Understanding the Role of Language/Culture in Group Work through Qualitative Interviewing

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The second language student experience of group work at university is not often transparent in survey evaluations, although the multicultural nature of the student population in Australasia would suggest that culture and language should be on the research agenda. Culture and language, notwithstanding, is used in the higher education literature to position the Asian learner as "different" and problematic, although such cultural models and stereotypes have been the subject of some criticism in recent years. Through semi-structured qualitative interviewing in focus group interviews with nineteen South East Asian students, I explore the ways students account for their experiences of group work in their representation of teaching and learning reality through language and the discourses they take up. I find that student perceptions regarding the benefits and challenges of group work appear to be similar to their native speaking counterparts but that language/culture also appears to play a diverse and sometime unexpected role in their experience. Key words: English as a Second Language, Group Work, University, Focus Group, and Qualitative

Introduction

Recent survey results at my university and faculty raised questions about the development of teamwork skills among students, and a report on the international students experience for 2000 (James & Devlin, 2001, p. 9) also found that a significant large number of ESL (English as a Second Language) students reported that they found it difficult to participate in small group discussions. In my role as ESL lecturer and language adviser in a major Australian university, I felt this issue warranted further investigation beyond a (quantitative) questionnaire-based approach.

While qualitative comments from students are sometimes included in survey results, they are backgrounded to quantitative results. In line with content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980), such comments are also typically categorized at the level of referential content, where we privilege "what is said in a stretch of transcript but not how it is said or how it fits into the overall flow of the event" (Cameron, 2001, p. 147). The need to focus on the "how" is a key motivation of approaches to discourse analysis such as conversation analysis, which focuses how we both "represent the world" and also give particular accounts of ourselves (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998) that fit with how we wish to be recognised.

Following an overview of the existing literature on group work, I take up both the how and what questions in the following analysis of focus group interviews with nineteen

South East Asian students in an Australian university. I also give some space to considering the specific strengths of qualitative interviewing in focus groups as particularly relevant to the question of the "mediation" of culture and language in the ESL student experience.

Problematizing Group Work in Higher Education for ESL Students

The use of group work in higher education is linked to teamwork skills as graduate attributes and outcomes in Australia, the U.S., and the U.K. On the one hand, institutional legitimation of group work is a response to industry demands for more relevant skills for students (Ackermann & Plummer, 1994; Bourner, Hughes, & Bourner, 2001, p. 30; Mutch, 1998), the increasing vocational nature of higher education, greater student accountability, and pedagogies of active learning (Kremer & McGuinness, 1998, p. 44). Group work under various guises is also associated with a number of progressive theories or approaches to learning including constructivism (Hodder, 1998), student-centred learning (Lejk & Wyvill, 2001, p. 61), experiential learning (McGraw & Tidwell, 2001, p. 162) and collaborative and cooperative learning (Ackermann & Plummer, 1994; Lee, Ng, & Jacobs, 1997; Mahenthiran & Rouse, 2000, p. 255; Nance & Mackey-Kallis, 1997, p. 2; Smith, 1995), which all aim to produce "greater involvement and accountability of students within the group" (Stoll, 1996, p. 260), redistribute power (Berge, 1998, p. 195; Mahenthiran & Rouse, 2000, p. 256), and promote student autonomy (Bourner et al., 2001, p. 20).

Although a number of different learning theories and labels are applied to group work such labels conceal a range of definitions and practices (Mutch, 1998, p. 51). Rather than limiting myself to such prescriptive labels, e.g., collaborative learning, I allowed students to generate, where they saw fit, definitions for the group work they were engaged in. Students were recruited where they saw themselves engaged in group work in different faculties and programs. The extent to which such work constituted "true" collaboration, cooperation, and deep-learning, etc. and improved learning experiences being determined not by pedagogical theory but by the accounts they provided. A number of students referred to learning theories such as problem-based learning and collaborative learning, or teaching methods in general as underpinning or related to group work, but there accounts were as eclectic as those who did not.

Overall, despite the fact that meta-analysis of cooperative learning in groups is generally linked to improved thinking and problem-solving (Lee et al., 1997), whether group work practices improve learning experiences and outcomes remains "a matter for conjecture" (Kremer & McGuinness, 1998, p. 48). Feedback from students sometimes confirm their experience of these benefits and a "large and mainly optimistic body of research exists on the benefits of group work among peers" (Leki, 2001, p. 40). As MacCallum (1994) notes perceptions among students within a class of the goals, aims, and processes of collaborative learning vary substantially. Leki (2001) in a qualitative analysis of non-native students in the U.S. found that in general difficulties facing non-native English speakers were invisible in course evaluations such as questionnaires, "often the disappointing features of the group work appeared to be invisible to the course instructor, sometimes hidden behind positive evaluations of the final group project itself" (Lejk & Wyvill, 2001, p. 62). To remedy the existing limitations of survey studies, Volet (1999) suggests that to understand learning practices across cultures we need to look at the staff and student perceptions of learning in

the home and host country arguing that only through such an in-depth qualitative approach can stereotypical constructions of the foreign student as "other" be remedied.

In Australasia, cultural difference is used to explain different approaches to group work and learning by non-Western students, e.g., (Andrews & Dekkers, 1999; Anyanwu, 2000; Baker & Panko, 1998), and cultural difference is often positioned as a problem. McGraw and Tidwell (2001, p. 163), for example, refer to "culturally different approaches to work" among problems with group work. Claims about the lack of participation by Asians in group work sometimes focus on language difficulties but also stress the lack of independence or autonomy and dependence on uncritical acceptance of authority figures as part of their cultural baggage (Baker & Panko, 1998; Chapple, 1998). The sometimes unstated assumption in this claim is that Asian students lack of participation is a cultural disposition although this contradicts the collectivist ideology identified for confucianist cultural explanations (Chan, S., 1999; Redding, 1990).

Some scholars have questioned the construction of the Asian learner as different and deficient (Biggs, 1994, 1996; Watkins & Biggs, 1996), and Kleinsmiede (1997) suggests that attempts to view overseas learners as products of a homogenous and different culture may be a revival of the discredited Sapir-Whorf hypothesis about language as a direct reflection of cultural thinking and language. As Kubota (2001) has argued, the tendency to "essentialize the culture of ESL/EFL students . . . as categorically different from the perceived culture of students in English-speaking cultures" (p. 10), a discursive construction of "other" (Pennycook, 1998); serves as a form of gate keeping to educational and social change. As I attempt to show below while cultural difference may have some explanatory power, it is insufficient on its own to explain the similarities students perceive, and the literature supports in the learning approaches of native and non-native speakers.

Survey-based studies also question this construction of the learner as different. Littlewood (2000) concludes that there is less difference in attitudes to learning between Asian and European countries than between individuals within each country. Ramburuth and McCormick (2001) discovered that there were no statistically significant differences between Asian and Australian students in their approaches to learning, although they did differ in their learning strategies and styles with Asian learners preferring more collaborative and group learning. Csete, Yan, and Kwan-Liddle (1998) note in a survey study that students in Hong Kong increasingly found participating in group work an unsatisfactory experience. In contrast, Tang (1993) finds that the same cultural group – Hongkongese – use "spontaneous" peer collaborative learning to achieve more than students learning individually. Partly in response to this conflicting picture, P. Chan (1999) suggests that "educators should pay more attention to both similarities and subtle differences between students from different cultures and countries, rather than assuming that students from certain cultures or countries behave in certain ways" (p. 9). A similar scepticism to "othering" ESL students and reifying difference motivated this study.

In their use of language and, in some cases, in their reference to the role of language and cultural difference in structuring their experience, student interviewees display the importance of this element in their academic work. The interview itself, however, also offers students a space to resist the essentialization of their experience by them claiming their similarity to other students, by openly rejecting difference as problematic, and, as a result, through their projection of an identity not dissimilar to their perception of their native

speaking counterparts. Before considering how students achieve this in "doing" identity in the interview, I highlight in what follows how discourse analysis can help suggest how individuals do identity even in relatively institutional contexts like research interviews.

Discourse Analysis, Accounts, and Identities

Both the construction of a socially situated identity and a material reality are two of the key achievements of talk in context according to Gee (1999, p. 12). As Potter and Wetherell (1987) note, individual accounts of experience are constructed out of existing linguistic resources and "are not simply representations of the world; they are part of the world they describe" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 107). While I focus on both in the discussion below, here I highlight the power of talk in fashioning identities as it pertains to this study.

Qualitative social researchers are interested in the "intersubjective" use of language since we "speak with the voices of our communities, and to the extent that we have individual voices, we fashion them out of the social voices already available to us" (Lemke, 1995, p. 24-25). Such social voices are inscribed with power and in taking up these voices or discourses, we do identity. In talk and action, we seek to project a "socially situated identity", i.e., use the resources of English to project oneself "as a certain kind of person, a different kind in different circumstances" (Gee, 1999, p. 13).

As Cameron (2001) notes utterances in context always perform other functions in addition to objectively referring to the world. "Speakers do refer to states of affairs in the world when they talk, but at the same time, they are deeply concerned with such non-referential tasks as the management of relationships with others . . . and the construction of identities for themselves" (Cameron, 2001, p. 147). One of the key elements of recent approaches to discourse analysis has been a shift to consider "what activities particular forms of self discourse make possible, and how a subject may be constituted on any particular occasion" (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 128).

As Cameron (2001) also notes when people talk they do identity, "in interactive talk one may observe both the construction of identities and their reception by participants" (Cameron, 2001, p. 171). Thus, construction of identity is achieved interactionally, and identities are sustained by the linguistic choices we make. Accounting for oneself in interview is also a face threatening act since our interview "self" is being judged albeit implicitly. Doing identity in talk means not only telling listeners about ourselves, but representing what we are and what we are not. For the identities we wish to do, "there is a limited. . . number of discourses on offer out of which we might fashion ourselves" (Burr, 1995, p. 53).

Hutchby and Woofitt (1998) note, for example, how interviewees deal with "the interactional management of category ascription, resistance, and affiliation" (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, p. 184), by responding and positioning themselves either within or against the assumptions in questions. Resistance to the construction of the learner as different, a possible "reading" within the context of this interview, is taken up by some participants. Even so-called referential factual accounts are used by people to "warrant their perspective, position or point of view" (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, p. 203). As Edwards and Potter (1992) note, "factual accounts are constructed to appear external to the actor, to be

representations of features of an "out-there" world, rather than the reflections of the actor's own desires and concerns" (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 160).

Accounts are selective, and "organize" social reality and "the everyday organization of experience produces and reproduces the patterned and patterning experiences we have come to call social structure" (Boden & Zimmerman, 1991, p. 19). In choosing what to include in an account, students take up existing discourses (talk-and-action) regarding recognizable and acceptable forms of student behaviour (Gee, 1999). In an interview context designed to elicit their "experiences" of group work at university, second language students aim to project an identity that is consistent with existing discourses of cultural difference and the ordinary student.

This construction of identities is made complex where interviewees are working through a second language and culture even where they resist its effects. In a study of similar scope to the preset work, Briguglio (2000) has noted "language and culture issues are extremely closely interwoven, although students themselves may not be aware of the role that culture plays in their English language difficulties" (Briguglio, 2000, p. 2). I suggest that the "role" of language and culture is not only influential in referential (what) terms but also in sociolinguistic (how) terms.

In general, then language, even apparently objective factual accounts of the material world are never disinterested but performative (Searle, Kiefer, & Bierwisch, 1980) or action oriented. They contribute to the construction of particular identities we wish to warrant in the interview setting. The analysis of interviews in this paper takes up this question with regard to the responses of interviewees. I find that in their accounts students both refer to language/culture as an element of an objective social reality bounding their experience, and also in their linguistic interaction and responses attempt to locate themselves in the discursive space of student life. It seemed to me particularly "legitimate" to use the group interview setting to discuss tacit theories or cultural models of working in groups, "the group is a socially legitimated occasion for participants to engage in "retrospective introspection", to attempt to collectively tease out previously taken for granted assumptions" (Bloor, 2001, p. 5-6).

Methods: Qualitative Interviewing in Focus Groups

It is true that there is "no such thing as a neutral venue for a focus group" (Bloor, 2001, p. 39), although the seminar room chosen for interviews was intended to offer a relatively neutral off-campus common ground. Through this location and the nature and process of the interviews, I constructed the focus group interviews as a conventional academic research encounter, and students accepted the consequences of asymmetrical power relationship of interviewer-interviewee (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, p. 164-171) allowing me to direct turn sequences. In addition to a consideration of geography and space, there are other key features of qualitative interviews and focus groups which are worth highlighting here, including variability in responses, group and individual interaction, and appropriateness to the research question.

Western interview conventions are culturally specific and need to be considered when working with students of a different culture (Briggs, 1986; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, p. 113-115). Increasingly interview like other forms of institutional interaction (Cameron, 2000;

Fairclough, 1995) has been "conversationalised" , i.e., reformed to more closely mimic the dialogue of everyday interaction. Interview, like other institutional genres, nonetheless, builds on a structured asymmetry (Markovic & Foppa, 1991) between interviewer and interviewee that is "interactionally achieved" (ten Have, 1991, p. 162). This contribution of interaction to the product of the interview is even more significant in focus groups, which foreground group dynamics (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997).

Focus groups have been used as a complement to surveys for course evaluation to explore reasons behind quantitative responses, e. g., (Dreachslin, 1999, p. 226; Wall, 2001, p. 28). Bloor (2001) also note that focus groups can be used "adversarially" to contest survey data and results or at least to offer alternative interpretations of apparent results (Bloor, 2001, p. 11). In this paper, both the individual students "account" of experience and this account as a response to the group – both the individual "moving picture" and group "snapshots" (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997) - is explored as significant effects of the focus interview. Myers (2000), rejecting the view that talk in moderated groups is artificial, adds, rather ambitiously in my view, that focus group analysis, is "a chance to explore how society emerges" and, in particular, how the individuals locate themselves in society.

In discourse analysis but not questionnaire studies, variability is foregrounded, "The goal is to understand variability and to employ it for analytical purposes, not to eliminate it" (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 10). Variability in responses is aggregated in surveys and some group interviews. Variability includes apparent "contradictory" responses by individuals in interview. In fact, a close analysis of these so-called contradictions "by speaking in more than one voice, social actors are providing evidence about their multiple ways of understanding the world" (Cameron, 2001, p. 157). Bloor (2001) also note that unlike group interviews, which seem closest conceptually to complementary interviews, in focus groups "the objective is not primarily to elicit the groups' answers but rather to stimulate discussion and thereby understand (through subsequent analysis) the meanings and norms which underlie the group answers" (Bloor, 2001, p. 43). Bloor's reference to subjective meaning "underlying" responses is replaced in social constructivist approaches by interactional achievement of meaning, which lies in not beyond talk-in-action.

Focus groups, like individual interviews, are seen as "uniquely well suited to the assessment of adult learners' satisfaction" (Dreachslin, 1999, p. 226) and part of a qualitative turn in research on student experiences to "examine the sense making process of the individual" (Garavan & Murphy, 2001, p. 283). Semi-structured interviews can avoid researcher preconceptions embedded in questionnaire categories (Garavan & Murphy, 2001, p. 283-284) and because the generation of texts and the in-depth analysis involved numbers are smaller and representativeness, in quantitative terms, not usually an issue. Garavan and Murphy (2001), for example, use six students in their study; Wall (2001) used eight students from a cohort of 425 business studies students. McCosker (1994), interviewing 12 students in two focus groups, finds their experience of group work unsatisfactory as do Ackerman and Plummer (1994), who interviewed nine students of 56 surveyed in health studies. This study is similar in size and depth to the semi-structured interview study of Briguglio (1998), who interviewed 18 NESB students regarding their linguistic and cultural needs.

Methods: Addressing Validity in Small-Scale Qualitative Research

In this study, nineteen students predominantly from Indonesia and China were interviewed in focus groups ranging from 3 to 6 members for between 45 to 60 minutes each. Recruitment was via posters advertised in key locations for international students and via contacts with students taking ESL credit courses in the ESL centre; in the appendix, I provide a brief profile for each interviewee. As can be seen from that table, a large group of students were involved in a nursing postgraduate program. Other students came from a range of faculties and where possible in interviews, I attempted to mix groups both in terms of academic domain and ethnicity. To avoid any ethical conflicts, none of the interviewees were currently or had in the past studied with me. In addition, I advised students to address their experiences of group work to situations outside their ESL credit subjects since I did not want to introduce the likelihood of critical evaluation of colleagues. Despite this explicit note, some students did refer to their ESL group work experiences albeit in a general sense.

Students received university approved plain language statements and consent forms; each student received $10 which was considered insufficient as a financial inducement but sufficient as compensation for time spent. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. I used a broad transcription approach where standard orthographic full stops and commas were used to mark major pauses and grammatical phrase groups. Standard orthography was also used so that student interviewees, who received a copy of the transcript, were not dismayed by the lack of grammaticality in their speech; a fear I had seen expressed before. Students are referred to by abbreviations, which indicate sex (m/f) and interviewee number. Although most were not enrolled in first year undergraduate subjects, all those interviewed were in their first year of study at Melbourne.

In their review of qualitative criteria for assessing research validity, Anfara, Brown, Mangione (2002, p. 30) note that "publicly disclosing methods and research processes" is still insufficiently addressed in research writing and that credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, need to be addressed. In the following outline of the research process, I attempt to address these dimensions. The interviews were based around a set of focus questions, which were explored for different groups and individuals as is typical with focus group semi-structured interviewing (Morgan, 1997). Evidence of a desire for consensus and "group think" among participants was evident (Carey & Smith, 1994). I also intervened at several points in the interviews to clarify interviewees responses, to direct participants to elaborate, and to rephrase statements; thus, interviews were very much a jointly constructed discourse and questions "part of a circular process through which its meaning and that of the answer are created in the discourse between interviewer and respondent as they try to make continuing sense of what they are saying to each other" (Mishler, 1986, p. 53).

In the initial stages of data production and analysis, two colleagues helped develop the initial focus of the analysis. Following discussions with them on the questions used to orient the focus group interviews, we settled on the following as sufficiently focused and able to address five key dimensions of their experience: student evaluation of their experience, the theory and practice of group organization, benefits of working in groups, difficulties students face, and evaluation of the importance of group work in courses. To this was added a question regarding what value students thought lecturers attached to group work.

- What do you think about group work as a way of learning or being assessed?
- How are groups organised in your course, and how do they operate in practice?
- What do you actually gain from group work in terms of quality of work or results?
- In your experience, what makes it difficult to work in groups?
- How important is group work for your final mark, and what do you think about that?

As ESL lecturers, we had our own tacit theories about Asian learners and a vested professional interest in examining our own tacit theories. Once the first transcript was transcribed, together with a colleague, I developed an initial categorization of themes, which emerged from a first reading[1]. The nine broad themes around which student responses clustered emerged in response to the five semi-structured questions used in the interviews:

- Distribution of tasks, i.e., how tasks are distributed within the group?
- Organisation of groups, i.e., who decides who goes with who?
- Assessment and proportion of grade accredited to group work
- Individual versus group work, which gets a higher mark?
- Group conflict: a) different opinions, b) cross-cultural, c) personality
- Group composition, i.e., who makes up the group in terms of student backgrounds?
- Benefits
- Language problems
- Perception of group work for future career

When the complete transcripts of the four focus groups were completed, I constructed an index coding using qualitative data analysis software – NUDIST 4.0™ and also generated a graphic display of the categories for discussion. In this first iteration, I proposed four meta-categories: grades assigned to group work, organization of group work, culture and language, challenges, and benefits. The culture/language category only coded those instances where interviewees explicitly referred to this. These categories then were subdivided again into lower level themes. In our team research discussion, it emerged that the culture/language category seemed the most promising angle through which to manage the data. Having "collaboratively" established the focus, I proceeded with the particular discourse analysis approach adopted here to the data analysis reproduced below.

Discussion: Language and Content As

In the following discussion, I mention first some of the linguistic resources used by students to locate themselves within groups and then I address some of the substantive comments students make regarding the relevance or non-relevance of language/culture to their experience. Both these "choices" can be seen as an attempt by students to position oneself within classroom communities. I take up language first as a topic and resource for accounting for student work.

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[1] Neither of the two colleagues that joined me in the initial stages had substantial experience of qualitative data analysis, and participated partly as a learning experience.

In relating their experiences of group work, many students correlate the meaning they attribute to the pronoun "we" with their general response to how successfully they locate themselves within classroom groups become sites within which they locate themselves. One group take up the pronoun "we" and use it to refer to their location within the group constituted by classroom practice where their experience is positive. A second group distance themselves by identifying a community "we", e.g., we Chinese students, that only partially overlaps with the "we" of the classroom group. A third group, who also generally report reservations about the group process, clearly locate the "agency" for the group process outside both their own perceived community, which is reflected in the language of obligation, e.g., we have to or program demands, e.g., this subject. I see links between these responses and their overall accounts as individuals.

Table 1. **Pronoun use and group membership.**

	Personal agency and ownership/generally successful group work experience	Semi-agentive participation/ partly successful group experience	Group work as imposed/ misgivings reported about group work
Students claiming membership	S7 S18 S17 S11 S1	S5 S6 S15 S16 S10	S19 S14 S8 S12 S13 S9 S2 S3 S4
Example Expressions	We have a discussion we got that like problem-based learning (S7) We work together how to explain from many background (S18) We must go to an organization (S11) We designed a system (S1)	We get more knowledge from our group members (S5) We talk about the research we are doing with our group members (S15) We just work in groups to discuss (S16)	It is required me to explore my ideas . . . I have to (S19) We have to discuss in a group and we have to submit every week (S14) This subject utilise group work (S8) I have to do group work at case management subject (S9)

In the interviews, students seek to fashion a culturally acceptable student identity through their talk; in some cases resisting existing assumptions about their identities as problematic second language learners. It appears at times that such an acceptable identity must conform to underlying cultural conventions in public encounters such as the interview. In the situation where a focus group contained students with similar ethnic backgrounds, (S17, S18, S19) students seemed reluctant to challenge a consensual positive assessment. The Indonesian nursing students, for example, appear to work initially with a principle of group consensus, which is a form of acceptable cultural "facework". For example, the response, of students to the question I make regarding group work as a way of learning, elicits only one student elects to directly signal his dislike of group work (see table 1 below) while all others

in sequential turns highlight benefits alone or in the main. One student described this principle as deliberate deferral of authority to others and a desire to maintain consensus.

When one of these students raised the issue of different backgrounds, I intervened with a question about a preference for mixed groupings, which lead the students to begin to unpack their consensus into particular issues they had. Exceptions to this initial reluctance to critique group work among the Indonesian nursing students, e.g., S2, S14, seemed to arise in contexts where there was a mix of ethnicities and other participants were prepared to be openly critical and had made these comments in preceding turns. In line with this, one Indonesian student (S13) was prepared to identify a single "challenge" facing him following the overtly negative response from students in his own group (S12).

Table 2. **Overt indication in initial student response to question one.**

Positive	Negative	Positive and negative
S8, S10, S11, S16, S17, S19, S18, S19, S1, S9	S12	S15, S14, S5, S6, S7, S2, S3, S4, S13

Group consensus or group think emerged also in the way students explicitly acknowledged their agreement with contributions by previous speakers and in their more general approach to responding to questions. Explicit agreement with previous opinions was marked by phrases such as that of S13 "Yeah agree with S9 opinion". In terms of the interview process, for example, among the four Indonesian students in group 4 the initial response of three of the students was to highlight only benefits of working with an all Indonesian group work; they moved cautiously from a reluctance to identify problematic issues with group work to a tentative comment on difficulties. When S12 explicitly rejected these advantages, following his intervention, both S8 and S9 then took up the difficulty of reaching consensus among group members as a difficulty with group work. When prompted to make his final comments S9, who together with S8, was reluctant to name cultural homogeneity in groups as an obstacle seemed finally persuaded to note that to improve group work "I think we will involve the other person from other countries".

Despite noting a preference for consensus and "doing" consensus in their interview, achieving consensus for group assignments, however, was difficult for the Indonesian students and lead to the need to go outside the group to other figures of authority such as learning skills advisers to "help us to decide what is the best answer". The need for "external" confirmation raised by S8 is prefigured in S12s comment on "the need to make sure what we are doing is true or not". This desire for a single answer seems a product of the perception among students that what is required in their case management subject is a single answer, one the lecturer may be withholding. This need for a "best" answer is then reinforced by an assessment system, which penalises, according to the students, those who produce an interpretation of a question that disagrees with faculty. While one student notes that the nursing field is a domain within the social science where "there is no answer, nothing answer wrong or is true" (S18), i.e., multiple interpretations are defensible; the assessment program appears to privilege a single correct interpretation. Students recognise that the subject and the group work within the subject is to help them "learn how to work with other people" and deal

with "different views, different opinions" (S12). However, the extent to which the classroom program encourages this is doubtful according to some.

Having raised the issue of consensus among a homogenous cultural grouping, I then pursued this with the other non-Indonesian participants in the group. Neither of the other two students identified any potential conflicts citing disciplinary differences as the reason why consensus was not a problem. S11, a first year student in business management working with Australian and non-Australian students on a process in an Australian organization, claimed a general consensus among all students about the content of his program "everybody agrees with it". He coupled this "natural" consensus with the fact that since his group work was based on a single source of information – the manager of an organization" – and this information was the same, therefore, "we draw the conclusion, the same conclusion". S11 also noted later on that he clearly benefited from working with other more experienced students in an environment where students chose their partners and where, therefore, he could incorporate "different perspectives"; the ability to choose partners is then taken up by the Indonesian students as a desirable feature they have no access to. While S11 appears to both hold to the notion of the importance of multiple perspectives and a single perspective, his desire for partners is more pragmatic; taking up other student perspectives avoids wasting time and studying in a way "which is incorrect". Thus, working with others is a strategic way of getting the right answer. Clearly, multiple perspectives and consensus are compatible although perhaps the realist discourse of business management promotes such conclusions.

In referring to her work in a research laboratory and the conclusions drawn from experiments, S10 explicitly rejected the possibility that culture played a part in the possibility of multiple outcomes, "we think we can draw our conclusion from this way and the people then said it's not the best way, you need to give more details or we can draw taking from another way . . . I think it's the main disagreement in academic not the culture or something" (S10). In her final comments about the limitations of Ph.D. training in Australia, S10 again explicitly rejected the discourse of culture as problem when referring to student background, "I'm talking about not the cultural background talking about academic". S10 was quite explicit in her rejection of the importance of culture/language in influencing her group work experience.

Despite S10's explicit rejection of the relevance of language, other students volunteered how language intervenes in a complex way into the group work experience. S06 links confidence and language use, which she calls "the language problem", in participation in groups:

> For example, I'm Chinese; perhaps like working with Australians, I might not say my opinions out because of the language problem. I might be feel a lack of confidence by saying that or being teased or whatever and also perhaps the others won't give you the chance to say what you think (S06).

S05 takes up this theme of reluctance and explains it through culturally-based rhetorical strategies, claiming that although native speaking Australians gave the appearance of taking much more firm stances on issues, this was a product of ways of talking rather than the inherent independence of one or other group:

I think Australians, they have stronger points, and they insist on their points more strongly than we Asians . . . they think their ideas are the best, and they will argue for that, but I think perhaps maybe typically Asians, they won't express what they really think. If they are talking in their own language or perhaps saying in Chinese, perhaps they will argue at the end to hold their idea . . . for Asians perhaps because of the language problem, they will put it inside but not say it out but it doesn't mean they're not holding their strong ideas (S05).

Although non-native speaking students refer to the presence of native speakers as an advantage in terms of practising and improving their own language levels; S09 and S08 add that even within a homogenous group of students from the same culture language abilities differ and this means that homogenous groups can contribute to language development.

And like S08 said before English is not the first language, and we can share my ability because every people have different ability about the English especially grammar and vocabulary, so we can share each other about the English first and secondly about the idea (S09).

S15, in addition, mentions that group work with (culturally) familiar peers was an opportunity for informal discussion with peers without having to worry about the status of the lecturer.

Sometimes we feel nervous to talk with our tutor or lecturer yeah . . . because lots of student in my group are Chinese students yeah so it's easy for us to communicate with each other. Of course, we still use, English, but I feel very relaxed, and it's easy for us (S15).

Not everyone agreed, however, that the presence of non-native speaking students with different abilities could help clarify tasks. S12, for example, suggested that language and culture together contributed to a lack of perspective for nursing students. Since a single correct response was obviously what was required, S12 also saw this as impossible without adequate input:

When we work together with the same people from Indonesia, for example, it's very difficult to understand because I think we have different problems with language . . . but in this case, we have only an Indonesian group, for example, without another student, international students, for example, from Australia to help me understand the article . . . we need to make sure what we are doing is true or not (S12).

Students recently arrived in the country may have few cultural resources to deal with group tasks. Leki (2001, p. 50-51) reports on the difficulties for Ling from Taiwan precisely because she lacked these resources. A somewhat similar problem emerged in S03's response. Working in the faculty of law on a subject called infrastructure development, students were allocated the topic of concession agreement to discuss and present. S03 had understood the idea of concession agreement from her textbooks but was unable to participate in the

discussion since her two Australian companions had practical experience and understanding of the nature and function of this:

> You know in China, the government didn't sign agreement with companies, so concession agreement is not very popular in China. But, two other Australian persons very familiar with this kind of concept; they just to say we have so many thing to talk with concession agreement . . . so, I just follow them's idea, mind, you know, follow step by step . . . I think it's difficult to follow their steps, very, very difficult (S03).

Thus, although many students did represent language and culture as influential in their experiences, the problems they faced did not only arise through linguistic deficiencies. Students like S12 saw correct interpretation of tasks and questions as tied to language while other students downplayed language per se to focus on other difficulties affecting group work success.

Social and academic aspects of group work although in principle separate are difficult to divide in practice and perhaps "are best viewed as two ends of a continuum" (Leki, 2001. p. 47). Positive social relationships among group members are essential to academic success, i.e., successful task completion. Even though, they may have difficulties in participating in groups with native speakers, South East Asian students have their own strategies for informal peer group work. As Volet (1999) and others, e.g., (Greenhill, von, Nielsen, & Pringle, 1996) have noted, informal peer groups for study purposes is a common strategy of Asian learners. S06 and S07 referred to this in their observations on circumventing problems in working in groups. S06, for example, highlights difficulties with groups and simultaneously the way informal groups with friends help to clarify and complete individual tasks:

> But if you can't really get into the group, and you're out of that group . . . of course the result won't be as like you're expecting . . . sometimes I find doing individual work, I always call my friends to seek for their help. It's kind of like group work, right? (S06)

Although social interaction and the development of relationships are not necessarily the primary function of groups, some students saw this as one of its main features. S16, for example, claimed:

> When you get in groups, you need to interact with others and initially you know each other better . . . I think this kind of advantage is out of learning . . . it's not necessarily to deal with academic work (S16).

Western models of random assignment of individuals to groups and the use of group work in general puts some pressure on the need to quickly develop social relationships for the group process. Such spontaneous relationship forming may not come easily to all students. S06, for example, foregrounds this need to establish relationships as essential to the successful communication and task completion:

> I think it needs a certain time to develop a certain relationship with that person and then you can further want to communicate with that person. Communicate with a stranger, it's already a really hard thing and then you are coming together and solve a certain problem, it's even harder (S06).

S06 adds to this that training in communication skills and learning how to consult rather than impose is also something that is not yet a part of group processes that she has experienced.

In a few cases, group work was part of project-based learning and involved a team project and report. In such situations, described by S01, S04 and S11, for example, forms of project-based group work lead to a collaborative report and the involvement of students with cross-cultural groupings (native and non-native speakers) that in two of the three cases were successful. S01 describes, for example, how working together to produce a mechanical system and a report of the same was a very positive experience since the project enabled each student to contribute their particular strengths to the project; in S01's case this was mathematics. His particular ability in mathematics, S01 attributed to better training in Taiwan. While acknowledging that if he had completed the project by himself he would have scored higher than he did (since he was given a combined total), he preferred the group work since it helped him establish a social network he did not have on arrival:

> So, I didn't know any friends in my class, and the class is about one hundred students in a lecture . . . so the group, my partner, is a students that I have no idea well . . . if I do all the report maybe we can get higher marks, but I think it's not important because the grades didn't mean everything. So, I get something more than the marks (S01).

Social relationships also affected S04, who described the collaborative production of a web-site in Chinese with an Australian male and Japanese female student. He noted, to the amused chuckles of other interviewees, that when the emotional relationship between the male and female group broke down this produced conflict. He cited a difference of perception about priorities for the website based on cultural difference. This difficulty was also compounded, according to S04, because the three cultures also had to agree about what to include in a Chinese-based site (a fourth culture) and had to work with one computer.

> But, we always fighting about what we should put in our website because what I think important is not important for my Australian friend, and it's also not important for my Japanese friend. So, it's not only the language but also the cultural background (S04).

Overall, social interaction and group formation processes play a key role for all students. Mixed groups bring advantages and disadvantages to the successful completion of tasks and also foreground the need for a social basis for clear communication.

The majority of students reported that groups were randomly assigned by lecturers and reacted variously to whether this random assignment contributed or not to a successful group experience. On the one hand, S15 pointed out that in her view, it is difficult for students to organise themselves, and this is best left to the lecturer, although it was possible this was a reflection her belief about the authority and expertise of faculty or a response to

other difficulties students might have. On the other hand, S16 believed that random assignment was used to encourage interaction and class cohesion, purposes which students did not necessarily share. Referring to lecturers mixing students, he claimed:

> Yeah, they encourage us to work with strangers because maybe they think that you need to know your classmate better, and it provides a way to interact with strangers, that's the benefit of it . . . I think it's good but in fact I know the people don't like it (M16).

Where random assignment was used this also lead into a discussion of the process of managing groups and appointing roles. S18 reported how the formation of groups initially was a very lengthy process in his group because in Indonesia leadership is not publicly sought after:

> Sometimes, we have much time to decide who is the leader of group because maybe I don't know the Western culture but in the Indonesian culture sometimes if someone will be choose to be leader sometimes is no, no, not me, please, please no somebody else, like that (S18).

Although this is a time consuming process, leaders are chosen, according to S13 (and S11), on the basis of a careful consideration of skills and prior experience:

> Actually, in my group, we choose one person to become a group leader . . . based on his[2] skills, and we feel he can lead me because we know his background, and he usually lead us from the other group (S13).

Students, in general, felt that random assignment of group members was either not a good idea or irrelevant in their view to the efficiency of the group. Since this is an extremely prevalent practice in the academy, revisiting the principles on which random assignment is made with students may be a good idea. S11 categorically stated that random assignment by staff was dangerous and that student choice was far more appropriate and principled:

> We choose ourself, the group, and I don't think the lecturer assign the group members is a good thing because some people are hostile to each other (S11).

There was general acknowledgement among participants that assigning a group leader, where this was done, contributed to the functioning of the group and avoided some difficulties mentioned elsewhere. Where a group leader was assigned, this was done on the basis of specific principles, mentioned above.

Despite the fact that international students are often represented as lacking the kind of autonomy and presence of their Australian peers, S07 (Physiotherapy) reports on how cooperation among international students in his program is much poorer than that of their Australian counterparts putting this down to the high self-estimation of the foreign students:

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[2] The reference to "he" may also indicate that male leadership is the norm in Indonesian groups.

And the problem is when I go to these international groups, we have difficulties to organise the program. I don't know why but more like their individualism is quite high compared to the local student . . . I mean they don't want to look to the other opinion, just looking to from their own vision (S07).

In fact, a number of students, note that competitive individualism is not only a characteristic of non-native speakers but a general problem in some group settings and is partly produced by the democratic principle that one is obliged to give a hearing to everyone even where students are aware they should be searching for the single correct answer. As S12 notes:

It is often come up with the confusing discussion because every person have own different opinion, and they keep in their opinion because they have their own evidence . . . so, it's sometimes very difficult to make the discussion in one result (S12).

Several other students pointed to the trade off between the advantage of broader perspectives on tasks from a group and the disadvantage of having to be democratic about accepting alternative views. Given that many group outcomes demand a single convergent decision, product, or solution, democracy frustrates rather than contributes to achieving task completion. This issue of a convergent answer is developed in the following section.

The usefulness of different opinions is also proportional to the task so that where students' backgrounds do not permit useful input this leads to unsatisfactory outcomes. S15 notes that in her course on research methods the diverging interests of students in different research topics and the fact of having to work together in a group that did not share these interests did not work:

And because at the beginning, we have some similar research topic, and the teacher try to organise us in the same group. But several weeks later, we change a little so, but, we still in the same group, yeah (S15).

Plurality is encouraged sometimes by staff refusing to make judgements or provide guidance during discussions as to what their own opinion is. S15 pointed out how this actually frustrates students, who see staff not playing their role as experts and, as other interviewees also suggest, then judging only a single answer as correct:

Yeah, I think our lecturer; they think group work is important because sometimes many of my group members they try to ask some question about our research, our assignment to lecturer and she said, it's not my position to answer your question, you should send it to the forum or talk with your group members. But, we are just students so sometimes we couldn't provide some suitable or some information or some suggestion (S15).

While S18 identified a number of benefits associated with group work and also thought that working with a student from the Philippines from a different profession helped provide a different perspective for discussion, the same plurality of opinion was difficult to reconcile with the need he felt to give a single answer:

> When I presented this result of discussion . . . I would like my lecturer give clarification, give answer in this issue. And sometimes lecturer agree in one of the, an agreement but sometimes she has other opinion. And maybe I don't know, once again in Western Culture, but in my culture if a lecturer have said something usually we agree what lecturer said (S18).

This conflict between the apparent aims of group work to encourage a diversity of opinions and the behaviour of staff, who contradict this in practice by selecting one favoured answer, seems a contradiction to S18. In another sense this convergence on a single "right" answer seems an underlying conflict with the collaborative open nature of the process. S05 in the Faculty of Arts saw advantages in being able to work with other peoples' perspectives as a contribution to a task but at the same time an obstacle to gaining the best grade since:

> Sometimes your opinion will be different and you don't know which person's idea to accept . . . But no one know whose idea is the right one or better one (S05).

Thus, while students are encouraged to explore alternative opinions, and this exploration is sometimes seen as an inherent part of the paradigm of the social sciences, students are aware that often they are required to converge on a single correct answer, an answer that staff may refuse to provide. Such confusion may suggest that faculty needs to reconsider the compatibility between the group process, assessment, and program aims. At the same time, it may also indicate that misinterpretation of questions by language deficient students may have created a context which appears unjust.

Many did propose that group work seemed out of place as content for assessable work due to the inherent difficulties in assigning grades fairly and efficiently, while several students pointed out how group work discussions still contributed ideas and clarity to individual assignments. Thus, while it might have been possible to divide group work and its value into assessed (graded) and non-assessed (ungraded), such a division would not have represented the value accorded to group work as a contribution to individual success that students appeared to give this.

A number of students pointed out how group work contributed to a sharing of workload that would have been difficult otherwise, although at the same time, group processes increased the workload due to difficulties in working together deemed to be caused by either cultural or personality differences. Some students specifically referred to "passengers", i.e., students, who used the group without contributing equally, although most students were able to identify ways in which group work helped clarify tasks and achieve a broader perspective. For example, S11 valued a group project as a way of seeing theory in action dividing workload:

And when we visit that organisation, we face a lot of new stuff, and if I go there alone, I can't ask every question which will be faced in the report. And because we four of us go there, and each of us can think a particular good question (S11).

Conclusions

Leki notes in her qualitative study that for international students group work was not a positive experience principally because "gaining access to communities of practice required the students in this study to take subordinate roles when they felt entitled to full, not peripheral, participation" (2001, p. 62) and course surveys do not reveal this marginalisation. Although group consensus and a respect for the academy may have worked to stifle criticism of group work among participants, all interviewees were able to identify ways in which they had benefited from the opportunity to work with others on academic tasks. While observation and a broader interview base – including staff and other students – could have helped developed a better picture of the student experience, a key feature in this small-scale research study (Knight, 2002) was that narratives of experience are at least as important as observed behaviours in examining pedagogy in action and perhaps more important in understanding student cultures of learning. As Rubin and Rubin (1995) argue in qualitative research "culture is about how people interpret the world around them by developing shared understandings . . . in interviews, we are often trying to figure out the rules of the culture we are studying" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 20). Interviewee responses in this study suggest that students have some difficulty understanding some of the underlying principles of Western approaches to group work and how these different principles seem to contradict, e.g., democracy and convergent responses, each other at times.

Social relationships, assigning of roles within groups, the issue of competition and convergence, and the use of language and culture in group processes and outcomes require careful consideration. It does not seem to many students in this study that these issues are sufficiently well theorised and catered for. Qualitative research highlights the fact that experience is always individual but may also be mediated by common cultural concerns. Some of the concerns discussed above were shared in this sense across both cultural groups of Indonesian and Chinese speakers. Pearson (1999) suggests that one solution to improving cross-cultural communication is getting students to workshop and negotiate the meaning of culture and use this to restructure learning. It may be, on reflection, that a careful negotiation of a new cultural model is required for practice in the university if international student numbers increase, and there is a serious intent to consider other perspectives in the future.

The extent to which students either deferred or resisted taking up culture and language as a significant factor in their group work experience was noticeable in the interviews. I have suggested above that this may be due to some of the face work they do in the interview and a desire to resist taking up a discourse of cultural difference as problematic. Even in those instances where language was mentioned, it was not necessarily used to highlight foreign language differences, i.e., English and Mandarin or Bahasa Indonesian. So, for example, while S18 alludes to language in his response, he suggests that the different perspectives of students contribute to clarifying key professional terms in nursing rather than word meaning per se. Also, where students allude to the different "backgrounds" of group members in multicultural groups, these different "backgrounds" do not necessarily signal

cultural and linguistic differences but rather professional background differences. In addition, the cultural mix some students would prefer to have does not necessarily require the participation of native speaking Australians. For example, S19 notes that "by learning with the students from different cultures we have more exercise, we have more experience".

In a focus group study with 19 students, there are limitations in drawing general conclusions about the role of language and culture in the experiences of second language university students. I cannot claim that these few interviews represent the general experience of Chinese speaking and Indonesian speaking university students in Australia. On the other hand, as I signalled above, an in-depth qualitative analysis of student responses does both complement and, in my view, expand the limits of aggregated questionnaire responses. As I noted above, students appear to take up discourses that both resist and to some extent reinforce culture and language as a factor in their students' identities. In relation to conclusions drawn about student language, a second limitation of this study, and qualitative analysis conducted with second language speakers in English is that conclusions about language use, such as agency and group belonging indicated above, may be a product of imperfect proficiency rather than meaningful choice. However, I found that there appeared to be a correlation (not statistical!) between language choice and the general position students took on their experience of group work.

I believe qualitative studies of this kind point the way to different understandings of the second language learner experience. One of the highlights of my own encounter with the texts was the discovery of linguistic and interactional patterns, which offered a different perspective on the language/cultural nexus as significant in understanding second language learner experience. In my own future applied research on second language learners, I hope to pursue the issue of how culture and language affect the discourses of the learner that ESL students take up. In addition to exploring discourse analysis as evidenced in this text, I hope to expand this work through observation and more naturalistic data sources.

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Appendix: Interviewee Profiles

S (sex) (age) Group	Country L1 identified	Faculty, UG or PG, and study
S01 M (20) Group 2	China	UG Year 3 Manufacturing and Mechanical Engineering. Discusses a group project developing s system and writing a report on the project. A total of three (group) reports used in the course.
S02 M (31) Group 2	Indonesia	PG Master of Nursing Course Work and uses group work in case management, an on-line subject. The subject is on-line and involves solving a problem with group members. A selection of the group discussions are graded together with individual work.
S03 F(31) Group 2	China	Studying PG Master of Laws Course Work and refers to APEC globalisation law as a particular context for group work, for discussion and class presentation. Group work referred to as "a clue to develop your own topic".
S04 M (26) Group 2	Indonesia	PG Grad Dip Course Work Arts/Chinese Studies AUSAID. Refers to group production of a Chinese website with an Australian male and Japanese female.
S05 F (20) Group 5	Taiwan	Studying first year Arts subject Contemporary Culture and Everyday Life together with ESL subjects. Group work used for class discussions with no grade assigned in Arts subject but refers to grades and marks for the other subject.
S06 F (22) Group 5	China/Macau	Studying first year Arts subject Contemporary Culture and Everyday Life together with ESL subjects. Group work used for class discussions

		with no grade assigned in arts subject. Has had one good experience of group writing.
S07 M (36) Group 5	Indonesia	Studying for PG Dip Physiotherapy and uses group work both for laboratory practice and (problem-based) classroom discussion. Group work not assessed directly but an individual piece of assessment is "based on that work in group as individually".
S08 M (28) Group 4	Indonesia	Studying for PG Master of Nursing Course Work and uses group work in case management, an on-line subject. The subject is on-line and involves solving a problem with group members. A selection of the group discussions are graded together with individual work.
S09 M (30) Group 4	Indonesia	Studying for PG Master of Nursing Course Work and uses group work in case management, and on-line subject. The subject is on-line and involves solving a problem with group members. A selection of the group discussions are graded together with individual work.
S10 F (33) Group 4	China PR	Studying for PhD Medicine Biochemistry/Molecular Biology works in groups in regular research meetings in the Medical Centre and also presents work in progress at group meetings of staff and students. Teams are part of the culture of the laboratory.
S11 M (19) Group 4	China	Studying for B. Commerce/Info Systems and uses group work for Organisational Process, a first year subject. Involves a group of four students investigating an organization and reporting back (written). Sees no problems with group work since in the course "everybody agrees with it (group work)" and everyone draws the same conclusion.
S12 M (33) Group 4	Indonesia	Studying for PG Master of Nursing Course Work and uses group work in case management, and on-line subject. The subject is on-line and involves solving a problem with group members. A selection of the group discussions are graded together with individual work.
S13 M (26) Group 4	Indonesia	Studying for PG Master of Nursing Course Work and uses group work in case management, and on-line subject. The subject is on-line and involves solving a problem with group members. A selection of the group discussions are graded together with individual work.
S14 M (35) Group 1	Indonesia	PG Master of Nursing Course Work and uses group work in case management, an on-line subject. The subject is on-line and involves solving a problem with group members. A selection of the group discussions are graded together with individual work.
S15 F (30) Group 1	China	Studying for PG Master of TESOL Coursework. Group work is used in research methods class as part of classroom activities.
S16 F (19) Group 1	China/Macau	UG B. Arts Uses group work in psychology and a literature subject called contemporary culture for class discussion.
S17 M (35) Group 3	Indonesia	Studying for PG Master of Nursing Course Work. Uses group work in advanced practice nursing and ESL subject. APN is an on-line subject and discussion is on-line with group members, solving "patient problem".
S18 M (38) Group 3	Indonesia	Studying for PG Grad Dip/Masters Rural Health. His field is environmental health. Works with group members from different fields (GP and nutritionist). Group works together to solve problem topic given by lecturer.

S19 M (33) Group 3	Indonesia	Studying for PG Master of Nursing Course Work. Had experience of group work in a foundation programme and also uses in case management within nursing. The subject is on-line and involves solving a problem with group members. A selection of the group discussions are graded together with individual work.

Author Note

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