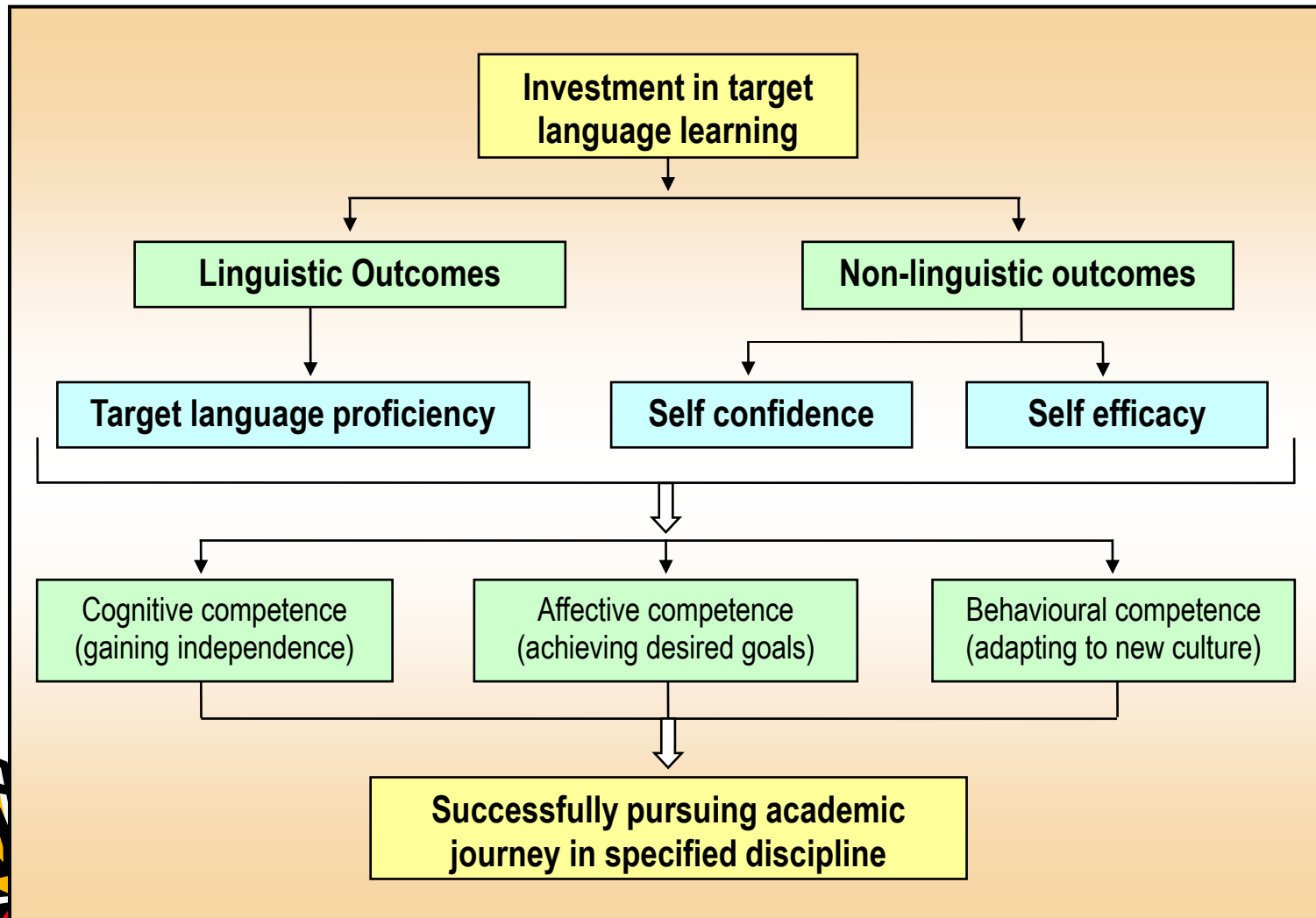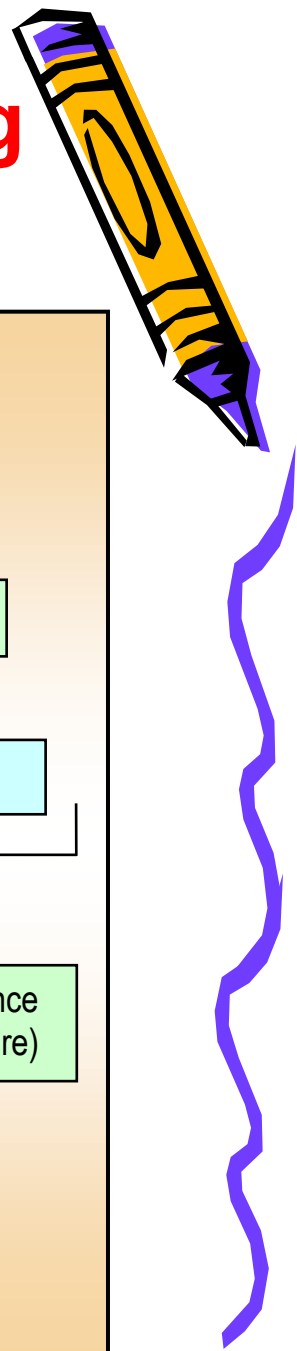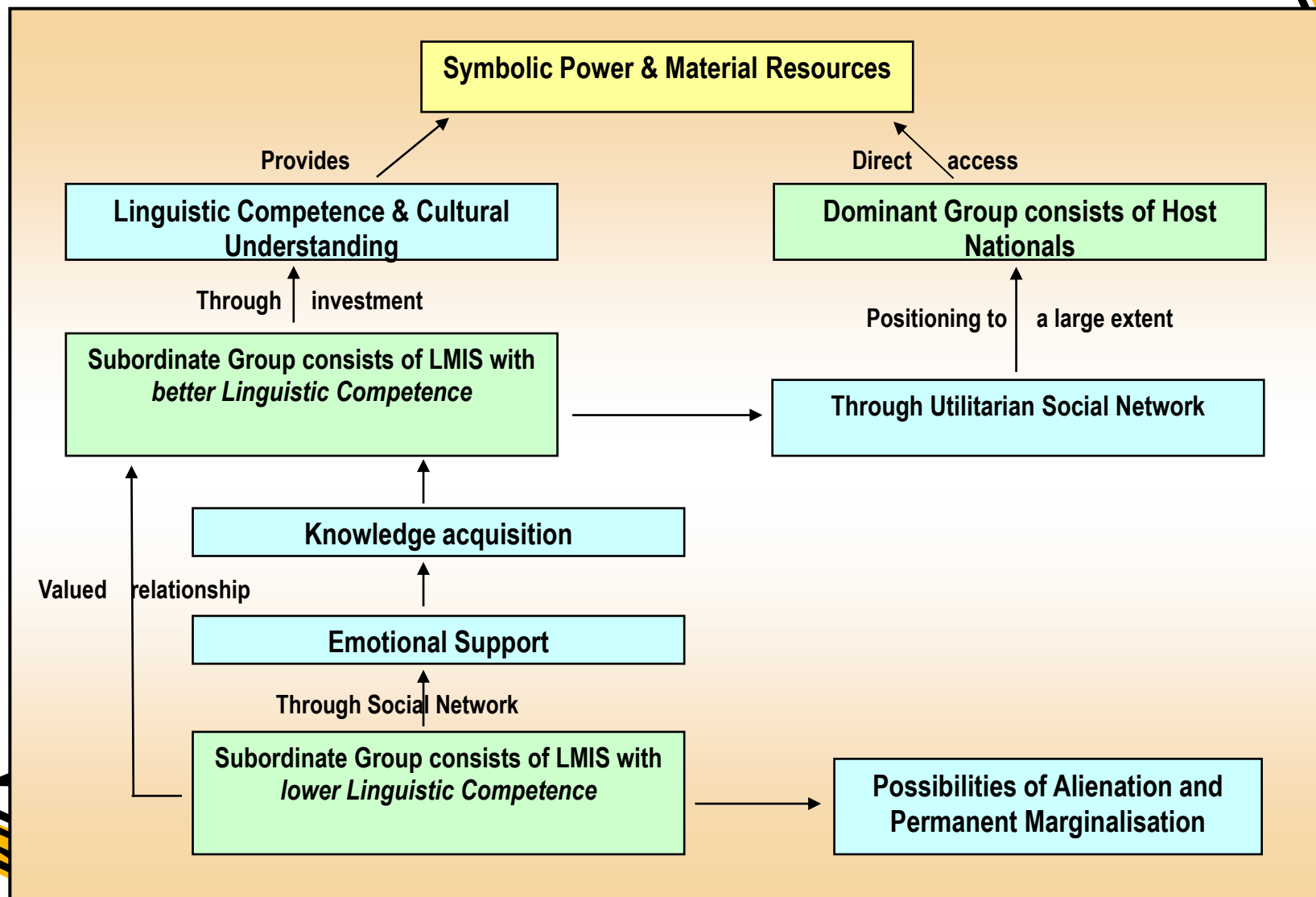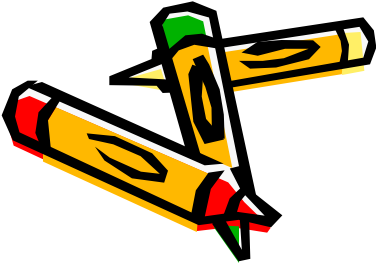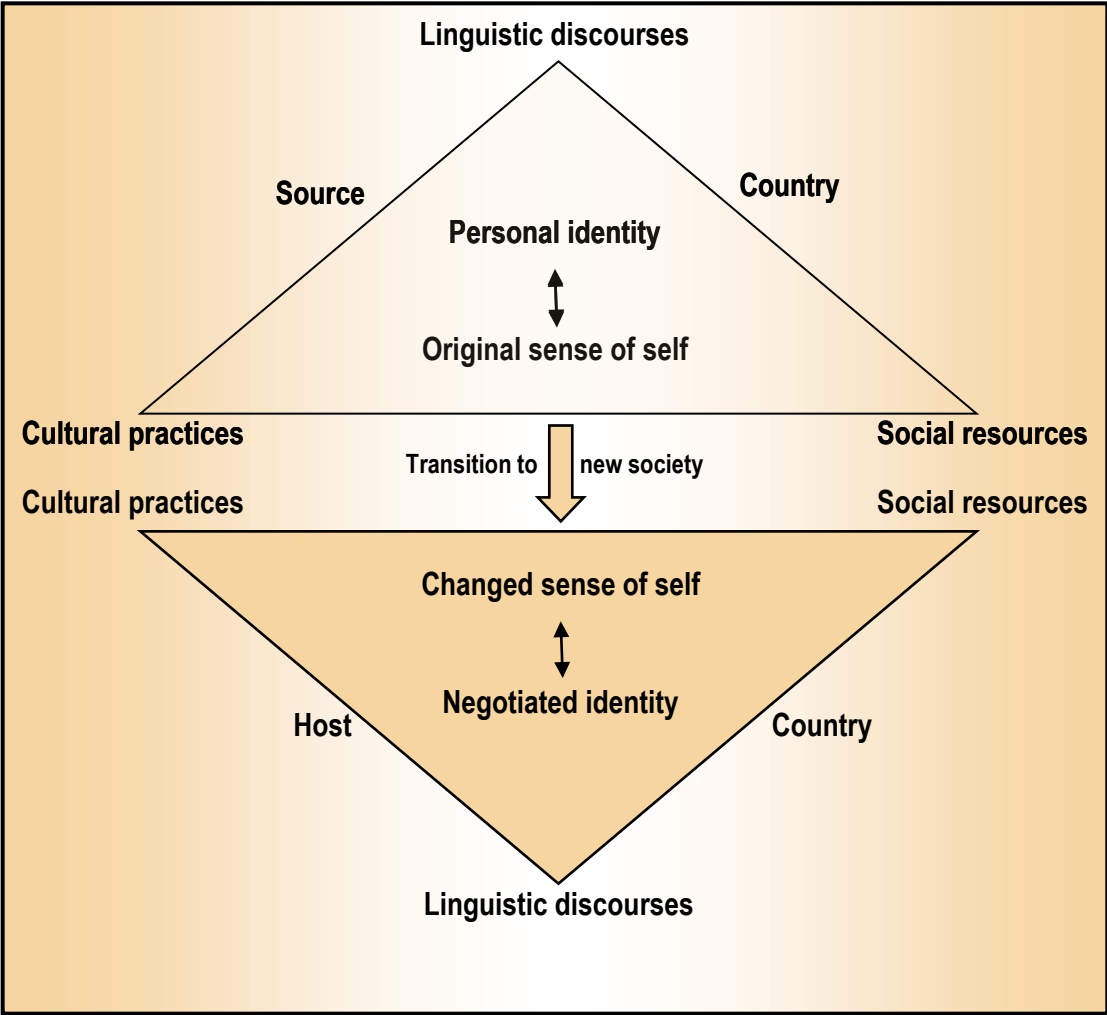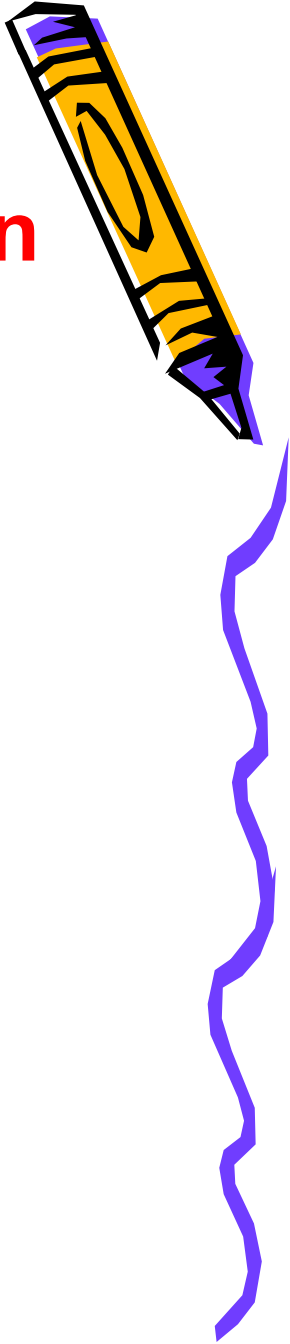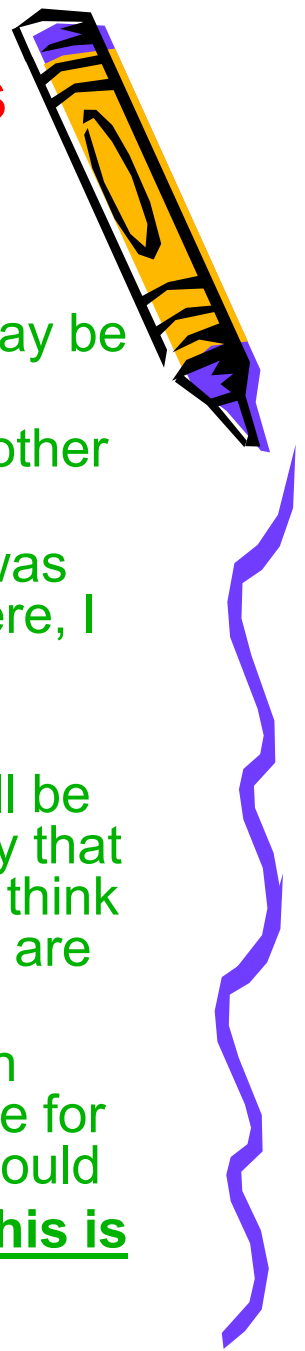
"Before coming here, I thought everybody is **equal**, no body will be seen as outsider. All the university brochures and website say that Australia is a multicultural country. But in reality, people here think **non-English speaking, non-white international students** are very different. So we **are outsider, foreigner** here.

There are different rules for international students not only in university, it's everywhere. They have to pay more fees, more for train ticket, they can't find accommodation easily but they should work less – 20 hours only in a week. Do you think, **this is a equal system**? "

Types of identity negotiation

Deep rooted inherent identity

ALIENATION
Permanent marginalisation or total isolation

OSCILLATION
Switching between the source and the host culture

Original socio-cultural orientation

Mainstream social/popular cultural practices

REVERSION
Rejection of Australian norms, going back to original cultural practices

HYBRIDITY
Acculturation - fused elements of original identity and new practices

Negotiating identity

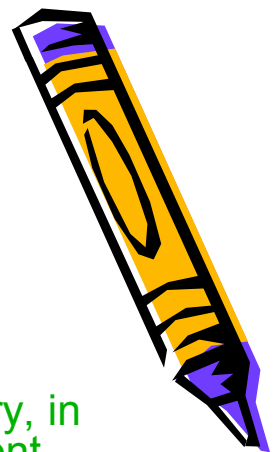# New identities not apparent without objectification or contrast

"I want to share one interesting story. I went to Bangladesh, my country, in summer holiday. And it is so surprising that I realise that I **feel** different.

I came back to my country after just one year. But even in the airport I feel that I was **getting annoyed** for the system and other things.
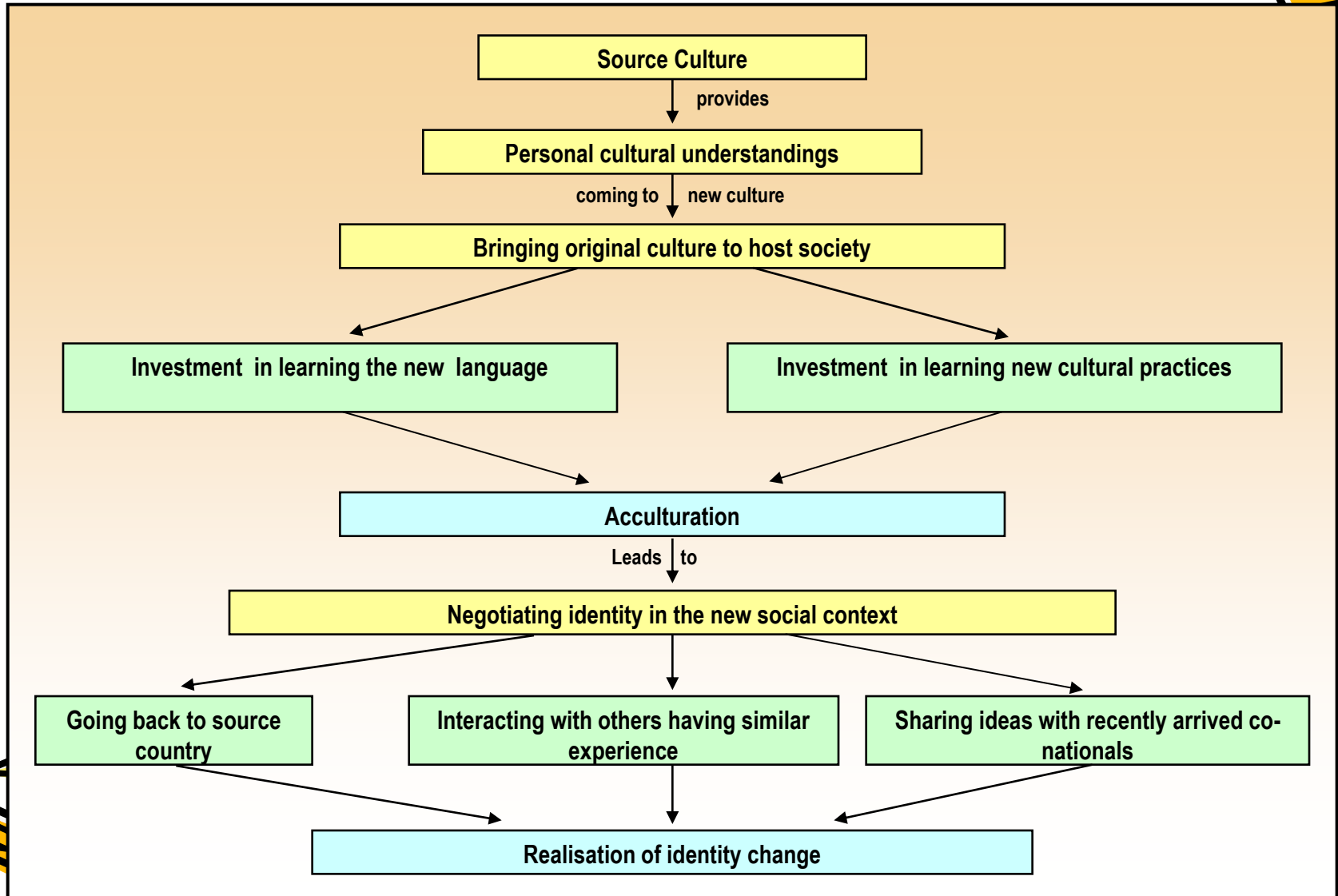
It's not that they became bad, it's not possible in this short time. That means **I have changed**. Even my parents, my family, friend **everyone** think I have changed, I mean my **attitude and behaviour**.

I did not realise until I go to my country. I'm still a Bangladeshi but I have changed I think."

(Asif, Bangladesh)

Realisation of Identity Shift

Source Culture

↓ provides

Personal cultural understandings

coming to ↓ new culture

Bringing original culture to host society

Investment in learning the new language

Investment in learning new cultural practices

Acculturation

Leads ↓ to

Negotiating identity in the new social context

Going back to source country

Interacting with others having similar experience

Sharing ideas with recently arrived co-nationals

Realisation of identity change

Some Recommendations

Linguistic minority international students need to be prepared socio-culturally and emotionally as well as linguistically for transition;

Teaching strategies and academic preparation should make study topics a focus of language teaching, with academic expectations and requirements clearly evident in curricula and teaching methods;

Language schools should prepare students better for the multiple roles English is likely to play, for the challenges of multiculturalism, and for the links between personal identity and socio-cultural contexts.