

# **Exploring Chinese Business Management students' experience of Active Learning pedagogies: How much *action* is possible in Active Learning classrooms?**

Submitted by Colin Gordon Simpson to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Education in Education in October 2013.

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## Abstract

This phenomenological study explores how certain “innovative” pedagogies were experienced by a group of Chinese students studying Business Management at a mid-ranking UK university. Analysis of the transcripts of interviews (some in Chinese) with 24 students using NVivo shows that whilst most students felt that Active Learning pedagogies effectively supported their learning, for some students the “zone of indeterminacy” in which group projects and simulations were carried out was an uncomfortable space.

Salient aspects of these students’ experiences were language, relationships and metacognitive skills, and the discussion explores the way in which these three experiential themes can be conceptualised as interrelated elements of the *action* (Biesta, 2006) which takes place in Active Learning classrooms.

The following recommendations are made: HEIs should attempt to provide students with the advanced skills of negotiation which they will need to use in the flexible, ill-structured environments associated with Active Learning pedagogies; tutors should develop consistent approaches to collaborative assignments focussing on group work processes as well as task completion; the development of metacognitive skills through Active Learning pedagogies should be promoted through the use of explicit reflective elements embedded within the teaching, learning and assessment activities.

The concluding discussion proposes that the successful use of Active Learning pedagogies requires a reconceptualisation of the purpose of education and that these pedagogies provide a potential readjustment of the balance between the functions of qualification, socialisation and subjectification (Biesta, 2010).

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## Abbreviations

AL	Active Learning
ASI	Approaches to Studying Inventory
BA	Bachelor of Arts
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CAQDAS	Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software
CHC	Confucian Heritage Cultures
CS1 etc.	Chinese Student 1 etc. (interviewees)
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
I	Interviewer
IP	Information Processing
LPQ	Learning Process Questionnaire
MBA	Masters in Business Administration
PBL	Problem Based Learning
PRC	People's Republic of China
SAL	Student Approaches to Learning
SAR	Special Administrative Region
SPQ	Study Process Questionnaire
UKCISA	UK Council for International Student Affairs
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

## Chapter 1- Introduction

This thesis explores the experiences of a group of international students on Business Management programmes which are delivered using a specific set of pedagogical approaches. It therefore concerns the intersection of two *live issues* which are currently high on the strategic agenda of UK Higher Education (HE). The first of these is the use of innovative pedagogies, in this case Active Learning, with the purpose of raising levels of student engagement and thereby improving recruitment and retention. The second issue is internationalisation, or more specifically, the increasing diversity of the student body, particularly on vocational courses, represented in this study by Chinese students on the Business Management group of courses at a mid-ranking UK university (University of Gloucestershire).

The following section provides a background explanation of how and why Active Learning pedagogies were introduced onto Business Management programmes at the University of Gloucestershire before going on to note some of the observations subsequently made by staff who felt that these pedagogies faced some international, especially Chinese, students with particularly difficult challenges, which in many cases they seemed unable to overcome. These observations seemed to indicate that some of the tutors' expectations of Chinese students were based on the assumption that the latter were used to a highly structured, teacher-centred academic culture, and would therefore find it difficult to adjust to pedagogical approaches which were relatively unstructured and student-centred.

This research is therefore intended to provide a body of empirical evidence on the basis of which a reasoned opinion can be offered as to whether Active Learning pedagogies are perceived by Chinese students as effective in supporting their learning on Business Management programmes, or as an additional challenge to overcome. This thesis will thereby contribute to the growing number of studies being carried out concerning the internationalisation of HE. The discussion section also offers an original theorisation of Active Learning based on Biesta's (2006) Arendtian understanding of *action*, proposing that as a set of *action*-centred pedagogies the successful use of Active Learning



requires a reconceptualisation of the purpose of education, and that these pedagogies provide a potential readjustment of the balance between the functions of qualification, socialisation and subjectification (Biesta, 2010).

## **1.1 Background**

The revalidation of the Business Management course group at the University of Gloucestershire Business School in 2009 served as an opportunity to embed a set of pedagogical approaches referred to as “Active Learning” into the delivery of these programmes. The relevant validation documentation and associated staff development events indicate that the introduction of Active Learning pedagogies were part of a response by the Business School to falling recruitment and retention and aimed to “engage students more closely in the course content” (University of Gloucestershire, 2009: 14). The validation document referred to this approach as innovative, integrative, practical and distinctive, and as requiring on-going staff and team development. It also stated:

“Whilst lectures and tutorials will be used, more emphasis will be placed on the in-class and out of class activities such as learning clinics, projects and coaching sessions. Students will be supported to display the skills of independent learners and encouraged to seek out what they need from academic staff.” (University of Gloucestershire, 2009: 66)

The language of this document clearly shows that the new Business Management programmes were based on a pedagogical model which departed from previous practice, with the expectation that both staff and students would be challenged in ways which they had not previously experienced.

The taught sessions which would underpin this new approach were described in the document as including a wide range of learning methods, such as case study analysis, formal and informal group activities, problem solving tasks, investigative inquiry and business simulations. It can be seen from this list and the previous quotation that the principal objective of using Active Learning pedagogies on these courses was to engage students by giving them an active role in selecting materials and defining the precise elements on which their

study would be based. This active role corresponds to the “negative definition” of Active Learning offered by Meyers and Jones (1993: 19) as: “in contrast to the worst of traditional teaching in which teachers actively present information and students passively receive it”, and to Stinson and Milter’s (1996: 3) more positive call for students to be “active initiators” who are able to “clarify their own roles in ambiguous situations”. Active Learning pedagogies are based on constructivist educational principles (Savery and Duffy, 2001; Gergen, 1995; Meyers and Jones, 1993; Duffy and Jonassen, 1992), often requiring students to work with others on loosely structured tasks designed to resemble the realities of professional practice, where issues rarely present themselves as clearly defined individual problems which can be solved using previously determined solutions. An initial survey of the first year’s operation of the new Business Management programmes at the University of Gloucestershire indicated that students were: “more engaged in active learning approaches – showing more emphasis on synthesis, organisation and less on knowledge transmission”; “more active participants in the learning process and involved in discovery processes”; and “more engaged in group activities, formally and informally, and working with authentic situations” (University of Gloucestershire, 2010: 3).

The introduction of Active Learning pedagogies on the Business Management programmes coincided with a sudden increase in the numbers of international students on these courses, reflecting a national trend in which the recruitment of international students and the internationalisation of Higher Education have risen to the top of the education policy agenda. The success of the first of these policies is illustrated by figures published by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), which show that by 2012 non-EU international students made up 14% of the total student population and 36% of the total on Business Management courses. The top sending country was China, accounting for 36% of the total figure (UKCISA, 2013).

On the other hand, adapting the delivery of HE to increasingly diverse student groups has proved more difficult, as shown by Hyland *et al.* (2008), who use the perceptions of staff and international students “talking about critical thinking, discussion, independence and the application of theory to practice” to reflect on

how higher education is currently delivered in the UK. An important finding of this work is the worrying gap between the resources devoted to international recruitment strategies in many UK HEIs and the relatively low level of attention and resourcing devoted to ensuring high quality educational experiences for all students and to the development of an internationalised curriculum.

In a review of the University of Gloucestershire Business School's provision for international students (Simpson, 2010 unpublished), a number of teachers concluded that many of our international students had difficulties in certain business classes due to the gap between their previous and their current educational experiences, as well as the linguistic demands of advanced academic study in a foreign language. These issues could be summarised as being related to both academic culture and academic language. However, although the University provided extra language support such as specific language skills modules and dedicated support from literacy tutors working in the library, there seemed to be little recognition of the academic cultural demands made on some international students by having to study in an educational context where teaching, learning and assessment activities might be carried out in ways which were unfamiliar to them. It was therefore reasonable to assume that there was a need to investigate the experiences of these students in order to establish whether being taught Business Management in classes which used Active Learning pedagogies presented additional problems or in fact provided new modes of access to course content for these students.

I have become increasingly interested in exploring experiences of intercultural encounters as a result of teaching International Business at a university business school in China (for one academic year, 2005-6) and working with Chinese undergraduate students on International Business courses at the University of Gloucestershire. This interest also coincides with the content of some of the modules on which I teach, and in which students are introduced to a range of cultural theories designed for use as managerial tools to resolve problems caused by poorly understood cultural differences (e.g. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2004, 1998; Hofstede, 2001, 1984; Triandis, 1995, 1982). The conceptual clarity of these

authors makes them popular with management students since their various theoretical frameworks can be applied to case studies with results which often provide a good starting point for the discussion of intercultural issues. However, although this work is often referred to as providing key insights into cases of intercultural encounters, many of these theories have been criticised for being reductionist and likely to produce “sophisticated stereotypes” (Osland and Bird, 2000), which fail to explain cultural paradoxes. In response, one of the most frequently cited authors of this kind of cultural theory, Geert Hofstede (2002), has conceded that cultural theories are clearly unable to explain many of the problems experienced in intercultural encounters and warns against an over-reliance on cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, a brief review of the most commonly used text books concerning international business cultures confirms the popularity of dichotomous theoretical frameworks based on cultural dimensions such as individualism/collectivism, long-term versus short-term orientation, high versus low power distance and achieving versus ascribing status.

Within international educational research, a great deal of early work followed this tradition and produced certain sophisticated stereotypes of academic culture which are reminiscent of the management literature. For example, Davies (2007:19) lists some frequent (mis)conceptions about Asian students in the Australian Higher Education context, including: rote learning and memorisation styles; passive learning and non-participation in class; lack of willingness to mix with local students; lack of skills for analysis and critical thinking; and inability to adjust their learning styles to that of the Australian context.

It is possible to imagine that institutional discussions based on these notions might produce a number of well-intentioned policies designed to help these students “adjust” to their new educational context, but they seem unlikely to promote institutional or pedagogical adjustments which might make that context more appropriate for their students. Kumar (2011:7) is highly critical of the discursive construction of “international students” and uses postcolonial theory to argue that international students are often subjected to “constricting, divisive and exclusionary discursive practices that fail to properly acknowledge their

complex histories, subjectivities and educational aspirations”, concluding that in many cases “the [host] institution fails to benefit fully from the presence of international students because of its narrow rendering of them”.

In this thesis I work within the tradition of emerging narratives which promote less divisive or dichotomous views, and therefore provide a more positive basis for institutional discussions related to internationalisation. I do this firstly by examining, in a spirit of constructive scepticism, the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of some of the literature on “Chinese learners”. It is my belief that much of the reductionism evident in cross-cultural literature is, at least partly, the result of methodological approaches which are based on objectivist epistemologies, particularly the influential behaviourist psychological literature, which is often seen by its practitioners as rooted in traditions akin to the natural sciences. Much of this work categorised students according to their nationality and used self-reported data collected from questionnaires or highly focussed qualitative interviews to provide detailed characterisations of national academic cultures (e.g. Watkins and Biggs, 1996).

Contrary to this approach, my primary research for this thesis was designed from an interpretivist theoretical perspective deriving from a constructivist epistemology. The aim of this design was to avoid imposing predetermined categories on the ways in which students described their experiences, and in this way to avoid collecting data which specifically supported or undermined the kinds of (mis)conceptions of Asian students noted above by Davies (2007). Instead, I encouraged my interviewees to discuss their experiences in relatively unrestricted thematic terms, an emic approach which allowed me to explore this issue using an original frame of reference. This was achieved by using a three-phased approach to data gathering, with the first phase (pre-pilot) aimed at identifying themes referred to by the interviewees themselves in relatively unstructured group discussions, and the second (pilot) and third (main interviews) phases used to explore these themes in semi-structured one to one interviews. After analysing the interview transcripts using NVivo, I constructed a thematic framework which highlights three specific aspects of students’ experience: language (particularly the skills of speaking and understanding); relationships (with other students and tutors); and metacognitive skills.

The design of this investigation is also intended to challenge the use of national or other “large cultural groups” (Clark and Gieve, 2006; Gieve and Clark, 2005) as units of analysis, a feature of much of the work on “the Chinese Learner”. Research on Chinese learners as a “large cultural group” has enabled the production and consolidation of sophisticated national stereotypes, but at the cost of glossing over, or simply ignoring, individual and contextual distinctiveness. Much of this work provided quantitative data using closed questionnaires and structured interviews, but in terms and categories devised beforehand by the researchers themselves. By contrast, my research has been designed to foreground the diversity of individual perspectives by using thematic categories which emerged from my interviewees’ own accounts, thereby contributing to the growing body of literature which uses a variety of methodologies from interpretivist traditions (e.g. Cortazzi and Jin, 2011; Chan and Rao, 2009) to explore students’ own accounts of their experiences.

## **1.2 Key research questions**

For ease of orientation, I set out my research questions below. However, for a full understanding of why specific elements were selected for inclusion and why the questions were formulated in this way, it is necessary for the reader to refer to the literature review and methodology sections. Furthermore, it should be noted that some evolution of the research questions took place (see Appendix 1) as themes emerged from my reading or were spontaneously raised by my interviewees. Figures 4, 5 and 6 are also designed to indicate how my interview questions were fine-tuned during the research process.

### **Principal research questions:**

1. How do Chinese students describe their learning experiences on modules which use Active Learning pedagogies at a UK business school?
2. How effective do Chinese students consider Active Learning pedagogies to be in supporting their learning on these modules?

### **Sub-questions:**

1a. What do these students consider to be the greatest opportunities and challenges facing them on these courses?

1b. What do these students consider to be the important similarities and differences between their previous educational experiences in China and their experiences here?

1c. Which teaching, learning and assessment styles are favoured by these students?

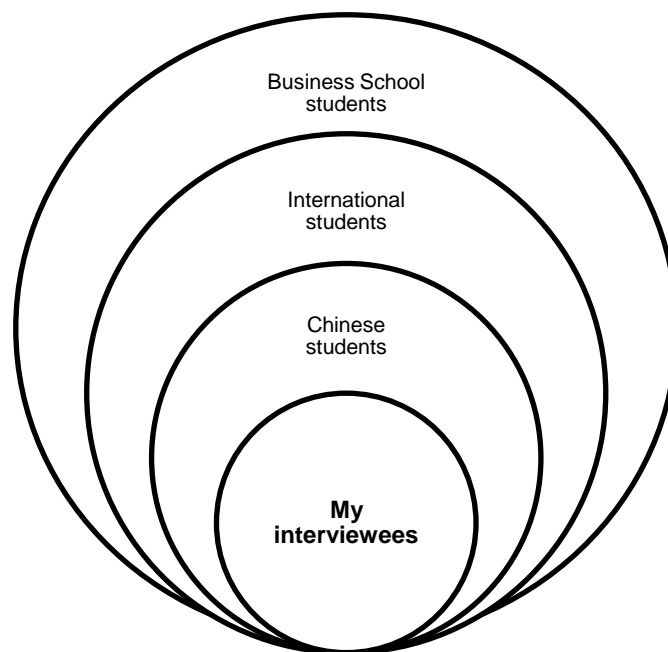
2a. How well do these students feel they understand what is required of them on these courses?

2b. How effective do these students consider Active Learning pedagogies to be in providing opportunities to develop their metacognitive skills (e.g. awareness of their personal learning styles, cross-cultural skills, awareness of higher cognitive skills development.)

### **1.3 Scope of the research**

The “cultural arena” (Rubin and Rubin,1995) of this study consists of male and female students from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) who, at the time of the interviews, were studying on courses leading to the award of BA Hons or Masters degrees in management subjects at the University of Gloucestershire. However, whilst this cultural arena appears to be well defined, with a focus on the experiences of individuals belonging to one ethnic group within a specific educational context, it has become clear to me from various readings and my interviews with these students, that using large cultural groups as a basic unit from which to draw conclusions is very problematic. Firstly, there is the issue of generalisation itself (Hammersley, 2008), which can give a very inaccurate picture of the members of that group by being based on the experiences of a few individuals. Secondly, the notion of identification (Chang, 2000) can also be problematic since not all individuals belonging to an ethnic group might agree or identify with all or many of the general characteristics commonly attributed to

that group. In my conversations with students, whilst they unreservedly identified themselves with the generic term “Chinese”, nevertheless, a diverse range of perceptions within the sample of interviewees was revealed. As a result, I use the term “cultural arena” to describe the group of individuals who provided data during interviews which were conducted in the data gathering stage of this project, with no assumption that the findings of this study can be automatically generalised to include all Chinese students on management courses in the UK or elsewhere in the world. The following overlapping Venn diagram (Figure 1) depicts how this sample constitutes a particular group within the overall population of the University:



**Figure 1: The cultural arena of this study**

In displaying the cultural arena of my study in this way, I hope to show that my methodological intention was not for the sample to be representative of the total number of Chinese or international students at the University, but to capture sufficient phenomenological data for them to be considered illustrative of a range of perceptions of Chinese students on management courses which use Active Learning methodologies. The topics for discussion in the interviews were selected mainly from the topics mentioned by students during the pre-pilot group interviews and pilot individual interviews, which I conducted several



months before doing the main series of individual interviews during the period from October to December 2011, and therefore reflect issues of significance for this group of students.

Another term taken from Rubin and Rubin (1995), “topical arena”, refers to a broader range of interested parties than just those within the cultural arena. It includes “all those who are affected by a problem or who interact intensely on a narrow issue” (Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 22). The topical arena of my project therefore includes other Chinese and non-Chinese international students, home students, managers and tutors at the University of Gloucestershire, managers and tutors at the Chinese sending institutions, parents and staff at other UK institutions, and other researchers who are concerned with international education. By using the terms cultural arena and topical arena to define the scope of this research, I intend to demonstrate how the topics I explore in this thesis have a broader import than the narrow locational confines of the classrooms in which these students were studying. In addition to examining the suitability of Active Learning pedagogies for these students, I attempt to demonstrate how research with international students can be carried out without reverting to dichotomous theoretical frameworks with their inherent tendency to produce deficit narratives.

Finally, before proceeding to the report of my literature review, I would like to give a brief justification for the narrative style of this thesis. I use a self-conscious narrative style with frequent use of the first person and references to my reflections during the research process in order to remain located, as a researcher, in the account of the research. This goes against the conventions of much scientific research, which is often reported in the third person as if to remove the danger that the researcher’s own feelings or motivations will somehow “contaminate” the data. However, since this research is underpinned by a social constructionist theoretical perspective, a self-conscious standpoint seems appropriate. This narrative style is intended to reveal some of the elements of “idiosyncrasy, error and confusion” which Kuhn (1970: 138) noted as integral to the process of scientific research, but which are often omitted from reports of research.

My reasons for leaving in historical details which reveal the messiness of my research process are both pragmatic and functional. Firstly, adherence to the truth of the process of research requires an honest account of the errors, false starts, subsequent justifications for pre-determined aims etc. which are all part of this process. Leaving them out would give the impression of having systematically followed a pre-determined plan, which was not what happened. Secondly, in this thesis I have tried to write, at least in part, true to the spirit of the object of investigation: the experiences of a particular set of students of a particular set of pedagogies as related in their own words. It is only fitting for an investigation of experiences to be written up in a way which includes an account of the researcher's own experiences of doing the research. Had I been entirely focussed on investigating the results of one group of students compared with those of a different group of students doing the same courses, I could have used a different approach such as an experimental design, and in keeping with the tradition of experimental research, my own experience would have been of less importance or interest as an element in the account. However, researching in the spirit of social constructionism requires a willingness to question or critique one's own assumptions: "Constructionism does not seek to establish the truth of its own premises. It recognises that constructionism is itself socially constructed" (Gergen, 2009:29). I therefore use a self-conscious narrative style in order to show how this account has itself been socially constructed.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

### 2.1 Themes and methodology

“As a generative and emergent methodology, grounded theory requires the researcher to enter the research field with no preconceived problem statement, interview protocols or extensive review of literature”. (Holton, 2007: 269)

“A literature review provides me with the current parameters of the conversation that I hope to enter ... it does not, however, define my research.” (Lempert, 2007: 254)

These two quotations from authors working within the Grounded Theory tradition vividly demonstrate the extent of a fundamental disagreement within the research community over the role of the literature review in research. This ranges from the view that a review of existing literature is likely to contaminate the purity of concepts which emerge from the primary data, to one which sees it as a valuable means of locating one’s research within an already occurring conversation which provides useful conceptual frameworks and a basic vocabulary. The indecision I felt about how much reading to do before gathering and analysing my data reflects the lack of consensus amongst professional researchers about the role of the literature review. On the one hand, I understood the Glaserian view (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) that previous reading could undermine the construction of theory grounded in the data, but on the other I felt attracted by a more liberal Straussian approach (Strauss, 1987) which would acknowledge the valuable contribution which existing social theories, used as “coding paradigms”, can make to data analysis. I make no claim here to have strictly followed a Grounded Theory approach in this thesis since I started reading around the subjects of constructivist pedagogies and Chinese learners long before I began to gather data, and this reading certainly helped me to clarify my overall research topic and design. However, the major thematic categories I used for my data analysis emerged mainly from the initial pre-pilot group interviews which I carried out before doing individual interviews and in this respect I carried out my review of the literature more in the spirit of a conversation with existing research as described by Lempert rather than following the principles set out in the quotation by Holton.

In chronological order, I began by examining some key texts on constructivist pedagogies in order to clarify what was meant by Active Learning, and to understand the philosophical underpinnings of these pedagogies. At the same time I read a number of books and articles regarding Chinese learners and came to appreciate that there is some overlap between the extensive literature on cross-cultural learning styles and the so-called “Student Approaches to Learning” (SAL) literature. From this reading, as will be explained in more detail below, I gathered that much of the early research on Chinese learners was carried out using positivist methods with the aim of investigating the influence of educational traditions on the attainment of standardised learning outcomes. These approaches appeared to be underpinned by an assumption that educational traditions, at least to a certain degree, determine learners’ predispositions and therefore exercise a strong influence over their experience in international contexts. In the earlier literature on this subject this assumption was rarely questioned and research findings often confirmed the thesis that “cultural distance” is correlated with the difficulties experienced by international students in adapting to unfamiliar academic environments.

My own experience of teaching in China and the UK, and conversations with colleagues suggested to me that many of our Chinese undergraduate students do indeed have difficult experiences, but the diversity of these experiences appears to defy any simple explanation based on the notion of cultural determinism. I felt that one of the more serious by-products of this kind of explanation was a tendency towards the dichotomisation of so-called Eastern and Western cultural interpretations, that is, a narrative which tends to simplify the two categories by treating “Western” educational culture as being based on “Socratic” or dialogic traditions, and Chinese educational culture as based on Confucian traditions of deference and filial respect towards teachers. Aoki (2008) offers a good example of this binary conceptualisation:

“In Confucian philosophy, studying means finding a good teacher and imitating his [*sic*] words and deeds. Education is the corrective means to curb any tendencies to stray from ethical behaviour. In contrast to Western education in which students are encouraged to engage in

debate, Confucian education has emphasized rote learning and memorization.” Aoki (2008: 35)

Since these notions are rarely explicated in detail, it is difficult either to support or counter the arguments of those researchers who see them as opposing and irreconcilable extremes of a cultural continuum. Ryan and Louie (2007) cite a number of examples of dichotomous conceptualisations, often expressed by well-intentioned researchers whose attempts to compensate for deficit interpretations of Asian learners often result in “surplus interpretations” or over-generalisations, which add nothing useful to the current state of knowledge in this area. Rather than trying to support or refute these approaches directly, I decided to design my own research using an explicitly qualitative approach in order to challenge both the fixity and the reductionism of these dichotomous assumptions.

I continued to read around the topic of Chinese Learners throughout the data gathering and analysis phases of my research. My aim here was to investigate the extent to which the work in this area either continued the earlier traditions of largely positivist approaches or added to what appeared to be an increasing body of work using more phenomenological and critical traditions. It is therefore for the sake of thematic clarity, rather than reflecting any chronological order of reading, that I set this review out using three sections encompassing the main topics of the literature I examined: Active Learning; Learning Styles and Approaches to Learning; and Chinese Learners. In certain respects these topics overlap since some of the authors in the Learning Styles literature (e.g. Biggs, 2001; Sternberg and Zhang eds., 2001; Watkins, 2001) also feature prominently in the literature on Chinese learners (Watkins and Biggs, 2001, 1996; Zhang, 2001) and some of the literature on Chinese learners concerns Active Learning or constructivist pedagogies (e.g. Higgins and Li, 2009; Pearson *et al.*, 2007; Tiwari *et al.*, 2006; Stokes, 2001). Nevertheless, the topics seem to have distinct origins and will therefore be reviewed in turn. In the following section I discuss my approach to reviewing these literatures.

Jesson, Matheson and Lacey (2011) identify two types of literature review: the traditional (or narrative) literature review and the systematic literature review.

They define a systematic literature review as “a review with a clear stated purpose, a question, a defined search approach, stating inclusion and exclusion criteria, producing a qualitative appraisal of articles” (Jesson *et al.*, 2011: 12). This review cannot be called systematic according to this definition, since I did not approach it with all of these elements determined in advance of the research.

On the other hand, these authors define the traditional review as: “a written appraisal of what is already known – existing knowledge on a topic – with no prescribed methodology” (Jesson *et al.*, 2011: 10), which is closer to my intention since I used the review partly to provide theoretical background to my topic (e.g. on the constructivist philosophical origins of Active Learning pedagogies) and partly to assess the empirical evidence concerning the experiences of Chinese students in international education. This is therefore a traditional (narrative) literature review, although it contains certain systematic elements. For example, the section on “Chinese Learners” applies inclusion and exclusion criteria, as explained in the following paragraph. For the literatures on “Student Approaches to Learning” and Active Learning or constructivist pedagogies I have taken the approach of a conceptual review “to synthesise areas of conceptual knowledge that contribute to a better understanding of the issues” (Jesson *et al.*, 2011: 76). By comparing and contrasting the views of several authors in these areas, I aim to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the conceptual background of my research.

Within the literature on Chinese Learners, I have restricted my search to the literature covering university students from the People’s Republic of China, especially those on Management courses, and including the literature on students in Hong Kong and Macau since 1997. In this year, sovereignty over Hong Kong was returned to China, followed in 1999 by Macau. The political and cultural contexts of these territories differed significantly from that of mainland China due to their distinct colonial histories and therefore the findings of researchers based in Hong Kong and Macau cannot be easily generalised to the situation on the Chinese mainland at that time. However, since these territories are now Special Administrative Regions (SARs) of China, and their educational policies include recent reforms similar to those on the Chinese

mainland, I decided to include research carried out in these regions since 1997 in my literature review.

Since only a small portion of this literature deals with the experiences of Chinese students on Active Learning courses, I examined a range of texts concerning Active Learning and constructivist pedagogies in order both to gain a greater appreciation of the theoretical underpinnings of Active Learning and to find out more about how these pedagogies have been received on Business Management courses generally. Literature which deals specifically with the experiences of international students on courses which use Active Learning pedagogies (e.g. Bache and Hayton, 2012; Strauss and U, 2007) suggests that the diverse educational backgrounds of international students and their relatively lower levels of English language competence might make it difficult for them to access course content. The Chinese students I interviewed for this thesis certainly confirmed that language difficulties presented them with daunting challenges on courses which use these pedagogies. On the other hand, many students also reported an appreciation of the opportunities these courses provided to improve their language skills through interaction with home students. Furthermore, by using a relatively open-ended research design, I discovered that language difficulties were enmeshed in and often compounded by poor relational dynamics and variable levels of metacognitive skills.

## **2.2 Active Learning pedagogies in HE contexts**

Active Learning pedagogies are interpreted variously as being underpinned by social constructionism (Gergen, 1995) or constructivism (Savery and Duffy, 2001; Duffy and Jonassen, 1992). However all interpretations contrast Active Learning with more traditional, teacher-centred pedagogies which imply the transmission and recall of knowledge from teacher to individual students. Originally adopted in medical schools to train doctors to pose their own questions and develop problem-solving skills (West, 1966), Problem-Based Learning and other constructivist pedagogies have been developed in many business schools (Stinson and Milter, 1996) in order to provide opportunities to develop practical skills which can be applied in real world situations.

In social constructionism an important metaphor is that of the conversation or dialogue, in which objects are discussed between two or more interlocutors, meanings negotiated and strategic decisions taken over whether further investigation is needed, and what form this should take. Meyers and Jones (1993:4) contrast this with the transmission metaphor which emphasises the way knowledge is passed between people, and in which the teacher's role is often seen as "delivering knowledge to the uninitiated". Active Learning pedagogies therefore underpin the design of courses in which collaborative learning can take place and in which students have opportunities for actively shaping their learning outcomes through interactive engagement. Examples of Active Learning include: Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) (Bache and Hayton, 2012; Waddell and McChlery, 2008; Tiwari *et al.*, 2006; Dochy *et al.*, 2005; Nijhuis, Segers and Gijssels, 2005; Waters and Johnston, 2004; Steinemann, 2003; Savery and Duffy, 2001; Stinson and Milter, 1996); Cooperative student projects (Plastow, Spiliotopoulou and Prior, 2010; Higgins and Li, 2009; Strauss and U, 2007); case studies (Heriot *et al.*, 2008; Danford, 2006); and simulations (Takahasha and Saito, 2011; Polito, Kros and Watson, 2004).

From a social constructionist theoretical perspective, knowledge is partly created through the interactions between individuals and their contemporaries using language actively as an operational tool in this process. This perspective contrasts with objectivist interpretations of knowledge as a given and language as tool for reflecting or transmitting an already existing state of affairs. Since Active Learning pedagogies embody the social constructionist perspective, and since the function of language is especially significant for students working in a foreign language, the following section is designed to explore more carefully the implications of this kind of course design. As Gergen (1995: 24) points out (in italics below), social constructionism entails a number of important interpretations of the function of language.

Firstly, *meaning in language is achieved through social interdependence*. If meaning is seen as a product of collaborative activity, this has the effect of foregrounding the processes of social interaction such as negotiating roles,



cooperating, resolving conflicts and monitoring group activity. An important aim of this thesis then is to understand how students experience these processes of social interaction. Secondly, *meaning in language is context-dependent*. This view of meaning sees language as serving to define truth by reference to contextual information. Elsewhere Gergen calls this: “replacing the goal of Truth with the possibility of multiple realities” (Gergen, 2009: 131). It is an essentially constructivist view of truth which might challenge the epistemological or cultural assumptions of students who are used to studying in more structured environments where knowledge might be considered to be embodied in text books and teachers, and where the aim of education might be seen as the correct retrieval and transmission of this knowledge. Thirdly, *language primarily serves communal functions*. This might be particularly significant for less competent speakers of the language of instruction since they might have more difficulty in completing cooperative assignments than individual tasks for which language serves a mainly representational function. There is therefore a risk of these students experiencing the “partial participation of newcomers” (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 31), that is, of failing to fully participate in the learning processes of the epistemic community of which they are a new member.

Gergen (1995) avoids deriving specific pedagogic or other practices from social constructionist theory, but explores its implications for the role of the teacher, finding that “under many conditions, the role of the teacher may fruitfully be cast as a coordinator, facilitator, or resource adviser, that is, as one who enables students to marshal resources” (Gergen, 1995: 32). However, this diffusion of the authority of the teacher and the consequent empowering of the student might be uncomfortable for students with more traditional expectations of teacher roles, and the “freedom” of the student to “establish the contours” (Gergen, 1995: 32) of their curriculum might be felt as a burden rather than a liberation. Students’ expectations of teacher roles are therefore likely to be an important influence on their experience and this theme is explored in the findings and discussion chapters of this thesis.

Whilst Gergen explores the implications of social constructionism for the roles of teacher and learner without deriving specific pedagogies, other authors provide clearer links between this philosophy and pedagogical practice. For example,

Savery and Duffy (2001) show how the theoretical principles of constructivism (unlike Gergen, they do not distinguish a separate social constructionist epistemology) can underpin course design, and propose Problem-Based-Learning (PBL) as one of the best examples of a constructivist learning environment. They base their constructivist pedagogy on three primary principles (in italics below):

1. *Understanding is in our interactions with the environment.* This is the principle that what is learned cannot be separated from how it is learned. Cognition is distributed or diffused throughout the learning context so that “what we understand is a function of the content, the context, the activity of the learner, and, perhaps most importantly, the goals of the learner” (Savery and Duffy, 2001:1). In this way PBL challenges dualist approaches in which the learner is seen as separate from what is to be learned.
2. *Cognitive conflict or puzzlement is the stimulus for learning and determines the organisation and nature of what is learned.* The principle of cognitive puzzlement is in stark contrast with the gradualist view of learning, which has a long history. For example, Doll (1993) refers to the gradualist design of most modern curricula as corresponding to Darwin’s notion of a “finely graduated organic chain”. In this view, since “nature has no gaps” (Doll, 1993: 76), curricula are designed in logical and sequential steps. By contrast, PBL presents students with “messy” situations and challenges them both to come up with their own definitions of problems, and to envision appropriate solutions.
3. *Knowledge evolves through social negotiation and through the evaluation of the viability of individual understandings.* This principle stresses the importance of the social environment in the constructivist framework. In our search for viable interpretations of messy situations, we test our constructions against those of our co-learners and thus negotiate our understandings of them as “a mechanism for enriching, interweaving, and expanding our understanding of particular issues or phenomena” (Savery and Duffy, 2001:2).

Savery and Duffy argue that PBL is one way to apply these primary principles to pedagogical practice since it attempts to replicate the complexity of authentic working environments, in particular the ill-structured nature of advanced knowledge domains: “The focus is on learners as constructors of their own knowledge in a context which is similar to the context in which they would apply that knowledge” (Savery and Duffy, 2001:14). Although few of the modules at the university where my participants studied were strictly underpinned by PBL, these students readily identified aspects of their modules which were associated with constructivist principles, particularly group projects, business simulations and ill-structured practical assignments.

The emphasis in constructivist course designs on maintaining the complexity of authentic working environments is contrasted by Spiro *et al.* (1992:57) with “traditional” learning environments, which are “unrealistically simplified and well-structured”. Ill-structuredness can therefore be seen as a salient feature of Active Learning environments, one which deliberately exposes students to the uncertainties supposedly found in the real world. However, although there is a great deal of support for the ways in which constructivist pedagogies seek to imitate real world challenges, a number of authors (e.g. Kirschner, Sweller and Clark, 2006; Dick, 1992; Perkins, 1992) are critical of how little discussion is devoted to the demands made on the learners, to the learners’ diverse backgrounds and to the expected learning outcomes of constructivist pedagogies. These aspects might be regarded as particularly significant in mixed-nationality classes, where linguistic difficulties as well as cognitive and cultural barriers might represent important obstacles to the effectiveness of these pedagogies. Since this seems to be a relatively under-researched area within the literature on Active Learning, I decided to make student experience the main focus of my research in this thesis.

Attempting to define the exact nature of the challenges facing all, not just international, students on constructivist courses, Perkins (1992) uses the term “double-learning agenda” to indicate the requirement that students in constructivist educational environments have to learn two things at once: “X (by a route which looks roundabout to them) and a new theory of learning (that says

that the route isn't so roundabout after all)" (Perkins, 1992: 164). Perkins proposes that course designers should approach this double agenda as such, i.e. find ways of engaging their students actively with both the content and the learning process. This seems to imply that students would benefit from explicit clarification of the pedagogical principles which are served by the emphasis on process aspects in these courses. I return to this question in my discussion of findings related to metacognitive skills.

However, not all of the authors I have come across support even the fundamental principles of constructivist course design. For example, Dick (1992) argues that the essential functions of instruction [teaching] are undermined by constructivist frameworks:

"A minimalist definition of instruction is an educational intervention that is driven by specific outcome objectives, materials or procedures that are targeted on these objectives, and assessments that determine if the desired changes in behaviour (learning) have occurred. What about the constructivist interventions. Do they have specific learning objectives for each student? Apparently not. Is the organization of content, as well as practice and feedback activities, focused on specific outcomes? Apparently not. Are criterion-referenced assessments provided for each learner to determine if they have mastered the desired skills? Apparently not. Therefore if instructional designers design instruction, then constructivists are designing something else. This "something else" may be a desirable educational intervention, but it does not appear to be instruction." (Dick, 1992: 97)

The language of this passage reveals a clear contrast with the language used earlier to describe constructivist pedagogies. In particular, the proposed equivalence of behaviour and learning is grounded in behaviourist psychology, which is quite at odds with the constructivist philosophy. The stress on skills and outcomes also contrasts with the indeterminacy of process-focused pedagogies. However, the passage does imply that the double learning agenda referred to earlier regarding the demands made on students, also applies to teachers and course designers. That is, a teacher who holds similar expectations of constructivist learning environments as they would of traditional environments based on an objectivist epistemology of learning outcomes, is likely to find it very difficult to evaluate the outcomes of the educational experience and make sense of their own intervention within this environment.

Indeed there is evidence (e.g. Nijhuis, Segers and Gijssels, 2005) that the introduction of constructivist course designs without specific teacher training can actually have a perverse effect on students' learning.

Whilst the study by Nijhuis, Segers and Gijssels (2005) is not critical of constructivist pedagogies as such, it provides important evidence that the redesigning of courses along constructivist lines can lead to outcomes which are the opposite of those intended if teachers are not sufficiently trained in the use of these techniques. The experiences of students on courses which are designed using Active Learning principles will therefore depend to some degree on the experience and understanding of teachers as well as on the learning styles and cultural predispositions of the students. However, unlike research which has explored the links between constructivist pedagogies and teachers' epistemologies (e.g. Chan, 2009; Marra, 2005), this thesis focusses exclusively on the experiences and perceptions of students and therefore explores teacher roles as conceptualised by students. To achieve this I invited students to comment on their relationships with teachers, and on the extent to which they felt that teacher interventions were a critical aspect of the effectiveness of Active Learning pedagogies, particularly group work.

### **2.3 Learning styles and approaches to learning**

This section of my literature review identifies some of the key literature in the areas of cognitive and learning styles in order to examine more closely the epistemology underpinning this work. After reviewing this literature I conclude that approaches which concentrate on learner predispositions are inadequate for the investigation of the learning process in general and students' experiences of Active Learning pedagogies in particular.

Much of the literature which deals with international comparisons of learning styles seems to be grounded in an objectivist epistemology. This can be seen in comparisons of academic cultures, which treat cultural characteristics as fixed and identifiable predispositions similar to cognitive and learning styles. This kind of work generally sees the educational process itself in static terms where the

curriculum is given and non-negotiable and the learning process consists of the acquisition of skills and knowledge conducive to gaining mastery over the curricular content. In accordance with this epistemology, it is possible to classify students according to a number of cognitive and/or cultural typologies which aim to facilitate the identification of the mismatch between students' predispositions and the requirements made of them. The purpose of this knowledge is of course to enable the teacher or educational institution to optimise the students' experience, either by supporting them in skills or cognitive areas where they are deemed deficient (student deficit), or by modifying the delivery to make the curriculum more accessible to the students (teacher deficit).

By identifying cultural attributes and cognitive styles as fixed, this kind of work emphasises what students bring to the learning process (what Biggs (2001) calls "Presage") and consequently pays less attention to the learning process itself, particularly the indeterminacy and complexity of this process. This bias may be partly a result of the objectivist epistemology and positivist theoretical frameworks underlying much of this work. Researchers working from this perspective would naturally utilise measurable research constructs such as abilities, cognitive styles, clearly identifiable cultural attributes and performance measures. Correlations between students' predispositions and their attainment of specified outcomes might also rely on the assumption that the students are working within well-structured knowledge domains where there is a clear set of learning outcomes such as those prescribed by certain professional bodies or government agencies. In such cases it might be expected that both students and teachers strive for the maximisation of performance outputs and will attempt to eliminate all factors which they deem incompatible with this end.

In their investigation of psychological perspectives on thinking, learning and cognitive styles Sternberg and Zhang (2001) note a resurgence of research on cognitive styles in the 1980s after early research had failed to attract much serious interest. They attribute this lack of interest to several problems with the early work: the failure of early theorists to clearly distinguish styles from abilities or personality; their failure to make contact between this area and other psychological literature; and the variable quality of early empirical research.

According to Sternberg and Zhang, more recent research shows that learning styles are better predictors of academic achievement than abilities and therefore much of the recent work is concerned with this aspect of learning, particularly the literature concerned with Student Approaches to Learning (SAL) and its derivatives. A further factor which explains the recent resurgence in interest in this area is the rapid increase in the diversity of the student body in recent years: “Our student populations are more diverse than ever before, so the issue of thinking and learning styles has become important as it never has been before” (Sternberg and Zhang, 2001: viii).

However, the research methods used to investigate learning styles and approaches to learning were developed largely within national contexts and a number of researchers have questioned the accuracy with which these approaches can be used in international education. For example, questions need to be asked about the degree of recognition amongst international students of the ethno-centric or etic constructs used by researchers to characterise their academic cultures, and whether alternative, emic, constructs might be more appropriate for this kind of research. A specific question might concern the extent to which students from Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC) (a term coined by Ho (1994) to designate a number of East and South-East Asian cultures, including China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Korea and Vietnam) recognise Confucianism or “vernacular Confucianism” (Lee, 1996) as a major influence shaping their learning styles. A further question is whether academic cultures (Ryan and Louie, 2007) or “cultures of learning” (Parris-Kidd and Barnett, 2011; Stanley, 2011) can be effectively contrasted and whether any postulated differences are supported by empirical research. Finally, it is clearly worth questioning the validity of static conceptualisations of culture in an age characterised by rapid social, political and technological change (Zhao and Bourne, 2011; Zhou, Topping and Jindal-Snape, 2011; Yang, 2009).

Some of these questions are properly addressed by Chang (2000) in a broad discussion of the need for, and some serious challenges facing, indigenous research paradigms. For example, Chang questions the assumption that a “Chinese” approach to research would be more appropriate to investigate Chinese contexts, since it could easily make the same mistake as certain

“broad-brush” western approaches which assume that there is an accepted definition of “Chinese” and that all those who fall within this definition are equally familiar with its cultural implications. Furthermore, indigenous approaches still have to resolve the problem inherent in objectivist approaches to educational research, which is to assume that cognitive predispositions related to cultural conditioning will necessarily produce certain predictable outcomes. A number of researchers attempt to resolve these difficulties by using a variety of phenomenological research methods (e.g. Parris-Kidd and Barnett, 2011; Gutierrez and Dyson, 2009) which aim to use constructs which are recognised as meaningful by the research participants themselves. In this way, more recent researchers appear to pay more attention to finding out more about their participants’ sense-making of their experiences than to measuring their performance against “objective” criteria.

In his survey of the research associated with the so-called Student Approaches to Learning or SAL school, Watkins (2001) explains that the SAL position arose from dissatisfaction with information-processing (IP) approaches. The IP approaches had tended to assume that learning efficacy was linked mainly to cognitive ability, whereas the SAL constructs were linked with the psychological notion of situated cognition (learning approaches are influenced by both affect and cognition). Researchers working in the SAL tradition therefore set out to investigate the links between learning efficacy and styles or approaches to learning. The SAL position is said to have emerged from Marton and Säljö’s (1976) work with Swedish students on their approaches to reading academic articles and therefore adopted the terminology of “deep” and “surface” learning promoted by those authors.

Watkins (2001) identifies two branches emerging from the SAL approach: a qualitative branch involving Swedish researchers who developed an approach called “phenomenography” in the 1980s, and a more positivist branch typified by the work of Biggs in Australia and Entwistle in the UK. The qualitative branch focussed on the perceptions of individuals in the belief that: “The ways students learn are a function of how they perceive the learning task and the learning environment” (Watkins, 2001: 167). This branch foregrounded conceptual change in learners and promoted the idea that “teachers need to understand



their students' conceptions of learning and how they can facilitate conceptual change" (Bowden, 1988 and Ramsden, 1992, cited by Watkins, 2001: 167).

Although phenomenographic approaches aimed to achieve deep and rich understandings of students' conceptions of learning, they were open to criticism on the basis of their inability to provide generalisable knowledge which could reliably inform educational policy. On the other hand, the SAL branch which used more positivist approaches to classify and quantify the links between learning efficacy and student approaches appeared to offer a more useful contribution to education practitioners. These positivist approaches favoured the use of learning process inventories such as Biggs's (1987) Learning Process Questionnaire (LPQ), its tertiary counterpart, the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ), and Entwistle and Ramsden's (1983) Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI), which added the dimension of achievement motivation (the strategic or instrumental element of students' approaches to learning). However, to characterise each branch purely by reference to the research methods they were associated with would be an oversimplification of the SAL conceptual framework. To understand this more fully, the following section attempts a brief analysis of Biggs' so-called "3P" model (Biggs, 2001).

Biggs's 3P model goes well beyond the assumption that learning efficacy mainly correlated to ability by attempting to capture the relationships between three primary elements of learning: the characteristics of the learner and the learning context (Presage); student approaches to a particular learning task (Process); and the outcomes of learning (Product). Rather than linear and progressive (Presage through Process to Product), Biggs explained the relationship between the three P's as dynamic and interactive. In this way the model was supposed to demonstrate why deficit models fail to explain student learning:

"To explain student learning requires an appreciation of the interactive, multidimensional nature of 'the swamp' of real-life learning. General laws that focus on just one aspect of the learning situation, such as reinforcement, cannot achieve this" (Watkins, 2001:168).

By recognising the significance of antecedents (Presage) and situational factors (Process), Biggs's 3P model seems to support the use of contextually sensitive

research approaches, and these might be considered particularly important in mixed-nationality classrooms where the teacher cannot assume a single academic culture shared by all students. Furthermore, a particular strength of the 3P model is that it opens up the domain of learners' experiences to include elements outside of the classroom (temporal and locational externalities) and this resonates well with the post-modern notion of curriculum as lived experience (e.g. Slattery, 2006; Doll *et al.*, 2005; Doll, 1993).

However, it is questionable whether this model really is capable of reflecting the dynamic and interactive aspects of learning, particularly the importance accorded to them by constructivist formulations of the learning process. For example, Biggs claims that his 3P model is one suited to the purpose of enhancing learning, and that what counts as a guide to learning efficacy is the extent to which students have engaged deep approaches to attaining predetermined outcomes. In his opinion, the issue is one of aligning the teaching and assessment to clear learning objectives so that students become "entrapped in this web of consistency" (Biggs, 2001: 93). This model certainly takes into account some important characteristics of the learner's environment (Presage), but these become mediating factors in the attainment of predetermined learning objectives. In a sense this is the antithesis of a constructivist approach, and might be seen as a softer or more flexible model of an objectivist perspective, leaving little room for learner autonomy.

Biggs makes a useful contrast between the "Measurement Model" (which he sees as derived from psychology, especially the psychology of differentiation) and "Good Teaching", which enables change (learning), and which should be based on a criterion-referenced assessment of learning outcomes. In particular, Biggs argues that norm-referenced assessment procedures produce pathological learning behaviours (surface approaches), and that the "Measurement Model" is a characteristic of Western educational systems whereas "Good Teaching" is the hallmark of Asian systems.

"Thus in the United States and most Western countries, as opposed to Asian countries, success and failure are attributed primarily to ability, not to effort. It is taken as given in the West that only a few should succeed

well, whereas Asian educators expect most children to master what is taught". (Biggs, 2001:96)

This seems to contradict Biggs's own opinion of much of the work on styles, which he criticises for being bipolar and independent of context. He considers it to be an error to use styles as typologies: "Such labelling is surely likely to increase the chances of misclassification, stereotyping, and reification" (Biggs, 2001: 77). If this is true of styles based on measure of ability and personality, it must surely also be true of classifications based on ethnic and cultural origins. Biggs's revised 3P model (in Biggs, 2001) takes cultural characteristics into account and is therefore more sensitive than the original 3P model. However, since the process and product are largely teacher-directed, this cannot be described as lying within the constructivist tradition.

In conclusion, whilst Biggs's 3P model offers a useful, multi-dimensional approach to understanding the learning process, Biggs' epistemology is largely objectivist and this necessarily influences the purpose and conclusions of his cross-cultural studies. Ryan and Louie (2007) believe the work of Biggs and other scholars in the 1990s to have performed an important service in debunking the deficit model of Confucian Heritage Culture students, but warn of the danger that cultural stereotyping can be used to justify inappropriate pedagogical practices (Ryan and Louie, 2007: 409). Since the confirmation of cultural stereotypes appears to be a danger inherent in many types of cross-cultural research, I explore the validity of these constructs in more detail in the section of this review which deals with the literature on Chinese learners.

It seems clear from the previous discussion that both pure emic and pure etic approaches which are underpinned by an objectivist epistemology contain a number of limitations which make their use questionable in cross-cultural, if not in simpler, mono-cultural environments. A limitation common to both is that they assume stable cognitive or learning styles which result in identifiable and therefore predictable effects on the learning process. An important aim for this thesis is therefore to find out how students interpret their experience of the dynamic and complex learning environments provided by Active Learning pedagogies, rather than focussing on their predispositions.

Renzulli and Dai (2001) adopt a more sensitive theoretical framework depicting the act of learning as resulting from the interaction of three components: the Teacher, the Learner and the Curriculum, an approach which they describe as "dynamic person-situation interaction". In this model, positive experiences of learning are an outcome of the dynamic interaction of all three components and these positive experiences exert an important influence on the learners' dispositions to undertake further challenges.

This approach has two significant advantages over SAL derived approaches. Firstly, it acknowledges the indeterminacy and complexity of learning as a process which depends not only on the student's "inner environment" (cognitive styles, ability, personality etc.), but also on their "outer environment" (subject, instructional approaches, social dynamics etc.). From this perspective, studies of learning which focus on innate factors such as cognitive styles and abilities as the major factors determining learning outcomes are likely to miss the dynamic and mutually reinforcing aspects of the interaction between person and situation in educational settings.

By highlighting the complex nature of the act of learning, this perspective seems to move well beyond dichotomous approaches which seek to "measure" learner abilities against fixed dimensions and tend therefore to produce learner deficit or teacher deficit educational theories. Dynamic person-situation approaches require a mixed methods research methodology with a strong phenomenological element and can therefore be contrasted with cognitive styles research, which seems to put an almost exclusive emphasis on positivist research methods using fixed typologies correlated with performance measures. It should be stressed here that this criticism is aimed only at the research methodology used in these studies and does not take issue with the emphasis in this work on the importance of the role of intra-personal elements (personality, abilities, strategic preferences etc.) in the learning process.

The "dynamic person-situation interaction" model offers a useful challenge to the positivist research design of much of the work I have come across in this area. By maintaining an assumption of complexity within the learning

environment, it appears to work in the opposite direction of deductive approaches which seek to reduce and simplify this environment to the interplay of fixed elements. Its constructivist underpinnings also seem to mark it out as very different from Biggs's equally elaborate, but largely objectivist 3P model. In my research design I therefore attempted to capture the dynamic and open-ended elements of Renzulli and Dai's model by phasing the interviewing process into three stages to include pre-pilot, pilot and main interviews, as explained more fully in the methodology chapter. The pre-pilot phase consisted of two fairly unstructured group interviews and was designed specifically to identify themes which would be explored more thoroughly in subsequent individual semi-structured interviews. In this way I sought to avoid using pre-determined dimensions against which to measure the learning styles or cultural characteristics of my interviewees, and concentrated on those elements of experience which they presented as being particularly salient. These elements included issues related to language difficulties, relationships with other students and teachers, and the development of metacognitive skills.

In this section of the literature review I have tried to show that much of the work concerning student approaches to learning uses largely positivist research methods which seem to be based on objectivist assumptions. As I have argued, these methods often seem to be at odds with the underlying constructivist principles of Active Learning. However, the popularity of this work is difficult to explain solely by reference to methodological choices, and might correspond, at least partly, to current societal preferences for evidence-based research and a generalised interpretation of education as serving specific purposes or functions, particularly "qualification" and "socialisation" Biesta (2010). By contrast, the focus of this thesis is on students' "subjectification", defined by Biesta as an educational process through which subjects "come into the world" as individual human beings. This focus demands an inductive phenomenological approach capable of reflecting the complex dynamics of students' interactions with their learning contexts, an approach which I set out in detail in the methodology chapter.

## 2.4 Chinese learners in international HE contexts

There is a growing and complex literature on Chinese Learners, but not much of it concerns Active Learning or constructivist pedagogies. Jin and Cortazzi's (2011) edited volume: *Researching Chinese Learners: Skills, Perceptions and Intercultural Adaptations* is the latest of a number of collections by Chinese and Western researchers investigating diverse topics related to Chinese learners and their teachers at all levels of education, including in international contexts. In this volume Jin and Cortazzi (2011a) synthesise previous research published in English on Chinese learners and describe this work as drawing on a number of psychological, educational and cultural perspectives. They point out that much of the work in the books most often quoted (Watkins and Biggs, 2001,1996; Chan and Rao, 2009) relates to Hong Kong, where education is "hardly representative of China as a whole" (Jin and Cortazzi, 2011: 4). However, given the size of the population of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which now includes Hong Kong and Macau, it is likely that very few studies can aspire to give more than a very partial picture of the educational experiences of Chinese learners. Therefore, before proceeding to review this literature, it is worth reflecting on how the term "Chinese" is used in this context.

In some of the literature on Chinese learners, the definition of the term 'Chinese' is itself the subject of discussion, since it is sometimes used to refer to people from mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau (since 1997 and 1999 respectively incorporated into PRC), Taiwan (recognised by the government of PRC as part of China according to the principle of "one country, two systems") and to people of Chinese heritage living in other parts of the world. In short, the term "Chinese" usually denotes ethnic origin rather than geographical location, which might be a source of confusion when trying to identify who Chinese people actually are.

For some authors, e.g. Chang (2000), the "Chineseness" of Chinese learners is a relatively unstable cultural attribute, which depends more on an individual's personal identification than on their ethnic origin or nationality. Other authors note the importance of investigating how Chinese academics conceptualise their disciplines, and therefore talk about "Chinese education" (Aoki, 2008; Jin

and Dan, 2004,) and “Chinese psychology” (e.g. Yang, 2000). For example, writing from an indigenous perspective, Yang (2000) notes the way Hong Kong researchers have adopted “Western” concepts and methods, deliberately avoiding attempts to develop a “Chinese psychology”, and explains this partly as a result of an institutional culture where “promotion prospects depend very much on citation indices” (Yang, 2000: 157).

From these authors it can easily be seen that there is no consensus on how the term “Chinese” is understood since interpretations range from relatively fixed concepts such as ethnic origin and nationality to variable institutional arrangements or subjective notions of cultural identity. However, the concern of all of these authors with the subjectivity of both researchers and participants as well as the problematisation of categories in their work inspired me to contribute to the conversation in this thesis by inviting students to comment on their understandings of “Chineseness”. In this way I aimed to explore the correspondence between students’ interpretations of the concept and those which are evident in the literature.

Commenting on the concept of “the Chinese learner”, Cortazzi and Jin (2011: 314) see it as “a trade-off between generalization and diversity”. They note that there is always a need for some level of generalisation in research, but warn against the temptation of reduction and over-simplification. However, for Clark and Gieve (2006), describing the experiences of individuals in terms of “fixed, homogeneous and reified national cultures” is very problematic in any case. They recommend using the concept of situated identity to construct “small culture” explanations based on classroom experience since the influence of national identity is disrupted or moderated once students are transplanted into different cultural settings. Chan and Rao (2009) also support paying much more attention to contextual factors such as the background and characteristics of the learners, their learning goals, the changing learning environment and the nature of their interactions with others.

Furthermore, a number of authors argue that the problem of over-simplification emerges not from the terminology itself, but from the way categories are juxtaposed or contrasted, which all too often leads to a dichotomous

perspective. In this way, the differences between Chinese or Confucian-heritage cultures and so-called “Western” or “Socratic” educational approaches tend to be emphasised and exaggerated. Ryan and Louie (2007) are particularly critical of these dichotomous perspectives, which they feel have tended to reaffirm unhelpful stereotypes:

“These construct Asian or CHC [Confucian Heritage Culture] students as having outlooks that are opposites of Western academic values, and many construct ‘deficit’ views of them as learners, viewing them in terms of the characteristics that they lack, rather than those that they bring to their new learning environments.” (Ryan and Louie, 2007:406)

Along with authors such as Papastephanou (2005) and Webb (2005), Ryan and Louie (2007) argue for more imaginative responses to globalisation, responses which aim at a global perspective to curriculum development rather than seeing it as a source of “problems” to be solved. Applying a critical approach to the literature on this topic, Ryan and Louie point out that the dichotomisation of cultures has not only unjustly labelled non-Western cultures as deficient, but it has also led academics and students of the host country to miss the particularly important opportunity to learn more about their own cultural practices. One of these practices is the tendency to talk in homogenising and reductionist ways about foreign cultures, but in much more textured, multi-layered ways when referring to differences between individuals and organisations within their own geographic locality. In her comments on the discursive construction of international students, Kumar (2011) supports this view with references to Said’s (1978) conceptualisation of power and knowledge in “Orientalist” discourse, arguing that continual exposure to these reductionist ways of talking can even lead to some international students internalising this discourse and condemning the skills which they themselves bring to the host classroom.

Given the potential for reductionist theories to result in inappropriate pedagogical practices, Ryan and Louie (2007) recommend that researchers avoid the use of discourses containing overgeneralised ‘models’ and ‘virtues’ of specific educational systems. They state that recognising cultural complexity entails a “meta-cultural awareness” (p.416) and advocate the adoption of concepts such as Papastephanou’s (2005) “cosmopolitically sensitive education” and Kostogriz’s (2005: 203) “critical pedagogy of space”, which



takes into account “the multiple and contested nature of learning”. In relation to this, Kostogriz and Tsolidis (2008:134) develop the notion of “transcultural literacy in diaspora space”, as a valuable metacognitive skill which extends beyond the binaries of cultural difference, and which is “more in keeping with the intensified flow of texts and people across the boundaries of nation states”. Cortazzi and Jin (2011) also consider metacognitive awareness of learning across cultures as a useful outcome of Chinese students’ experiences of international education, a point confirmed by several of my interviewees.

Following what I take to be the spirit of these authors, in this thesis I avoided isolating particular strands of students’ experience in order to set up contrasts between “Chinese” and “home” students, and instead investigated a number of experiential components which my interviewees mentioned as significant aspects of their study on Active Learning modules. In this report I generally avoid referring to my participants as “learners” as I am not attempting to generalise about Chinese people on the basis of my data. The use of the term “Chinese students” in this thesis indicates that these participants were all from the PRC (including Hong Kong and Macau) and studying on courses at the university where I work at the time I interviewed them. The literature on Chinese learners investigates a wide range of educational topics, but for the purposes of this review I confined myself mainly to those authors who have researched the experiences of Chinese students in international settings or on courses using constructivist pedagogies.

Regarding the experiences of Chinese students with specific pedagogic practices, many authors mention the problems of adaptation to different learning cultures, with some finding that numerous institutional obstacles, including course design, make the process of adapting to their new learning environments more difficult. However, contrary to the expectation, based on cultural determinism, that Chinese learners might find it difficult to adapt to the Active Learning and constructivist pedagogies commonly used in many “Western” universities, there is abundant evidence that most students, regardless of their national origin, tend to adapt quickly to new pedagogical styles (Hall and Sung, 2009; Higgins and Li, 2009; Jones, 2005), including: Problem-Based-Learning (Pearson *et al.*, 2007; Stokes, 2001); Active Learning

techniques such as group activities, role play, case analysis and debate (Liu, 2008); communicative language teaching (Stanley, 2011); knowledge-building (Chan, 2009); constructivist approaches (Chan, 2001); and cooperative and interactive teaching approaches (Marton *et al.* 2009). This evidence suggests that earlier research which contrasted Western and Confucian learning styles might have exaggerated the differences between them and therefore also the scale of the challenge facing Chinese students in international educational settings. By providing examples of positive experiences, the authors cited here inspired me to use a research design which avoided foregrounding cultural differences or other interpretations based on deficit.

Nevertheless, despite the numerous examples of positive experiences recounted by these authors, other research refers to the difficulties which a number of teachers have experienced in integrating Chinese and non-Chinese students on collaborative activities such as group projects. A number of reasons are offered for this, including individual (often linguistic), institutional or cultural causes. I examine these in turn in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, the individual characteristics of students, as opposed to macro-scale categories such as nationality, ethnic origin or culture, are highlighted by a number of authors (Burnapp and Zhao, 2011; Gu, 2011; Kimmel and Volet, 2012; Gieve and Clark, 2005; Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2005) as determining the experiences of individual students. For example, Gieve and Clark (2005) interpret differences in responses to academic programmes between Chinese and European students as related to individual differences in language ability and previous knowledge of the subject. However, Gu (2011) focusses more on the importance of personal attributes, and criticises research which has tended to use objectivist methods to investigate students' psychological adjustment to study abroad, whilst ignoring their individual maturation and human development factors, including aspirations, motivation, contextual factors and relationships between students and teachers. Gu highlights the importance of identity change over time, which is invisible in most of the intercultural comparison studies. Similarly, Vansteenkiste *et al.* (2005) relate the success of international sojourns to the study motivation of individual students, influenced by non-academic outcomes such as well-being and vitality, concluding that

definitions of the educational context need to be porous and inclusive of the broader, life-related issues of individuals if researchers are to make sense of students' experiences. Burnapp and Zhao (2011) also discuss the differences between students entering so-called top-up courses and those from Chinese college diploma courses, finding that the former benefit from extensive previous exposure to a UK-validated course taught entirely in English. Clearly all of these authors put great emphasis on the importance of individual differences when attempting to understand the experiences of Chinese students.

A second group of researchers (Arkoudis *et al.*, 2013; Devlin and Peacock, 2009; Higgins and Li, 2009; Smith and Zhou, 2009; Sloan and Porter, 2008; Brown, 2007; Case and Selvester, 2000) relate students' experiences to the institutional choices which govern course design and assessment, and recommend a number of institutional changes to address the problems. These include the retraining of staff to provide them with the skills to work more effectively with an increasingly international student population (Brown, 2007; Case and Selvester, 2000) and the redesigning of learning and assessment materials to make them more suitable. Higgins and Li (2009) argue that much "inter-cultural" project work in classrooms fails to integrate students since different types of students have different expectations. They contrast the resentment felt by many of the British students ("reluctant hosts") with the positive feelings expressed by many Chinese students, who felt they greatly benefited from the help of their non-Chinese partners, and recommend a "reorientation of problem definition" so that cultural awareness is explicitly required of all students involved in collaborative projects. This is a design solution aimed at avoiding the perceptions of many home students that internationalisation is a problem and that their Chinese group mates are part of that problem. "Under this revised format students would need to explain how they had considered each other's viewpoints and adopted international or comparative approaches to the task under consideration" (Higgins and Li, 2009: 65). Similarly, Arkoudis *et al.* (2013) advocate curricular solutions to enhance the interaction between domestic and international students. Devlin and Peacock (2009) recommend that university institutions should take a more active role in creating spaces for intercultural interaction to occur outside the classroom, although they acknowledge the constraints in managing such top-

down initiatives. Smith and Zhou (2009) also found that students regarded the support mechanisms provided by their host universities as too specialised, and contrasted this with their experience in China, where there was “a door which they could knock on at any time for any help” (Smith and Zhou, 2009: 141). In a further example, Sloan and Porter, (2008) recommend that the language support service provided by many universities for international students should be embedded in academic courses rather than bolted on as a separate (and optional) service. In sum, all of these authors find that universities need to adapt their structures and practices to meet the needs of their international students, with some diversity of views over the precise location of the institutional shortcomings.

A third approach to researching the experiences of Chinese learners is characterised by its stress on cultural explanations. Much of the earlier work on Chinese learners (e.g. Ho, A., 2001; Kember, 2001; Watkins and Biggs, 2001, 1996; Lee, 1996; Marton *et al.*, 1996; Tang, 1996; Ho, D., 1994) stressed the need for “Western” researchers and teachers to develop a better understanding of Chinese culture and Confucian traditions more generally, in order to overcome what appeared to be “the paradox of the Chinese learner”. This consisted in the surprise felt by many researchers over the ability of Chinese learners to outperform their “Western” counterparts in many academic disciplines despite studying in what might be described as impoverished conditions by “Western” standards. Recommended solutions to this paradox included: the need to understand Confucian conceptions of learning (Lee, 1996) and Chinese “cultures of learning” (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996); appreciating the specifically Chinese function of memorisation (Marton *et al.*, 1996); and understanding spontaneous collaboration amongst Chinese students (Tang, 1996).

Following this tendency to explore students’ cultural pre-dispositions, a number of authors find that cultural factors pose important challenges to Chinese students. For example, Brown (2008) presents evidence that some students find it very difficult to make contributions to seminar discussions despite having near native fluency in English and puts this down to “academic cultural differences”, concluding that “academic success is impeded by poor language

skills, yet linguistic competence alone will not guarantee adjustment” (Brown, 2008: 23). Similarly, Liu (2008) found that Chinese postgraduate marketing students responded better to structured approaches which were “deeply rooted in their national culture and heavily influenced by Confucianism” (Liu, 2008: 39), but also found that they appeared to appreciate what she calls the “Western active learning approaches” (Liu, 2008: 39). Stanley (2011) finds some support for this contention in the work of Hu (2002), who argues that pedagogies are only effective to the extent that teachers and students have been “socialised” into them (Hu, 2002: 102), and in Greenholtz (2003), who finds that students question the legitimacy of unfamiliar pedagogies.

However, there is evidence that cultural explanations vary according to whether data is provided by students or their teachers, particularly in the importance attributed to cultural factors. For example, Hall and Sung (2009) highlight the differences between the perceptions of international students and their lecturers regarding the major challenges faced by students in collaborative coursework, pointing out that where lecturers tended to emphasise linguistic obstacles, the students themselves generally underplayed linguistic deficiencies, referring more often to differences in learning and teaching traditions (academic culture). Some of their participants referred to “East Asian learning culture” to explain behaviour which is often seen as problematic by “Western” lecturers (e.g. not talking during class, but often coming after class to ask questions about assignments). Brown (2007) also talks about “asymmetrical expectations” between international students and lecturers.

A number of researchers on Chinese learners attempt to identify specific issues related to classroom experience and identify group work in general as the arena in which students struggle the most. For example, Clark, Baker and Li (2007) researched the collaborative learning experiences of Chinese students at three New Zealand universities and found that neither staff nor students were adequately prepared for this pedagogic approach. They stress the need for universities to retrain their teaching staff to help them understand the educational cultural expectations of their students and to develop a “consistent philosophy for collaborative learning assignments that is understood by all lecturers” (Clark, Baker and Li, 2007: 9). Similarly, whilst generally supportive of

collaborative projects, Strauss and U (2007: 158) warn that these need to be carefully designed and students “prepared with both the requisite academic and socio-cultural skills to undertake them successfully”.

Looking more carefully at the specific problems encountered by some students in group work, Littlewood (2009) mentions "premature closure", where "members are reluctant to disagree with each other's views, lack motivation, or simply, for some extraneous reason such as tiredness, find it more convenient to stop the discussion early" (Littlewood, 2009: 213). Whatever the reason for premature closure, it leads to superficial and/or partial learning and signifies a failure of the group work approach to stimulate learning or motivate students to overcome whatever social barrier they might feel prevents them from interacting with other group members. This problem seems to be linked to the functions of language within constructivist pedagogies alluded to already, particularly the processes of social interaction such as negotiating roles, cooperating and resolving conflicts.

From these authors it can be seen that collaborative work in mixed-nationality groups raises a wide range of problems, including the students' language and culture, home students' resentment, the poor design of cross-cultural projects and staff training needs. Although this thesis cannot possibly cover all of these issues comprehensively, it approaches them in a way which aims to capture the complexity and interrelatedness of these issues rather than isolating them as specific problems.

In the final part of this chapter I explain how my review of the literature on Chinese Learners influenced my research design, which is elaborated in the following chapter. As indicated in Table 1, research in the decade between 1996 and 2006 attempted to move beyond earlier findings, which had supported a deficit model of Chinese Learners, by exploring Chinese (especially Confucian) conceptualisations of learning and learning strategies, which were deemed to produce more appropriate interpretations than the frameworks based on Western psychology which had informed earlier work. This later work specifically challenged the use of etic approaches in cross-cultural research on the basis that some of the theoretical constructs used in the analysis might not

be recognised by the participants themselves. However, more recently, researchers indicate that this second wave of research merely replaced one set of “Western” theoretical constructs such as Student Approaches to Learning with “Eastern” constructs such as Confucian Conceptions of Learning (Lee, 1996) or Confucian Heritage Culture (Biggs, 1996; Ho, 1994), thereby retaining a dichotomous perspective, which continued to exaggerate differences between Chinese and “Western” forms of learning. As Li (2009) notes, “The use of dichotomous frameworks may mislead research and raise serious concerns on examining any cultural group even though such frameworks can simplify topics and are convenient to researchers.” (Li, 2009: 63).

**Table 1: A summary of the literature on Chinese Learners**

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Perspectives</b>	<b>Findings</b>	<b>Methods</b>
<b>Pre-1996</b>	Determinist; deductive; etic; objectivist	Chinese Learners are passive; learning styles are inferior to Western styles (dichotomous perspectives)	Questionnaires; structured interviews
<b>1996 -2006</b>	Determinist; deductive; etic; objectivist and situated; inductive; emic; interpretivist	Chinese Learner styles misunderstood; founded on Confucian principles and often superior (dichotomous perspectives)	Questionnaires; structured and semi-structured interviews
<b>2006 - present</b>	Exploratory; inductive; emic; interpretivist; postmodernist; critical	Experiences are complex and diverse and cannot easily be typologised	Phenomenological, open-ended and semi-structured interviews, visual methods, metaphor studies

The choice of an inductive, phenomenological approach for this thesis was strongly influenced by the attempts of recent researchers to reject dichotomous and simplifying frameworks and explore the complexity of their research topics by using a wider range of research approaches. Since I set out to investigate students’ perceptions, I required a more open-ended design than the questionnaires and structured interviews associated with the SAL position and much of the early literature on Chinese learners, and this led to the research design which I describe in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In commenting on the London PhD criterion of “independent critical thought”, Silverman (1999) advises doctoral candidates to practise the three procedures of “developing a concept and/or a methodology; thinking critically about your approach; and building on an existing study” (Silverman, 2000:57). I enact these procedures in this chapter by outlining a number of epistemological, methodological and procedural aspects of this thesis in order to clarify my research design to the reader, and thereby to increase the credibility of my findings, which are discussed in a later chapter. The first section of this chapter explains how my research design rests on an epistemological basis strongly influenced by my understanding of social constructionism, and contains a number of methodological features exhibited by research carried out in the phenomenological and phenomenographic traditions. It also explains why I decided against using certain other approaches in my attempt to provide answers to my research questions. The second section of the chapter presents my three phase approach to gathering data and is followed by a detailed explanation of my analytical method.

### **3.2 Research philosophy, methodology and methods**

#### **3.2.1 Research philosophy**

The epistemological basis of this thesis is generally known as constructionism or social constructionism. My understanding of this perspective has been shaped by Crotty (1998), who clarifies the concept by making a strong distinction between constructivism and constructionism. In Crotty’s interpretation, constructivism emphasises “the meaning-making activity of the individual mind”, whereas constructionism foregrounds “the collective generation and transmission of meaning” (Crotty, 1998:58). Through this distinction, Crotty highlights not only the way social constructionism challenges objectivist knowledge claims, but also how it is opposed to those approaches which conceive of reality as constructed by rational individual minds in isolation from others.



There are two ways in which this understanding of social constructionism forms the epistemological basis of this thesis. Firstly, the main research aim is to investigate how a certain group of students experienced a number of courses underpinned by a set of pedagogies which emphasise the collective achievement of knowledge outcomes, often in groups and always with the active participation of the students. Social constructionism can be seen as an appropriate epistemology since my research questions concern not only the influence of certain educational structures and processes on the performance of individual learners, but also the ways in which these learners experience the educational context provided by these structures and processes. As I understand social constructionism for the purposes of this thesis, this epistemology recognises the interaction between people and their environment, including the active role played by people in shaping the outcomes of this interaction. This seems an entirely appropriate perspective from which to investigate students' experiences of a set of pedagogies which promote their interaction with each other and with their learning environment.

The second way in which social constructionism provides an appropriate epistemological basis for this thesis is by providing a critical perspective from which to question both its epistemological underpinnings and those of previous researchers in this area. The importance of this critical perspective is that it enables us to question our everyday understandings of the world, and without it: "We tend to take the sense we make of things to be the way things are" (Crotty, 1998: 59). In this thesis, I aim to critically reflect upon and challenge some of the reductionist typologies and dichotomised representations of culture prevalent in the earlier literature on Chinese Learners in order to arrive at a more complex and textured account which recognises my participants' own ways of talking about their experiences.

Within my own professional practice, I am conscious of how cultural theories by authors such as Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2004, 1998), Hofstede (2001, 1984) and Triandis (1995, 1982) characterise Chinese culture as long-term orientated, ascription-orientated and collectivist. Furthermore, in the earlier work on Chinese Learners and the SAL-derived literature, I found a reliance on

highly structured approaches, mainly questionnaires and structured interviews, which were based on previously designed typologies of student approaches to learning. Whilst these approaches highlighted some of the difficulties often experienced in cross-cultural encounters, they appeared to confirm previously held, usually dichotomously structured conceptions of students' approaches to learning such as "Eastern" versus "Western", collectivist versus individualist or Confucian versus Socratic.

In my investigation I wanted to challenge these concepts by using a more flexible framework to explore the ways in which my participants made sense of their learning experiences. I therefore identified a number of later authors who seem to avoid these typologies and use a variety of research designs to investigate students' perceptions. These include: phenomenological approaches (Parris-Kidd and Barnett, 2011; Gutierrez and Dyson, 2009); longitudinal designs (Kimmel and Volet, 2012; Gu, 2011; Zhou, Topping and Jindal-Snape, 2011; Brown, 2008); applied linguistics approaches (Jin and Cortazzi, 2011b; Leung and Crisp, 2011; Li and Cutting, 2011; Cortazzi, Jin and Zhiru, 2009); artificial dialogue (Zhao and Bourne, 2011) and visual techniques (Skyrme and White, 2011). These authors provide good examples of how intercultural research can be designed which does not rely on concepts derived from "fixed, homogenous, reified national cultures" (Clark and Gieve, 2006: 54). Following these examples, I used an approach designed to capture my participants' perceptions of their experiences without forcing a predetermined interpretation onto them.

### **3.2.2 Methodology**

At a methodological level, there are a number of approaches which seem commensurate with social constructionism, and which are appropriate for investigating lived experiences, two of which are symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. Both of these approaches exhort researchers to refrain from imposing predetermined categories on their participants' accounts, and to accept the meaning given to social phenomena by the actors themselves. However, it seems that symbolic interactionism requires a naïve or uncritical approach from the researcher, as implied in the following characterisations

(cited by Crotty, 1998:75):

“The situation must be seen as the actor sees it.” (Psathas, 1973:6)

“[Symbolic interactionists] are prepared to accept the meanings that the actors attribute to social phenomena at face value...” (Mitchell, 1977:115)

“Symbolic interactionism directs the investigator to take, to the best of his [*sic*] ability, the standpoint of those studied.” (Denzin, 1978:99)

In the case of my thesis it is difficult to imagine how I could completely take the standpoint of my participants due to both my professional situation at the University and the fact of my having some knowledge of work previously carried out on this research topic. Indeed, it was precisely on the basis of this knowledge that I decided to investigate this topic.

By contrast, influenced by the writings of Husserl (1931) and Merleau-Ponty (1964), researchers working in the phenomenological tradition believe that cultural understandings and conceptualisations often come between us and the phenomena we experience, thus “pre-empting the task of meaning-making” (Crotty, 1998: 79). Van Manen (1990: 46) writes that these pre-understandings “predispose us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon before we have even come to terms with the significance of the phenomenological question”, and he explains how, borrowing a term from Mathematics, Husserl recommended that phenomenologists “bracket” their cultural understandings in order in order to “get back to the things themselves” (*zu den Sachen*). However, the technique of bracketing is not aimed at forgetting one’s previous knowledge, but rather at establishing a critical distance from which to challenge it:

“We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character.” (Van Manen, 1990:47)

This expresses particularly well the critical element inherent in phenomenology, which, unlike symbolic interactionism, aims to reveal the researcher’s own voice in the research account, in order to critically investigate the phenomenon as understood by those who have experienced it.

A number of authors recommend practical ways of carrying out phenomenological research, including Greaseley and Ashworth (2007), Ashworth and Lukas (2000, 1998) and Van Manen (1990). Since I was particularly interested in the practical implications of working in this research tradition, I did not feel it necessary to fully research the debates over the precise commonalities and differences between phenomenology and phenomenography, which are discussed by Greaseley and Ashworth (2007). However, in the following section I explain how my research design reflected certain perspectives of authors working in both traditions.

Van Manen (1990:77), describes the task of phenomenology as “the clarification of the structure of meaning of the lived experience”, and proposes that although individuals inhabit different “lifeworlds”, a number of broad and open-ended “existential” themes can be identified that may prove helpful common starting points for the research process. These are lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality) and lived human relation (relationality). I used these as starting points for the discussions in the pre-pilot phase of my interviews in order to identify more specific themes for the main interviews without having recourse to topics derived from the work of previous researchers. I explain this method in more detail later in this chapter.

From my reading around phenomenography, I found that one of the challenges facing researchers is precisely the task of *epoché* or “bracketing” their previous knowledge in order to depict the “lifeworlds” of their research participants. Ashworth and Lukas (2000, 1998) consider that this difficulty is partly due to the fact that even the best known early proponents of phenomenography failed to stipulate exactly which types of knowledge were to be bracketed, and they provide a useful list themselves, which includes: “theories, research presuppositions and ready-made interpretations” (Ashworth and Lukas, 1998: 418). Following this guideline, and wherever possible, I excluded from my interviews and analysis any notions of national or academic cultures and concepts based on deficit interpretations, which I had become aware of in the literature on Chinese Learners.

Ashworth and Lukas acknowledge a further dilemma facing

phenomenographers, which consists of the conflicting aims of depicting lifeworlds as experienced by their participants whilst at the same identifying structures of meaning within specific thematic spheres, noting that “the phenomenographer cannot necessarily assume even that the notion intended to be the theme of the interview is unambiguously the actual theme for the interviewees” (Ashworth and Lukas, 1998: 423). I faced a similar dilemma when I attempted to capture students’ perceptions of their experiences on courses which used Active Learning pedagogies since I suspected that my interviewees might not share my interpretation of what these were or even recognise the term. In most cases this resulted in my completely avoiding the term “Active Learning”, and asking students about their experiences on specific modules which used certain teaching styles, such as group projects, business simulations, investigative studies etc.

I considered a number of other research designs which seemed appropriate for investigating student perceptions, but rejected these as offering fewer advantages than carrying out qualitative interviews within a phenomenological framework. For example, I felt that a longitudinal design, such as those used by Kimmel and Volet (2012), Gu (2011), Zhou, Topping and Jindal-Snape (2011), and Brown (2008) would not be feasible for this research due to two types of time constraints: firstly, the need to produce a completed thesis within a given period of time; and secondly, the short duration of the UK sojourn of most of my participants. However, by selecting students at different stages of their sojourn (see Table 3), I was able to obtain a sample of participants which was representative of the whole duration of the sojourn. I also reflected on the merits of using an applied linguistics approach, as exemplified by Jin and Cortazzi (2011b), Leung and Crisp (2011), Li and Cutting (2011) and Cortazzi, Jin and Zhiru (2009). An example of this kind of approach might have entailed the identification of students’ metaphors of learning or of teachers’ roles, from which I might have been able to deduce significant aspects of their experiences. However, my limited knowledge of my participants’ first language would have obstructed this, thereby considerably reducing the reliability of my findings. I return to the theme of interview language later on in this chapter in relation to the interviews which were carried out by a Chinese-speaking colleague.

My decision to rely entirely on interviews for gathering material for analysis also

requires further explanation since a number of possible methods of obtaining experiential descriptions might have been deemed appropriate. For example, in addition to interviewing, Van Manen (1990) mentions obtaining written protocols, diaries, journals and logs from participants, and using field notes based on observations. However, I decided that the use of written protocols, diaries or logs would have been inappropriate since my participants might feel stressed about having to produce written texts. This might have introduced an important element of bias into my data since students who felt less confident about their writing skills might have been unwilling to participate in this research. I also considered taking field notes based on close observation of students on specific modules. However, although I could have observed the behaviour of Chinese students within the classroom context, I would have had to speculate about their motivations and understandings, and it is unlikely that this would have produced sufficiently reliable information for me to infer their feelings about their experiences on these modules. Also, without making special arrangements with the students, it would have been impossible to observe their behaviour during meetings outside the classroom, e.g. in the refectory, library, cafes in town or in their accommodation. I therefore concluded that interviews were the most practical and reliable way to gather students' accounts of their experiences.

### **3.2.3 A critique of qualitative interviews**

On the other hand, despite having established a strong pragmatic rationale for using interviews within the phenomenological framework of my thesis, I consider it important to acknowledge the limitations and threats to reliability of this method of obtaining experiential descriptions. In particular, interviews are sometimes criticised as providing unreliable witness accounts since any information obtained will have been strongly influenced by the interview situation. As a critical lens through which to reflect on my own assumptions regarding the effectiveness of interviews, in this section I present a summary of Hammersley's (2008: 93-4) account of four analytically distinct components of what he calls "the radical critique of interviews" (Table 2) and then indicate how I responded to each of these components.

**Table 2: The radical critique of interviews (after Hammersley, 2008)**

<i>Discursive psychology</i>	interviews produce unreliable accounts of lived experience since they are “public displays”
<i>Epistemological scepticism</i>	each individual’s account of reality is only one of many possible versions of events, neither true nor false
<i>Methodological caution</i>	participants’ accounts of reality are unreliable since they are not based on rigorous data collection methods
<i>Reactivity</i>	interview data are always “contaminated” by the interview situation

The discursive psychology line of critique is a powerful one since it is very likely that my participants’ accounts were affected by the socio-cultural constraints of the interview situation. This might have led them to suppress certain comments, or at least confine their comments to the topics they judged appropriate in an interview with a senior member of staff at the University. However, this does not completely invalidate their accounts since the main purpose of my research was not to further my understanding of Active Learning pedagogies as objective realities, but as subjectively experienced phenomena. It is reasonable to assume that my participants’ accounts offer insights into their own experiences which are superior to any account which could be offered by any other persons, and being aware that these accounts are influenced by the socio-cultural constraints of the interview situation does not provide sufficient grounds to reject them. A measure of caution before accepting them as comprehensive experiential descriptions is certainly justified, but I would argue that interviews still offered the best means of gathering the kind of information which I required for this research.

Secondly, whilst it is true that individual accounts of lived experience cannot be transferred or generalised, I would not take epistemological scepticism so far as to deny the value of any of my participants’ accounts of their individual experience. Indeed, their immediate and intimate knowledge of their own experience made them uniquely capable of providing an account of this experience. As with the critique based on discursive psychology, epistemological scepticism should caution against an unquestioning acceptance of any one version as a definitive account of the phenomenon in question. However, by interviewing a number of students at different stages of their sojourn, I was able to compare accounts and to determine the extent to which

certain experiential components were either shared or appeared to be the particular experiential features of certain individuals.

The third critique, methodological caution, does not necessarily imply that all accounts of reality given in interviews are completely inaccurate, although it does highlight certain obvious threats to their reliability. It is certainly true that my participants' accounts were not based on rigorous methods of observation or data gathering, but then that would be true of most people's recollections of any experience. However, I would contend that the recency of my participants' experiences was one factor which mitigated this threat, since I could assume that they had reasonably accurate memories of the incidents they described and of their feelings at the time. I also took care to give each participant the opportunity to approve a summary of their interview in case they felt in retrospect that their own account was inaccurate, or that I had misinterpreted their comments. Two examples of student responses to my interview summaries are given in Appendix 2 and these show a number of suggested corrections. Of course, this opportunity to review my summary of the interview was aimed mainly at improving the accuracy of my understanding of their account, and did not necessarily provide a correction of inaccuracies on their part. However, I felt able to accept their account as a reasonably accurate representation of the phenomenon as subjectively experienced and this was the main object of my research.

The fourth criticism is a largely methodological one based on the notion of participants' reactivity to the interview situation and is therefore less radical than the other three. Specifically, this line of critique questions the "ecological validity" of interviews. However, as Hammersley (2008: 98) points out, ecological validity is not guaranteed by any research method, including researcher observation, so interviews should not be subjected to particular criticism from this perspective. Indeed, since I set out to investigate my participants' subjective experience rather than a phenomenon which existed independently of them, it is difficult to see how other methods could have been used more effectively than interviews. In response to this particular critique, Hammersley recommends that researchers should use further methods where possible to triangulate their findings in order to eliminate the possible bias



inherent in the interview method. This is a useful recommendation, but given the aforementioned difficulty of requiring international students to provide written accounts of their experiences, this was not a viable option. Instead of triangulation through the use of additional methods, I conducted interviews with students at different stages of their sojourn and offered each the opportunity to review a summary of their interview. I also conducted two relatively unstructured group interviews in the pre-pilot phase, which enabled me to identify topics for further investigation later on, and this technique might be considered an effective means of supporting my findings.

In conclusion, according to Hammersley (2008), the radical critique of interviews is based on the perception that in a great deal of recent qualitative research, data from interviews have been used unreflectively. In response to this, I have attempted to demonstrate in this section that this is not the case for this thesis. The other basis of the radical critique is that a great deal of qualitative research has relied exclusively on interview data and this leads to Hammersley's recommendation that additional methods be employed in order to provide triangulation and thereby increase the reliability of the findings. However, I justified my exclusive reliance on interview data both by the nature of the research topic (subjective experience) and by the fact that interviews seemed to offer the most reliable means of collecting the data I required to answer my research questions.

### **3.2.4 Ethical considerations**

In addition to methodological critiques of my research design, a number of ethical dimensions also require discussion. In this section I refer to a number of items from the ethical guidelines published by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) and the "check list of ethical issues for consideration in planning research" proposed by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) in order to demonstrate how these issues were taken account of in this research project. These are: informed consent; access and acceptance; non-maleficence and anonymity, which are highlighted once in italics in the discussion for ease of orientation. However, since compliance with ethical research principles is no guarantee that certain unexpected ethical dilemmas will not arise during the

process of research, and in the critical spirit of the social constructionist epistemology underlying this research, I also discuss certain practical and ethical aspects which go beyond the requirements of compliance.

BERA (2011) define voluntary *informed consent* as “the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway” (BERA, 2011:5). However, since duress is not defined in detail and this definition restricts itself to the period before the research actually begins, it seems useful to unpick this notion. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) quote Diener and Crandall's (1978) definition of informed consent, which appears to offer a useful starting point: “The procedures in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence their decisions” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007:52). They identify four elements of informed consent: voluntarism, competence, full information and comprehension. In the following section I explain how I responded to each of these elements of informed consent.

The students I interviewed were all sent a separate email inviting them to participate in this study by attending an interview in which I would seek their views of their experiences on certain modules at the University. I took care to explain that this work was for my own purposes as a doctoral student, but also informed them that the University might be able to use the results as part of a review of the use of Active Learning pedagogies. In this way I felt reasonably sure that my interviewees were voluntary participants.

Since they were also at an advanced stage of their tertiary studies I felt confident that they were competent to understand the significance of their participation in educational research, and would be able to offer considered views which could be accepted as reliable for the purposes of answering my research questions.

However, I have to question whether it is possible to claim to have provided full information. This is partly because I did not want to explain fully my research topic in advance of the interviews in case my participants felt it important to

“prepare” their answers, thereby threatening the reliability of their responses. Another reason is that, as Malone (2003) points out, a certain lack of information is built into the design of inductive qualitative research: “The inductive emergent nature of qualitative design precludes researchers being able to predict where the study will take them” (Malone, 2003:800). In the case of this research, I purposely used an open and flexible design which allowed specific topics to emerge from the pre-pilot group interviews, as explained in Section 3.3.2 of this chapter. Furthermore, it was impossible for me to know exactly how or even if my University might act on any recommendations I might make as a result of this research, which again prevented my participants from being fully informed of the consequences of their participation.

Finally, regarding comprehension, although my participants were at an advanced stage in their studies, the fact that they were international students was likely to entail a certain lack of familiarity both with my research topic (Action Learning pedagogies) and with the UK HE system in general.

In conclusion, I have taken reasonable measures to ensure informed consent from my participants by informing them of what Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) call “facts that would be likely to influence their decisions”, but I would not try to claim complete fulfilment of every aspect of this criterion.

Regarding *access and acceptance*, my research proposal was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Exeter before I began and permission was also granted to interview students in the Faculty in which I work. In practical terms, my role at the University gave me access to students and student data, which facilitated my identification of suitable potential participants, but I was careful not to misuse this data to put pressure on individuals to participate in my research. Using this data, I selected a convenience sample, which included students from a number of different management courses who had been at the University for varying periods at the time of interviewing (see Table 3). All students were given a note in the interview informing them of their “right to withdraw from the research for any or no reason, and at any time” (BERA, 2011: 6), and I also took care that the students I selected were not in any of my classes at the time of interviewing, although some of them had been

previously. Finally, my sample only included those students who replied to my email confirming their willingness to participate in the research, and this gave me reasonable confidence that I was not abusing my privileged access to the students or their data.

However, if the notion of coercion were interpreted in a broad sense, I would not really be able to claim that this research was devoid of all elements of coercion since I could not really know if any of the students I contacted experienced a sense of obligation to take part due to my position as a teacher. Malone argues that there is always a risk in researching in one's home institution that even fully-informed participants might not feel able to withhold their consent (Malone, 2003: 803) due to unequal power relationships between tutors and students. The BERA guidelines also remind us that "dual roles may also introduce explicit tensions in areas such as confidentiality and must be addressed accordingly" (BERA 2011: 5). As with the principle of informed consent, it seems that even the most strenuous attempt to comply with ethical procedures regarding access and acceptance cannot guarantee the elimination of feelings of coercion on the part of some participants.

Although I took care not to select any participants whom I was teaching or assessing at the time of the interviews, I had previously taught some of them, and at that time held the role of Senior Tutor for the Business School, a fact which potentially threatened the reliability of some of my participants' comments. I was made aware of the possible effects of this power imbalance whilst transcribing one of my interviews (see Appendix 3) as I realised that during the conversation I had misunderstood the participant's response and she had not corrected me. This incident did not actually lead to a misinterpretation since the problem was picked up at the transcription stage. Nevertheless, it is an example of what Hammersley (2010) refers to as the "reactivity" problem and it alerted me to the potential for a significant power imbalance between researcher and participants to threaten the reliability of interview data. Although not originally planned, I was able to have five of the main interviews carried out in Mandarin by a visiting scholar and this certainly enabled me to control for systematic bias. I also drew lessons from this incident, as I noted in a memo written at the time of transcription: "I should have given her more time and an

opportunity to correct me here, but understand that the difficulties are partly due to deference and unwillingness to “correct” the interviewer. The lesson here is to be more sensitive, listen more carefully and not jump to premature conclusions” (See Appendix 3).

The BERA guidelines refer to the principle of privacy by stating that: “the confidential and anonymous treatment of participants’ data is considered the norm for the conduct of research” (BERA, 2011: 7). In this regard, I discussed the principles of *non-maleficence and anonymity* at length with my supervisors and took care to comply with these to the best of my ability. For example, I protected my participants’ data by keeping all materials on a computer which was password-protected and in a locked environment. On the interview transcripts and in my findings section I also changed or deleted the names of members of staff or other students mentioned by my participants during the interviews. In this way I sought to ensure that none of my participants’ comments could be attributed directly to them at a later date, and that no harm could result from their participation.

However if the concept of non-maleficence is interpreted as covering all aspects of the research process, from the initial selection of participants to the dissemination of findings and including the interviewing process, it is important to question whether lack of harm is an effective criterion by which to make a judgement in this respect. For example, whilst I am reasonably sure that my participants would be extremely unlikely to suffer any harm from their participation in this research, it is difficult to be completely sure that all of my participants felt equally comfortable during the interviews or upon reading my summaries of the interviews. In fact in my earlier attempts to obtain participant validation (pre-pilot and pilot phases), I sent the full transcripts of the interviews to my participants and asked them if they thought I had missed or misinterpreted anything. However, as my supervisor pointed out, this might have made my participants uncomfortable, since they might have imagined that their language skills were being tested, and they might have become uneasy on seeing their comments committed to writing verbatim. After the main interviews I therefore produced condensed summaries which I sent to the students for their approval or correction (see Appendix 2). This practice reduced the amount the

students had to read, although it had the disadvantage that the summaries necessarily contained a degree of interpretation or selection on my part, which certain students might feel uncomfortable about “correcting”. On balance, this seemed a reasonable measure to take since it was likely to reduce my participants’ unease to a minimum.

In conclusion, although I took care to comply with standard ethical research principles, I attempted to go beyond mere compliance and continued to reflect on the extent to which my participants might be affected by their participation in this research. I agree with Malone, who states: “We need to adopt a persistently sceptical stance towards the very notion of informed consent” (Malone, 2003:813) since compliance will not protect us or our participants from the consequences of ethical dilemmas which emerge during the process of research. I worked in this critical spirit by continuing to reflect on emergent ethical issues long after obtaining the “informed consent” of my participants, although I do not claim to have resolved all of the dilemmas which ethical research guidelines are designed to resolve.

### **3.2.5 Interview language**

In the final part of this section I would like to discuss the question of interview language, since this also had an important bearing on the nature of the comments made by my interviewees and on my interpretation of them. I carried out most of the interviews myself in English, and five others were conducted in Mandarin Chinese by a visiting colleague. Although the Chinese interviews had not been part of my original research design, I was delighted to have the opportunity to gather some data in the students’ first language, particularly as I was conscious of the challenges presented to my interviewees by being required to talk about complex topics in a foreign language.

I subsequently came across the article by Cortazzi, Pilcher and Jin (2011), who examine a wide range of published research on Chinese Learners, including several cited in my literature review. The authors note that relatively few researchers explicitly acknowledge language choice as an important issue in their interviews, despite the fact that there is a significant qualitative effect of

language choice both on the information given by participants and on the interpretation made by the researcher, as they demonstrate by comparing transcripts from “blind shadow” interviews in which participants are interviewed in their first language and then in that of the researchers. The authors note some significant differences including expressive ability in the language of the interview, extra time needed for interviews in a foreign language and a number of characteristics of Chinese face-to-face communication processes such as indirectness and a listening stance in relation to superiors, including academic interviewers (Cortazzi *et al.*, 2011:519). These authors strongly recommend reflecting on the implications of interview language choice at the design stage as well as acknowledging the qualitative differences between data gathered through interviews held in the first and second languages of participants.

Regarding interpretation, Cortazzi *et al.* (2011) mention the role of the translator, who becomes an unwitting producer of data since all translation involves some degree of interpretation. Although I had not intended to compare the data quality of our English and Chinese interviews, the transcripts of the Chinese interviews generally reveal more precise vocabulary to discuss abstract concepts and longer responses to the interviewer’s questions. On closer inspection, it is not always clear whether these differences are the product of the interviewees’ speech or the skill of the translator. In either case, the process of transcription became enmeshed with the process of translation, and this made me acutely aware of the extent to which my colleague and I were involved not just in translation, but in meaning-making on behalf of our participants, as can be seen in the following excerpts from our email correspondence.

*Transcriber’s first version: “I know two Chinese and two European students live in same house, they seldom have communications with each other”*

*Corrected first version: “I know two Chinese and two European students who live in the same house, but they seldom communicate with each other.”*

*Transcriber’s note on corrected first version: “Here the interviewee gives an example instead of meaning he really knows all of them.”*

*Transcriber’s second version: “I know two Chinese students who live with two European students, but they seldom communicate with each other.”*

*Principal researcher’s note on second version: “As the student is only talking about an example, I have changed this to make the hypothetical nature of the sentence clearer.”*

*Corrected second version: I know that even if two Chinese and two European students live in the same house, they might seldom communicate with each other.”*

The process of producing English transcripts of Chinese interviews for analysis

involved sending comments and re-translations between China and the UK, as I would comment on initial translations, and propose corrections, which sometimes improved the original translation and sometimes missed the point. In the above case, I corrected an interview transcript for grammatical and stylistic features and these corrections were noted. My colleague then sent me a second translation with a note as to the real meaning of the utterance, which I had misunderstood. My “correction” had not captured the hypothetical nature of the student’s utterance, which was not obvious to me in the first version. Finally the re-translation was corrected to bring out this important syntactical feature in English. This example aptly demonstrates the way in which data were not only jointly produced by the participant and the interviewer, but in a very palpable sense they were also the product of a protracted negotiation process between the translator/transcriber (my Chinese colleague) and the principal researcher (myself). The two examples given in Appendix 2 show how this negotiation process also included the interviewees, who were subsequently invited to check the transcription summaries.

Several authors note that researchers are always involved in some degree of interpretation, since as Kvale (2007: 93) puts it: “From a linguistic perspective, the transcriptions are translations from an oral language to a written language, where the constructions on the way involve a series of judgements and decisions”. Temple, Edwards and Alexander (2006) appear to agree with this viewpoint, and state that literal translation just adds another layer of transformation:

“All researchers are translators and interpreters in their analyses and presentations of their interviewees’ experiences and perspectives, even where they share a language. Literal translation, from one language to another, in research makes this process acutely visible, however”.  
(Temple, Edwards and Alexander, 2006: 7)

The purpose of this section has been to acknowledge the differences between translated and first language data in the spirit of Cortazzi *et al.*’s (2011) recommendations. It has also shown that during the writing of transcripts I came to recognise the way in which translator and researcher are both involved in the



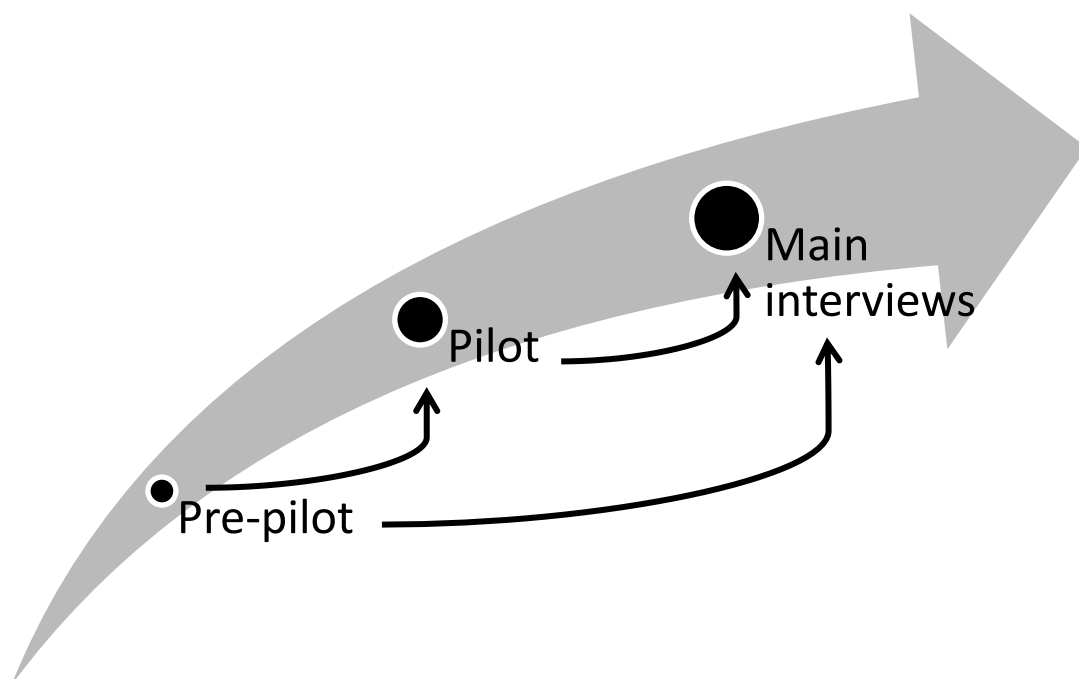
co-creation of meaning through the acts of transcription and translation. In this way I have again attempted to foreground the social constructionist philosophical perspective of this thesis by locating myself and my colleague within the data gathering process in order to highlight the significant role of the researcher in co-creating research data.

### **3.3 Gathering data**

#### **3.3.1 A three phase approach**

In my literature review I showed how my approach to gathering data aimed to challenge the use of structured interviews and questionnaires, through which earlier researchers on Chinese Learners and Student Approaches to Learning (SAL) had tested previously held, particularly determinist, cultural notions regarding the predispositions of Chinese students. In this section I show how I structured my data gathering in three phases, with the first phase (pre-pilot) designed to identify themes which would then be discussed in subsequent interviews.

In keeping with the exploratory purpose of my research, I decided to gather data in three phases, as illustrated in Figure 2. The large curved arrow in the upper part of this figure signifies the way the pilot and main interviews were built respectively on the themes emerging from the previous phases. This arrow increases in thickness with the volume and specificity of data produced by the interviews. The smaller curved arrows depict how the thematic structures of the pilot and main interviews were both influenced by the pre-pilot phase. Examples of this influence will be seen in the following section of this chapter, where I explain why certain themes were dropped whilst others were consolidated as the interviewing progressed.



Pre-pilot	Pilot	Main interviews
Two unstructured group interviews held in English	Two individual, semi-structured interviews held in English.	Thirteen individual and one paired, semi-structured interviews, of which nine were held in English and five in Mandarin.

**Figure 2: The three phases of interviewing**

In the pre-pilot phase, I interviewed two groups of students using a relatively open-ended, unstructured approach, the purpose of which was to identify specific themes related to their experiences of Active Learning pedagogies, which I then pursued in the pilot and main interviewing phases. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) support this approach, stating that “group interviews might be useful for gaining an insight into what might be pursued in subsequent individual interviews” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992: 100). As mentioned in the section on methodology, in this phase of interviewing I used Van Manen’s “fundamental existential themes” of spatiality, corporeality, temporality and relationality in order to keep these conversations as open-ended as possible.

Various research methods scholars point out a number of features of group interviews which I needed to consider in my research design. For example, Arksey and Knight (1999: 76), mention a number of drawbacks such as the possible dominance of the interview by one respondent, the reticence of certain

individuals to speak of sensitive matters in front of their colleagues, and the possibility that participants will offer a “public line” in their responses. However, in Kvale’s (2007) opinion the potential of group interviews is sometimes underestimated since they often produce more spontaneous results than individual interviews:

“The aim of the focus group is not to reach consensus about, or solutions to, the issues discussed, but to bring forth different viewpoints on an issue. Focus group interviews are well suited for exploratory studies in a new domain since the lively, collective interaction may bring forth more spontaneous, expressive and emotional views than in individual, more cognitive interviews.” (Kvale: 2007: 72)

The recordings and transcripts of these interviews display a considerable degree of interaction among the interviewees and this allowed me to elicit their collective views on certain aspects of my research design, especially the use of group versus individual interviews and the timing of interviews in terms of the stage of the students’ sojourn in the UK. Most responded that individual interviews were a more effective way of gathering comprehensive data since students had different experiences which might not be evidenced by comments made in group interviews. They also thought that in individual interviews, each interviewee would be more likely to respond to the interviewer and to talk about personal experiences, but might find the presence of other students embarrassing in a group interview. In this way, the participants in the pre-pilot group interviews validated my choice of individual interviews for the main data gathering phase of my research.

The timing of interviews during the students’ sojourn in the UK was another important aspect of my research design since it would determine whether my approach would be longitudinal or cross-sectional. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007: 212) cite Ruspini’s (2002) view that longitudinal designs can “highlight similarities, differences and changes over time in respect of one or more variables or participants (within and between participants)”. They argue that longitudinal designs are also more likely to catch the complexity of human behaviour than cross-sectional designs since they enable researchers to construct more complicated behavioural models. For my research topic a

longitudinal design seemed to offer the advantage of tracking the development of students' opinions as they progressed on their course.

On the other hand, any cross-sectional sample of students across a range of Business Management courses would include a mixture of newly arrived and more experienced students and this would allow me to obtain the views of different students at various stages during their sojourn. In the end I decided to interview a cross-sectional convenience sample of students (see Table 3) mainly for pragmatic reasons since I relied on volunteers and these happened to be at different levels within their programmes and at various stages of their sojourn. I also felt unable to prolong data gathering over an extended period as I had to complete my research and writing-up within a given time frame.

An additional reason for my choice of a cross-sectional design for this research was that, since I was aiming to explore students' perceptions of Active Learning pedagogies, it was entirely appropriate to select a sample of students at various stages of their sojourn. Some of the students I interviewed had come to the UK specifically to complete parts of a course which they had begun in China (e.g. 2+2 or 2+1 courses), whilst others had chosen to do the whole of their course in the UK (e.g. three year courses leading to BA Hons, or year-long courses leading to MBA awards etc.). As noted above in my response to the critique of interviews based on epistemological scepticism, this heterogeneous sample enabled me to compare individuals' accounts and build up a picture of what a number of students felt were significant thematic components of their experiences. Since this range of experiences was a likely feature of any random sample of Chinese students studying at my university I did not see this as something which threatened the consistency of my approach (internal validity). On the contrary, it provided variety, which a too narrowly focussed sample might not have delivered.

For the pre-pilot and pilot phases, a convenience sample of students was selected who were known to me, but who were not being taught or assessed by me at the time of interviewing. For the main interviews, participants were selected (from Student Records, to which I had access) for a purposive sample based on the following criteria: nationality (Chinese); course of study (a range of

business management courses was sought). This resulted in a pool of approximately one hundred and twenty potential participants, seventy-eight of whom were eliminated because I was teaching them on a Level 6 module at that time. After checking for time spent in the UK at the time of interview (a range was sought) and gender (a gender-balanced sample was preferred), and excluding any students I had interviewed in the first two phases (most had left), I invited approximately thirty students via email to participate, and interviewed those who volunteered (about half of the total). In all three phases, a total of twenty-four students were interviewed, which would have constituted about 20% of a typical cohort of Chinese students studying business management subjects at that time.

**Table 3: Interview metadata**

Participant	Date of interview	FHEQ Level	Student's major subject	Time living in UK at time of interview
<b>Pre-pilot Phase: April and May 2011</b>				
CS1 (F)	5/4/11 (first group interview)	UG 6	BA Management	20 months
CS2 (F)		UG 6	BA Management	20 months
CS3 (M)		UG 6	BA Management	20 months
CS4 (M)		UG 6	BA Int'l Business	32 months
CS5 (F)	20/5/11 (second group interview)	PG 7	MBA	32 months
CS6 (F)		UG 6	BA Int'l Business	20 months
CS7 (M)		UG 6	BA Strategy	8 months
<b>Pilot Phase: June 2011</b>				
CS8 (M)	9/6/11	UG 6	BA Management	20 months
CS9 (F)	27/6/11	PG 7	MBA	20 months
<b>Main Interviews: October to November 2011</b>				
CS10 (M)	18/10/11	UG 6	BA Int'l Business	14 months
CS11 (M)	24/10/11 (paired interview)	UG 6	BA Finance	14 months
CS12 (M)		UG 6	BA Finance	14 months
CS13 (F)	25/10/11	PG 7	MBA	14 months
CS14 (M)	25/10/11	PG 7	MBA	26 months
CS15 (F)	26/10/11	UG 6	BA Business	26 months
CS16 (M)	26/10/11	UG 6	BA Management	26 months
CS17 (F)	3/11/11	PG 7	MBA	26 months
CS18 (M)	11/11/11	PG 7	MBA	15 months
CS19 (F)	1/12/11	UG 6	BA Int'l Business	15 months
CS20 (F)	18/10/11 (in Mandarin)	UG 5	BA Management	15 months
CS21 (F)	28/11/11 (in Mandarin)	UG 6	BA Int'l Business	4 months
CS22 (M)	2/12/11 (in Mandarin)	PG 7	MBA	28 months
CS23 (M)	5/12/11 (in Mandarin)	UG 6	BA Int'l Business	4 months
CS24 (M)	8/12/11 (in Mandarin)	UG 5	BA Finance	5 months
<b>Summary</b>				
<b>Males: 13 Females: 11</b>	<b>Pre-pilot: 2 group interviews Pilot: 2 individual interviews Main: 13 individual and 1 paired interviews (of which 5 in Mandarin)</b>	<b>Undergraduate: L5=2, L6=15, Postgraduate: L7=7</b>	<b>Various Business Management programmes</b>	<b>&lt; 1 year: 4 1 – 2 years:13 &gt;2years: 7</b>

The range of students' previous experience can be seen in Table 3, which reports the length of time participants had already spent in the UK at the time of

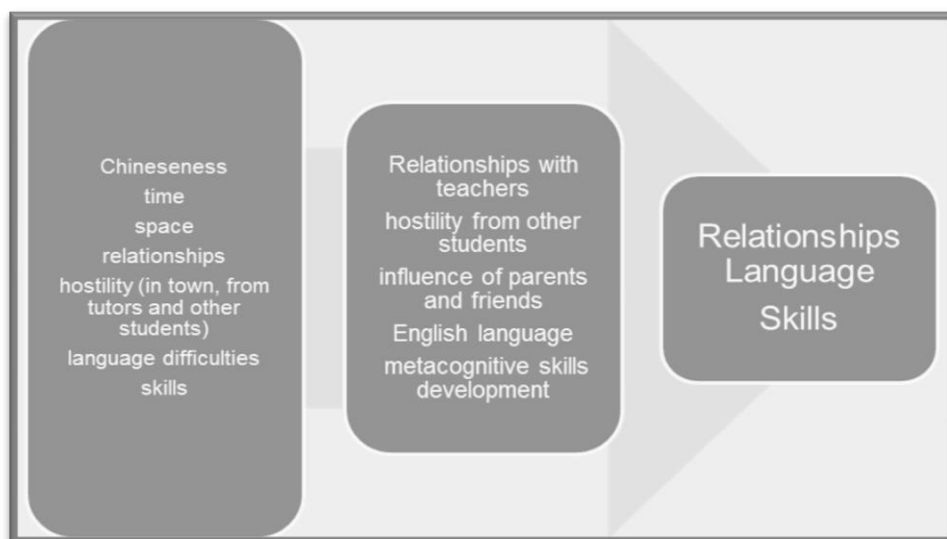
being interviewed. The participants were almost equally divided by gender with seven of the total at postgraduate stage at the time of their interview. Four had been in the UK for less than one year and seven for more than two years. The interviewees were on a range of management courses, with some specialising in Marketing or Financial Management and others on generic Business Management degrees. However, in all cases they had completed modules which used simulations and group projects, which I took as indicating the use of Active Learning pedagogies.

The second phase (pilot) of data gathering consisted of two individual interviews which were designed to try out and fine-tune the interview themes identified in the previous phase. These were held several weeks after the pre-pilot group interviews and about four months before the main interviews. Consequently, I had time to transcribe these pilot interviews and reflect on precisely which themes I would pursue in the main interviews. Although these two pilot interviews had this special testing purpose, I also analysed the data they provided in the same way as data from the main interviews.

The third phase (main interviews) consisted of fourteen semi-structured interviews, one of which was a paired interview, and five of which were conducted in Chinese by my colleague, who later transcribed and translated these interviews for me. This combination of interview languages (and interviewers) provided a range of data which I could not have achieved by conducting all of the interviews myself in English, although it also provided a layer of complexity to the processes of data gathering and analysis.

### **3.3.2 Interview themes and research questions**

Figure 3 below reflects the interview themes which emerged from this phased interview process. This emergence can also be described as convergence since the themes I concentrate on in the discussion of my data are fewer in number than those which were identified in the earlier interviews, some of which were subsequently dropped.



**Figure 3: The emergence (convergence) of themes during interviews**

In the pre-pilot interviews I identified certain topics to pursue later on in the main interviews, and narrowed the list of themes as interviewing progressed. For example, after the pre-pilot group interviews I dropped the theme of “Chineseness” because my participants did not understand what this term meant. Another theme, influence of parents, was originally included as one specific aspect of Van Manen’s existential themes (relationality) and because of its possible link with motivation (see Vansteenkiste *et al.* 2005). However, the way my interviewees responded to this theme appeared to be unrelated to the main topic of my research, so it was also dropped from later interviews. On the other hand, language, relationships and skills became major themes as students responded readily to my questions. Table 4 indicates how participants responded to the themes of the pre-pilot interviews with the themes which became important in later interviews highlighted in bold.

**Table 4: Themes of pre-pilot interviews**

<b>Pre-pilot themes</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Group versus individual interviews	Individual interviews preferred, although some support for group interviews.
Timing of interviews	Mid-term or beginning of holidays, but not at the beginning of their sojourn.
Time experienced whilst studying in the UK	Contact time very low in UK compared with China; more independent study.
Places where students study	Classroom, library, at home (differences between China/UK).
<b>Relationships</b>	Parents: parental expectations, finance, pressure; Teachers: teaching styles and some teachers’ disrespectful attitudes towards Chinese students; Chinese students: social support networks, competitiveness; Non-Chinese students: friendships, hostility, collaboration;

	<b>Language difficulty:</b> understanding and expressing oneself.
Motivation	Extrinsic: impressing parents and friends, work for family business; Intrinsic: interest in subject, personal challenge, <b>intercultural skills</b> .
<b>Active Learning</b>	Group work: good and bad experiences; Group dynamics: choosing and being chosen or ignored by other group members; working in mixed nationality compared with all-Chinese groups; <b>Skills:</b> using a wider range of approaches to solve problems; communication and assignment difficulties due to language.
Being Chinese (“Chineseness”)	Unable to respond to the general concept of “Chineseness”; respect for teachers and parents; relationships (“guanxi”); embarrassment (“face”); racial abuse from some local residents; poor treatment from some home students and some teachers.

The use of a relatively unstructured approach in the pre-pilot group interviews was a conscious attempt on my part not to define the topics in advance and not to test out a pre-determined theory, but to discover which topics were important to my interviewees and to “follow the data” (Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 65). This design allowed me to identify a number of topics which I had not previously encountered in relation to pedagogy, but which emerged as key components in understanding my participants’ experiences. For example, a number of students commented on their experience of hostility from other students. In this way, I came to understand that whilst Active Learning pedagogies are designed to increase student interaction, this might be painful for some students. For other students, working in mixed-nationality groups was seen as a positive opportunity to explore the implications of cultural differences. However, since not all of the students I interviewed had experienced hostility I found this topic too narrow and merged it with the general theme of relationships in later interviews.

In the second pre-pilot group interview I had the benefit of having already listened to the first interview several times and noted that there was some ambiguity over whether students were expected to comment on their own experiences or those which were common to Chinese students in general, but I managed to clarify this in the pilot phase of interviewing. At this stage I also became aware that since I was interviewing in English, I needed to think carefully about the way I worded the questions in order to make the topics as accessible as possible. In this way the pre-pilot phase provided valuable opportunities to explore topics and test questioning approaches.



After transcribing the pre-pilot interviews, I modified my initial topic areas and formulated specific interview questions, which are presented in Table 5 below. Having identified four main areas of interest, I went into the first pilot expecting the conversation to revolve around a much tighter agenda, which it did to some extent. However, there was still some ambiguity and misunderstanding in that interview, much of which was due to my own error in not using specific questions to ask about the student's own experiences. I also tended to conflate too many elements into some of my questions and at several points the student asked me for my key point, which is clear evidence that I had not pitched the questions at the correct level of specificity.

**Table 5: Themes of pilot interviews**

Broad topic areas	Interview questions
<b>How different is studying in the UK from studying in China?</b>	Do you feel that studying in the UK is different from studying in China? In what ways? What are the things you find most difficult about studying here? Give examples. How important is language in these problems? Are there other differences between the UK and China which make studying here difficult?
<b>What is the role of relationships with tutors/other students?</b>	How do you find working with other students in group work? What kinds of problems do you have in group work? When group work is going well, how do you know it is going well? Give examples. Is the relationship between students and teachers different between China and the UK? In what ways? How do you find the teaching styles here? Can you think of situations where you have found the teacher unhelpful?
<b>How influential are parents and friends?</b>	Was the decision for you to come to the UK mainly taken by you or by your parents? When you discuss the course with your friends, how important are their opinions to you? Are your parents' experiences and opinions important in how you approach your studies?
<b>Awareness and development of metacognitive skills.</b>	What kinds of skills do you learn from studying abroad? What are the main benefits of studying here? Have you noticed any changes in the way you think or behave since you started your course? Are these mainly related to study (academic skills) or to your personal life? Would you recommend other Chinese students to study here?

(The arrows indicate overlapping thematic links between the broad topic areas and certain interview questions)

I went into the second pilot intending to use a more personal questioning stance and this seemed to work rather better. This interview was shorter than the others (25 minutes compared with 80 minutes for the first pre-pilot, 60 for the second pre-pilot and 50 for the first pilot), but I had the impression that it

covered the areas I was asking about in a lot of detail. After analysing the two pilot interviews I realised the importance not only of focussing my questions on specific topics, but also of directing my questions at the students' own experiences, rather than asking them about the experiences of Chinese students in general. These were valuable lessons which I carried over to the main interviews.

By mid-November 2011, after about half of the main interviews had been carried out, I had linked my interview questions more clearly to my main research questions, as shown in Table 6 below.

**Table 6: Questions in main Interviews**

Main research questions	Sub-questions	Interview questions
<p><b>How do Chinese students describe their learning experiences on modules which use Active Learning pedagogies at a UK business school?</b></p>	<p>What do Chinese students consider to be the greatest opportunities and challenges facing them on these courses?</p> <p>What do Chinese students consider to be the important similarities and differences between their previous educational experiences in China and their experiences here?</p> <p>Which teaching, learning and assessment styles are favoured by Chinese students?</p>	<p>Before arriving in the UK, what did you think that being a student here would be like?</p> <p>What do you consider to be the greatest opportunities and challenges of studying here?</p> <p>What would you say are the main differences between studying in China and studying in the UK?</p> <p>Tell me about your experiences on the modules which involve [Active Learning pedagogies] simulations, group projects, investigative studies etc.</p> <p>Which aspects of these modules do you find most difficult?</p> <p>Which aspects did you find most satisfying?</p>

<p><b>How effective do Chinese students consider Active Learning pedagogies to be in supporting their learning on these modules?</b></p>	<p>How well do Chinese students feel they understand what is required of them on these courses?</p> <p>How effective do Chinese students consider Active Learning pedagogies to be in providing opportunities to develop their metacognitive skills (e.g. awareness of their personal learning styles, cross-cultural skills and awareness of higher cognitive skills development.)</p>	<p>How well do you think you understand/ understood what is/was required of you on these modules?</p> <p>How do you know when work on these modules is going well?</p> <p>How effective do you consider Active Learning pedagogies to be in supporting your learning of the subject on these modules?</p> <p>What other skills (apart from subject knowledge) do you think you have developed on these modules?</p> <p>Do you feel you would learn these skills on modules with more traditional teaching, learning and assessment approaches?</p> <p>If you were asked to recommend changes to the teaching, learning and assessment at the Business School, what would you recommend? Why?</p>
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Tables 4, 5 and 6 summarise the specific questions related to the main topics of my research which I formulated after transcribing and reflecting on the themes of the pre-pilot and pilot interviews. I made modifications to my interview questions sometimes in response to instances of incomprehension on the part of the interviewees, and sometimes in order to achieve a greater correspondence with my research questions. In both the English and Chinese interviews, supplementary questions were used to invite interviewees to clarify their replies or explain certain issues in more detail.

Having recorded all of the interviews, I obtained eighteen transcripts, which included contributions from twenty-four participants and added up to about seventy-five thousand words. These formed the data base which I proceeded to analyse using tools available on NVivo software, as outlined in the following section of this chapter.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

#### **3.4.1 Analysing experiences**

The purpose of this research was to investigate students' experiences of certain pedagogical features, and therefore an important concern in the interviews was to use an open and flexible approach in order to gather accounts of these experiences as far as possible in the students' own words. This approach necessarily generated interview transcriptions which were less neatly structured than would have been the case had I decided to use a structured interview technique or questionnaires. For example, where students had a great deal to say about certain incidents or themes, I allowed them to continue talking, assuming that they had strong feelings about these matters. As I was interested in exploring students' experiences it was more important to record their discussion of the areas about which they had strong feelings than to attempt to cover a number of pre-determined themes with equal space given to each regardless of the students' own feelings. A brief glance at the transcripts confirms how varied the conversations were both thematically and in terms of the space given in each conversation to each of the topics.

Since the approach I used to gather the data entailed a certain lack of pre-determined structure, it was important to select an appropriate method for analysing the data, and this meant waiting until the data gathering was well underway before deciding which criteria or themes to use as organising categories. The selection of thematic categories for coding my participants' responses also needed to be carried out carefully since using any single set of criteria to code all of the interviews might misrepresent them by privileging one or some of the twenty-four voices over the others, even if these criteria had emerged from some of the interviews. I was already conscious of this risk during the transcription process as I noticed that some of the interviewees expressed their views less confidently than others, or used a more restricted vocabulary, spoke more hesitantly or struggled to express their views in English. In order to do justice as far as possible to each of the twenty-four voices of my interviewees, I read through the transcripts several times before attempting any coding of the data. However, I still had to decide on a specific procedure for

analysing the data and both Content Analysis and Grounded Theory seemed to offer the possibility of analysing data on their own terms, that is, without using a set of pre-determined criteria. In the following section I explain why I decided to use an analytical method based on Grounded Theory.

### **3.4.2 Content Analysis versus Grounded Theory**

Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2007) discussion of qualitative data analysis provides a comparison between Content Analysis and Grounded Theory, which helped me to decide which to apply to my data. They define Content Analysis as follows:

“Put simply, content analysis involves coding, categorizing (creating meaningful categories into which the units of analysis – words, phrases, sentences etc. – can be placed), comparing (categories and making links between them), and concluding – drawing theoretical conclusions from the text.” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007:476)

Since this form of analysis is systematic and verifiable (through reanalysis and replication), this description of its features seemed to make it suitable for the purposes I had in mind. However, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) also argue that Content Analysis has strong positivist overtones, since it is often used to detect the relative frequency and importance of certain topics, and uses statistical techniques to do this. For example, their Step 9 (“conducting the data analysis”) describes how “once the data have been coded and categorized the researcher can count the frequency of each code or word in the text, and the number of words in each category” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007: 481). This approach implies that frequency is an indicator of importance, and as these authors point out, this may not actually be the intended meaning of the interviewees: “Frequency does not equal importance and not saying something (withholding comment) may be as important as saying something” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007: 481).

I strongly agree with this contention, and regard the assumption that the frequency of interviewees' comments on a theme should be considered as an indicator of importance as highly problematic. For example, I was aware during my interviews that certain students refrained from making comments which

could be taken as direct criticism of their tutors or other students. Whatever the motivation behind their choices of what to include and exclude from their comments, treating the interview transcripts as complete and quantifiable sets of evidence would clearly be contrary to the theoretical perspective of this thesis, and lead to an ineffective means of analysis since certain aspects of my participants' experience would need to be inferred by "reading between the lines" – a process which seems contrary to the positivist thinking underlying Content Analysis.

In sum, whilst Content Analysis offered valuable advantages of being systematic and verifiable, Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2007) view that it is used to draw conclusions from qualitative data by counting, patterning and clustering convinced me that it would be inappropriate for my aim of exploring students' accounts of their experiences. Furthermore, Content Analysis seemed to require applying a pre-determined set of codes and categories to the data in order to test pre-existing theory, whereas I was more interested in exploring the data with a view to building new conceptual categories. Since my approach in this project was exploratory, I needed a more open-ended and flexible analytical method which would allow my investigation to move into a number of different directions. I therefore decided to use an analytical approach influenced by Grounded Theory.

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), in seeking to build theory which is grounded in the data, Grounded Theory, like Content Analysis, relies on systematic data collection and analysis. However, unlike Content Analysis, which tends to reduce the complexity of the data by applying codes and categories, Grounded Theory seems to pay more attention to the complexity of context: "It takes account of apparent inconsistencies, contradictions, discontinuities and relatedness in actions" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007: 491). Flick (1998: 41), cited by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007: 491), sees the aim of Grounded Theory as: "not to reduce complexity by breaking it down into variables, but rather to increase complexity by including context". In practice, this aim of increasing complexity is achieved by first coding comments and then proceeding to identify categories which these comments appear to suggest. Categories are then either supported or undermined in an iterative

process of “constant comparison” with the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which allows the researcher to check and elaborate on their specific characteristics.

An analytical procedure which respected the complexity of context seemed entirely appropriate for this thesis since I was consciously attempting to work counter to the typologies evident in some of the earlier work on Chinese learners. However, the main advantage of Grounded Theory for my data analysis was its avoidance of pre-determined theory: “Grounded theory starts with data, which are then analysed and reviewed to enable the theory to be generated from them; it is rooted in the data and little else” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007: 492). Although, as I have made clear in the introduction, my choice of research topic is rooted in my professional experience and reading, this experience did not result in any choice of pre-determined theory before I embarked on my research. As the literature review demonstrates, I certainly developed an attitude of suspicion toward particular research approaches (positivist, statistical, “large culture” approaches), but this suspicion prompted me to adopt an exploratory approach through which I hoped to obtain a rather more complex understanding of students’ experience of a particular set of pedagogical styles, rather than to test specific theories. It therefore seemed clear to me that Grounded Theory was an appropriate approach on which to base my analytical method.

### **3.4.3 Computer assisted data analysis**

An important decision I had to make regarding analysis was whether or not to invest time and effort in learning how to use a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) and I came across a number of authors with helpful views on this including Bryant and Charmaz (2007a); Cohen, Manion and Morrison, (2007), Gibbs (2002) and Webb (1999). Webb states that when CAQDAS such as NUD.IST and The Ethnograph were first developed, much of their original appeal lay in their potential to add objectivity and reliability to the analytical process (Webb, 1999: 324). However, Webb points out that these advantages were not always seen as compatible with qualitative frameworks so this kind of justification became less commonly used later on. For this reason, rather than justifying the use of CAQDAS on the basis of systematic rigour,

Webb recommends that researchers base their decision on the size and complexity of the data sets they are working with. Where data sets are modest, Webb concludes that the researcher is better off using manual coding as the software can take over and leave the researcher alienated from the data, and the data itself fragmented. Nevertheless, the ability of software to facilitate the handling of large and complex data sets seems to give it significant advantages over manual methods.

Although my own data set was of a relatively modest size (about 75,000 words), the complexity of the task of cutting and pasting sections of eighteen interviews with twenty-four participants justified the effort required to learn to use the software. The design of NVivo (version 9) also made it fairly accessible, and greatly eased the processes of storage and retrieval of transcripts and memos. The memos recorded how certain categories (nodes in NVivo) emerged from my analysis of the pre-pilot and pilot interviews, and were later dropped or merged with other categories, finally producing the four core categories of language, relationships, skills and group work processes, which informed the main findings of my research. The software also enabled me to easily retrieve data at any point during the analysis in order to carry out a process of constant comparison by checking that my conclusions were supported by my participants' accounts.

The following table (Table 7) depicts the top-level categories I used and their origins. The nodes in bold are the core categories (Glaser's term, see Holton, 2007: 279) which emerged from this process and which I use as organising categories for the presentation of my findings in the next chapter of my thesis. The concept of a core category is explained further in the following section of this chapter. It can be seen in Table 7 that whilst most of the categories emerged in the early interviews, not all were pursued as major themes during the main interviews. After coding the transcripts in sections using these broad categories, the comments were then iteratively recoded using subcategories which either emerged from my interpretation, or which were the result of reading which I undertook during the analysis in order to explore the comments using concepts which are well known in the appropriate literature.



**Table 7: Origins of thematic categories for coding**

Top-level nodes (thematic categories)	Origin of theme
Cultural differences (living in the UK)	Mentioned by interviewees in first pre-pilot with comments going beyond classroom experiences.
Interviewing issues	Responses sought by author in pre-pilot group interviews in order to develop an appropriate approach for main interviews.
<b>Language difficulties</b>	Mentioned by interviewees in first pre-pilot and throughout all of the interviews.
Living in the UK	Mentioned extensively by students in first pre-pilot with some overlap between this and the node "Cultural differences".
Motivation	Based on literature on Chinese learners (see literature review)
<b>Pedagogic differences (AL)</b>	Based on literature on Active Learning and practice at author's HEI, and also on the literature on Chinese learners. Within the theme of pedagogy, most students commented extensively on their perceptions of group work.
Work or business experience	Mentioned by students in second pre-pilot, but not pursued in main interviews.
Quotable comments	Occurred to researcher during the first interviews
Recommendations	Mentioned by students in first pre-pilot and incorporated into all interviews.
<b>Relationships</b>	One of Van Manen's (1990) essential themes, taken up by students in first pre-pilot and developed as a specific interview theme throughout the pilot and main interviews.
<b>Skills</b>	Mentioned by students in first pre-pilot and developed during the main interviews to focus on academic (especially metacognitive) skills with more generic life skills being re-coded under the node "Living in the UK".

An example of iterative recoding using subcategories based on analysis of comments and further reading can be seen in the screenshot (Figure 4 below) of the nodes I developed on NVivo under the categories of relationships and skills. Taking the example of skills in Figure 4, it can be seen that this category groups together a large number of comments, but more importantly for my interpretation, most of the comments either explicitly referred to or allowed me to infer a range of types of metacognitive theories held by the participants. As I began to develop this thematic framework, the software allowed me to go back to the interview sections and to check that my interpretation was supported by the accounts of my participants. For further clarification of how NVivo was used to assist the coding process, Appendix 4 presents a complete transcript, followed by a selection of coded transcript and an example of nodal analysis: a cropped screenshot of the summary and sections from interviews and memos coded under the subcategory: "Difficulty understanding English (other students)".

Name	Sources	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Quotable comments	27	49	21/05/2012 21:07	CGS	22/10/2012 12:31	CGS
Recommendations	27	66	27/05/2012 14:34	CGS	22/10/2012 13:19	CGS
Relationships	1	1	20/05/2012 22:02	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Relationships with other students	32	112	21/05/2012 21:32	CGS	22/10/2012 10:35	CGS
Hostility from other students	14	29	20/05/2012 22:10	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Relationships with parents	20	64	20/05/2012 21:59	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Relationships with teachers	35	134	20/05/2012 21:59	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Evaluative comments	6	11	15/10/2012 15:53	CGS	19/10/2012 12:26	CGS
Poor experiences	12	29	15/10/2012 15:54	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Teacher interventions	8	11	15/10/2012 15:44	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Teachers as facilitators	14	28	15/10/2012 15:46	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Teachers as friends	9	13	15/10/2012 15:44	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Teachers as parents	8	24	15/10/2012 16:01	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Teachers as transmitters of knowledge	11	25	15/10/2012 15:45	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Understanding teachers	5	9	15/10/2012 15:49	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Skills	0	0	29/08/2012 10:29	CGS	01/10/2012 11:27	CGS
Conceptualisations and metaphors	18	43	23/05/2012 19:57	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Life Skills	14	33	24/05/2012 09:51	CGS	19/10/2012 14:28	CGS
Meta-cognitive skills	43	98	26/05/2012 15:40	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Formal theories	5	9	04/09/2012 08:32	CGS	16/09/2012 21:14	CGS
Cultural Learning	2	3	12/09/2012 10:32	CGS	01/10/2012 10:12	CGS
Individual Construction	2	2	12/09/2012 10:32	CGS	16/09/2012 20:49	CGS
Peer Interaction	4	5	12/09/2012 10:32	CGS	16/09/2012 21:14	CGS
Informal theories	16	34	04/09/2012 08:30	CGS	02/10/2012 09:27	CGS
Cultural Learning	4	5	12/09/2012 10:30	CGS	23/09/2012 12:19	CGS
Individual Construction	15	19	12/09/2012 10:31	CGS	02/10/2012 09:27	CGS
Peer Interaction	8	21	12/09/2012 10:31	CGS	23/09/2012 12:19	CGS
Tacit theories	21	51	04/09/2012 08:28	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Cultural Learning	4	5	12/09/2012 10:32	CGS	13/09/2012 11:15	CGS
Individual Construction	12	19	12/09/2012 10:32	CGS	13/09/2012 11:15	CGS
Peer Interaction	14	27	12/09/2012 10:32	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS

Figure 4: Screenshot of the node frameworks “Relationships” and “Skills”

Webb (1999) refers to the danger that researchers can become ensnared by the ease with which CAQDAS allows vast numbers of codes to be generated, particularly where they work on the codes in isolation from the text. In order to avoid this, before attempting any coding, I listened to the interviews several times and produced a summary of each interview, which I then invited participants to approve or correct (see appendix 2 for examples of summaries and correspondence). In this way I attempted to ensure that I would not become “alienated” (Webb, 1999: 325) from the data, but would remain aware of the context within which each comment had been made.

### 3.4.4 Categorisation and theory building

This explanation of how I used CAQDAS to facilitate my analysis might give the impression that the thematic categories I mention were arrived at after an unreflective process of examining data for indicators of thematic connections and coding them without due regard to the problematic aspects of categorisation. It might also be read as an attempt to convince the reader that

all of the thematic categories emerged exclusively from the data. However, it is important to note that I used a number of extraneous concepts later on to develop these initial categories into a thematic framework. The final section of this chapter attempts to do justice to this process of “give-and-take” between data and theory by reflecting on the nature of categories and the implications of using categorisation as an interpretive technique.

There is some debate over the use of categories in social science research and at least some of the disagreement seems to be focussed on what researchers deem categories to be. The main question is whether categories can be clearly defined and viewed as isolated variables, or whether categorisation is seen as problematic and complex. In keeping with my social constructivist perspective, I would like to reflect on the process of categorisation since my own experience of creating and using categories in this research project was not straightforward.

“In the classical model, categories are indeed categorical and express a clear and complete conceptualization of phenomena in terms of common features. A well-defined category will have attributes that are jointly sufficient and singly necessary to identify the category. Only members of the category will possess all these attributes, and the members of the category will possess each one of them”. (Dey, 2007: 169)

The neatness of this definition of categorisation accords with Glaser’s (1978) concept-indicator model, which describes how “indicators are used not to substantiate a category empirically through description but rather to elaborate the category through exploring its different dimensions” (Glaser, 1978: 43, cited in Dey, 2007: 168). Although Glaser discourages the use of data as description, that is, to “substantiate” categories, nevertheless, he does infer that the data can be used as empirical indicators of categories. There is an inference here that the construction of categories is unproblematic since the data will naturally fall into separate categories.

However, the clarity of this conceptualisation of categories seems to be in contradiction to the practice of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which involves a continuous review of categories according to their correspondence with the data. The process of categorisation is therefore on-going and open-ended since constant comparison will require the parameters of

categories to be continually revised. Furthermore, research in psychology and linguistics has found that categorisation is a far more problematic process than the “classical” model suggests.

Dey (2007) lists a number of theory-based accounts of categorisation which have emerged since the work of Rosch (1978) on prototypes and McNeil and Freiburger (1994) on fuzzy logic. According to these accounts, “categories and categorization depend on our conceptual understandings of the world, rather than on similarity between characteristics” (Dey, 2007: 170). It is this acknowledgement of the role of theory and experience which provides justification for the use of “sensitizing categories” or “sensitizing theories” in Grounded Theory, since it shows that, far from emerging directly from the data, categories are extracted by informed researchers according to their previous experience of sociological models. This is not to deny the use of similarity of features as an important element in categorisation, but it does recognise the importance of theory in the process.

“The recognition that categories are theoretically informed (or motivated) creates a conceptual space for the sensitizing role of categories that is recognized in grounded theory but that is otherwise hard to find in the classic concept–indicator model” (Dey, 2007:170).

Dey also points out that categorisation is used not just for descriptive purposes, but to explain or make inferences. Since the purpose of categorisation in Grounded Theory is primarily the identification of conceptual elements which can be used to construct theory, its inferential purpose must be acknowledged from the start. For example, during the process of analysis, I was conscious that some of my initial categories emerged from the data, but as I re-coded the data using more and more sub-categories, themes came through which prompted me to read further and find out how they were dealt with in academic literature. An example of this was the category “metacognitive skills” (see Section 4.2.3 of the Findings chapter). This theme emerged early on in the interviews as students talked about the skills they gained on Active Learning modules. Reading around the topic of metacognitive knowledge, I came across the work of Schraw and Moshman (1995), who propose three different kinds of metacognitive knowledge: tacit, informal and formal, which I used as convenient

sub-categories to code a number of comments by my interviewees. I then used a further classification proposed by these authors to characterise the source of each type of metacognitive knowledge. Using this typology to classify various kinds of metacognitive knowledge allowed me to look for similarities across interviewees and to reflect on how this level of analysis constituted a challenge to some of the large cultural explanations of learner experience which I had seen in my literature review.

I conclude this reflection on the use of categories in data analysis with a brief discussion of the criteria according to which certain categories can be judged to be more salient than others during the analytical process, either in terms of their ability to link large numbers of variables, or in their usefulness as explanatory constructs. Holton (2007) considers the identification of these “core categories” as essential to the process of theory building since this enables the researcher to limit subsequent data collection and coding to themes which are relevant to the emerging conceptual framework. For this reason, it is important to reflect on the criteria by which core categories can be recognised. Holton’s (2007) criteria are very practical for this purpose:

“The criteria for establishing the core variable (category) within a grounded theory are that it is central, that it relates to as many other categories and their properties as possible, and that it accounts for a large proportion in the variation of a pattern of behaviour. The core variable reoccurs frequently in the data and comes to be seen as a stable pattern that is increasingly related to other variables.” (Holton: 2007: 281)

In addition to providing helpful criteria, this quotation eloquently expresses the way core categories are not just “out there” waiting to be discovered by the researcher, but emerge gradually and influence the data collection process itself. In my analysis of the pre-pilot interviews, I identified a number of categories (see Table 4) which seemed to correspond to the wide range of experiences related by my participants. However, not all of these (e.g. living in the UK; motivation; work for the family business; racial abuse from local residents) either accounted for the wide variation of experiences given or related easily to other categories. On the other hand, I identified four core categories (language, relationships, skills and pedagogic differences) which were related to most of the aspects of experience discussed by my participants

in the pre-pilot group interviews, and which also seemed to hold the potential for theorisation along lines which avoided the reductionism and determinism of some of the work I refer to in my literature review. Focussing on these core categories in the main interviews enabled me to collect further data which could be used to give further support or modify my emerging conceptual framework.

In my data analysis, categorisation therefore included both comparison, a broadly objectivist process in line with Glaser's concept-indicator model, and concept-building, a thoroughly interpretivist process of building theory grounded in the data, but incorporating external elements such as sociological theories, common sense, personal experience etc. There is a sense therefore in which my thematic framework, which recognises the importance of language, relationships, skills and group work processes in students' experience of Active Learning pedagogies, is grounded in the data. However, it is also important to acknowledge the role of external elements in this emergence, including my own knowledge of social theories and my personal experience of the give-and-take between data and theorisation during the act of analysis.

## Chapter 4 - Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

I use the term “findings” in keeping with the conventions of social science research, but am conscious of the contradiction between its positivist overtones and the social constructionist spirit of this thesis. In this section I attempt to explain how, through the processes of data gathering and analysis, I both found and shaped the “findings” from my interviews. The experiential themes I present in this chapter emerged as major concerns in the earlier interviews and were pursued with specific questions during the main interviews. After coding the interview transcripts and sorting students’ comments and my own reflections on these as recorded in memos, I identified three particularly significant categories of comments related to the themes of language, relationships and skills, which all related to students’ previous and current experiences on their management courses at the time of the interviews. A fourth theme, Active Learning pedagogies, synthesised a number of significant issues, so I decided to keep this as a separate category for the purposes of my analysis and presentation of findings. The findings related to these four themes are summarised in turn, and their implications for pedagogical practice and theory are then elaborated in a broader discussion in the final section of this chapter.

### 4.2 Themes

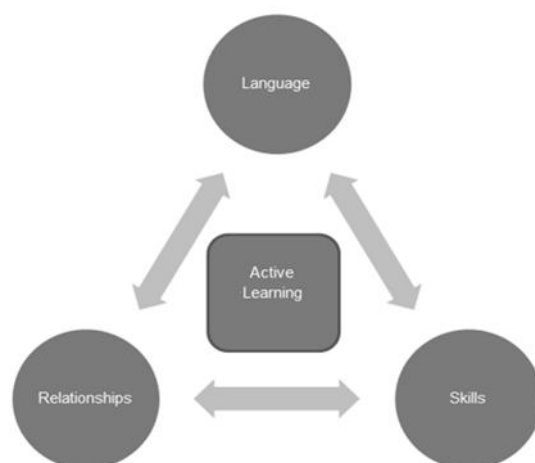


Figure 5: Dimensions of students’ experience of Active Learning

Figure 5 represents the thematic framework of this chapter and depicts the three contextual or situational elements of Language, Relationships and Skills as significant dimensions of these students' experiences of Active Learning pedagogies. Furthermore, the comments provided by my interviewees indicate that these three elements are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. I explain this notion in the discussion at the end of this chapter and link it to an action-centred interpretation of education in the conclusion of this thesis. The Active Learning element in Figure 5 stands for students' experiences of these pedagogies and occupies a central position in this thematic framework since these experiences were defined by my interviewees mainly in terms of the other three.

In the process of analysis I coded comments relating to these themes and examined them separately in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the nature of these thematic dimensions. Although this technique runs a risk of decontextualizing comments (Gibbs, 2002: 66), I took care, as outlined in the previous chapter, to re-read transcripts several times before coding in order to achieve an understanding of the context of each comment. Since this technique of separating the comments out into distinct thematic categories enabled me to achieve a deeper understanding of each of these dimensions of students' experience, I use these four elements as overarching thematic headings to present the findings from my interviews in the following sections.

#### **4.2.1 Language Issues**

Comments on language difficulties were frequent and many students felt that language was the greatest single obstacle for international students studying in the UK. Language or English was mentioned in all except two of the interviews as problematic and phrases associated with language included:

“lack of language; language barrier; the main difficulty; different body language; [Chinese students] suffer from bad English language; the main topic; the biggest problem; the most important thing; really important; everywhere English is a problem; language disadvantages; language issues; poor; not improved; really bad; not good enough; the real problem; not my mother tongue”. (Various interviews)



These and other comments indicate that language was seen by many students as a serious impediment to their progress on their management courses. However, on further examination of the comments coded under the overarching category of “Language Difficulties”, it became very clear that language issues are multi-faceted, with both inter-individual and intra-individual variations in specific skill competences. It was also clear that some of the problems mentioned could not be interpreted exclusively as related to language skills, since this interpretation does not show the dynamic nature of language in use, which is an important element in my participants’ descriptions of their experiences. I return to this aspect of language in use in the discussion section of this chapter since it relates to the interaction between the three dimensions of language, relationships and skills.

For convenience of analysis, I categorised my interviewees’ comments according to the generic language skills of understanding (aural and reading comprehension), speaking and writing. However, many of the comments concerned the causes and consequences of language problems e.g. paucity of speaking opportunities (mentioned by eleven interviewees), shyness and fear of making errors (mentioned by five interviewees), or aspects of the process of communication, such as the inability to understand home students in group tasks (mentioned by eight interviewees). All of these factors seem to constitute a vicious cycle of non-participation, in which poor language skills lead to difficult situations, and consequently to fewer opportunities to work effectively with home students and thus improve language skills. Since I was not seeking to establish any correlation between linguistic ability and academic success, I focussed on the ways in which the students described their experiences related to linguistic difficulties. This led me to the conclusion that Active Learning pedagogies often face students with complex and indeterminate tasks for which their study of English has not prepared them, a view which will form the basis of one of my main recommendations.

As there were relatively few comments indicating that the skill of reading posed any significant problems, I grouped all comments involving understanding (aural and reading comprehension) together. However, since the skill of speaking was crucial to students’ ability to engage with other group members for the purposes

of planning tasks, negotiating roles and evaluating contributions, it seemed important to keep the comments on this skill separate from those on writing.

Many students reported a lack of opportunities to practise their English by conversing with local people or home students and felt that as a result some Chinese students made very little improvement in their ability to understand spoken English. The large proportion of Chinese students on certain modules was partly blamed for this as there are not enough non-Chinese students to go round:

“Except for the lectures, where you study with a lot of foreign students, in the seminars there are too many Chinese students. So I feel there are few opportunities to speak English.” (CS21)

Some students commented on how the lack of practice in listening to speech meant that this was their weakest skill. Consequently, some students found lectures and oral activities with non-Chinese students particularly challenging, and as a consequence of this problem made extensive use of their social networks to meet after class and discuss lectures and assignments in Chinese:

“All Chinese students, they would like to ... not in the uni, they would like [like] to go back home and discuss it [the work] in Chinese.” (CS10)

“When we help each other we use the Chinese language. So English language becomes not really important because we use Chinese language to communicate, learn from each other and look for help.” (CS8)

These comments imply that the social networks of Chinese students reduced the impact of difficulties in understanding by providing these students with an informal mode of access to many aspects of their course, which they would otherwise find difficult to deal with. It is possible that without this mode of access, difficulty in understanding English, particularly spoken English, would have presented some Chinese students with a much more serious problem. There is a view in some of the earlier literature (e.g. Tang, 1996) that “spontaneous collaborative learning” is a feature specific to Chinese approaches to learning, and these comments seem to support this view. However, although a number of other interviewees alluded to their social network, they seemed to have entirely pragmatic reasons for meeting up with

fellow students, such as gaining a better understanding of their study tasks or checking over their written work. It is therefore impossible to be sure, based on this limited evidence whether this “spontaneous collaborative learning” is culturally determined or based on pragmatism.

Students offered various reasons for the difficulty in understanding lectures, which included: accent variation; use of local speech forms and fast delivery; lack of captions on videos shown in lectures; unexplained acronyms; and illegible handwriting on white boards. Having access via the University’s Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to lecture slides before, during and after the lecture was seen as helpful, and this led some students to express a preference for traditional pedagogies, with more lectures and less group work. Other students mentioned having difficulty understanding the questions asked by tutors and home students in seminars, sometimes resorting to online dictionaries or asking friends to translate terms which they did not understand. Planting questions for other Chinese students to ask them after presentations was a strategy mentioned by one student for preparing for the interactive discussion following presentations:

“In order to be well prepared for interaction, we often invite our Chinese classmates to discuss questions that we have prepared for ourselves.”  
(CS24)

This shows that students often used social networks both as a coping strategy to overcome the difficulty they have in understanding lectures and their associated course materials, and also to prepare for performance in more unstructured situations.

Difficulty in understanding other students, both home students and other non-Chinese students was frequently mentioned as an impediment to collaboration which led to problems in group work, as vividly illustrated by the following comment:

"It was four English students and I was the only Chinese student. As I told you, there were language issues. They kind of refused to talk to me because when they were talking to each other they really talked fluently and really fast so I could not keep up with them. So when they were discussing things, I’m like: no, I can’t understand what you guys are

talking about. So I couldn't add my opinion to the group and they ignored me for that. I tried to talk to them, and they just said: pardon, say that again, which really made me feel offended. That was kind of negative."  
(CS13)

There were also cases where mixed-nationality groups had worked well, and in the best cases, contrary to the image of "reluctant hosts" reported in some research (Higgins and Li, 2009), the non-Chinese students were very encouraging and helped them with both the task comprehension and production aspects of their academic work.

However, for some students, the assumption that they would have problems understanding, and therefore working with non-Chinese students, made them feel afraid of joining mixed-nationality groups. This is an example of why it is important to consider language issues in relation to the other two experiential dimensions (relationships and skills) since for some students, language competence not only enables them to understand the information presented to them, but it forms part of a mutually reinforcing nexus of elements which can lead to either positive or negative learning experiences.

Another point made by five students related their language difficulty to time spent in the UK and explained how this affected their preferences for group work. In these cases, they preferred to work with other Chinese students at the beginning of their sojourn in order to get the work done, whereas later on, they preferred to work with non-Chinese students in order to practise and improve their English. This rationale for shifting preferences demonstrates that, at least for some students, their enthusiasm for working in mixed-nationality groups was linked to the stage of their sojourn:

"CS12: But in my opinion, I think that originally we just find the same ... just Chinese students to cope with the work because we have the same language. But now for example, I'm studying on the Management Environment module doing group work with two foreigners [non-Chinese students] because during the work I can improve my English.

I: Yeah, but at the beginning ... last year, you would have found that very difficult.

CS12: Yes, I preferred to work with Chinese students."

In this case the preference for working with other Chinese or with non-Chinese students varied according to the student's perceptions of his own linguistic level, and this was partly dependent on how long he had been on his course.

Eleven students commented on having very few opportunities to practise their language with local people or home students, in the worst cases concluding that "it is almost the same studying here as studying in China" (CS24). Others were able to give examples of extensive interactions with native English speakers including teachers, friends, neighbours and landlords, and they thought that this had helped them to improve their English. In this way, some students felt that speaking competence in English was related to the frequency of opportunities to practise their language with native speakers. This remained a problem in some classes where Chinese students were a majority or a significant proportion of the total, and where certain home students felt reluctant to work with them. However, there is also evidence here that some students avoided joining mixed-nationality groups, and they offered a number of justifications for this behaviour. I will return to this problem in the section on relationships.

Although sixteen students commented on their experiences concerning writing tasks, these comments were mainly concerned with specific writing skills such as vocabulary selection, grammatical accuracy and essay-writing skills. Since these individual skills have little bearing on the broader aspects of relationships and metacognitive skills, these comments are not summarised here, although they are included elsewhere where these links are evident. E.g. CS 11's and CS 12's comments on plagiarism (p.108) and the comment about how a teacher had misinterpreted the student's need for help with their written assignment (p.102). An example of strong links between writing skills and the broader themes of relationships and metacognitive skills is where some Chinese students were able to get help with their writing from home students with whom they were working on group assignments or with whom they had made friends, and these cases seem to support the notion that good relationships with other group members were important in enabling these students to improve their language.

Nine students expressed positive views of group work and some of these admitted that their group work marks were much higher than their other marks. For those students who are more interested in the outcome than in the learning process, this might be an important incentive for working in mixed-nationality groups. However, it is not clear whether these students would make more effort in group work if they felt they would be getting a higher mark since the expectation of higher marks might actually make less motivated students sit back and rely on the more active students to do the work. Indeed the pressure to gain higher marks might actually produce a group dynamic in which one student takes over the assignment, knowing, or at least believing, that they can produce a better outcome for all, and thus curtailing the contributions of the rest of the group. I return to this problem in my discussion of group work processes.

In summary, most of the students talked about language as a difficulty or challenge, and grouping comments into categories according to language skills allowed me to examine them together and develop a deeper understanding of both the nature of their language difficulties and the significance they attributed to them. However, it is clear that many of the problems attributed to language difficulties contributed to other problems such as completing assignment tasks or relating to other (non-Chinese) students, and for this reason it might be misleading to isolate language issues as a separate category of phenomena since this might give the impression that a solution to these problems would be more language teaching.

It is my conclusion that an important reason for some of the problems experienced by these students was the kind of language preparation they received, both at their sending institutions and at the University. The language teaching generally received by international students on these courses deals with language as if it consisted of isolated skills which can each be worked on separately in structured language drills or exercises. This approach is based on the assumption that the learning experiences these students are likely to encounter will occur in a more structured pedagogical environment than is often the case. Indeed, one of the most common problems experienced by these students seems to involve their difficulties working in mixed-nationality groups on relatively unstructured tasks, as is frequently the case on courses in which

Active Learning pedagogies are used. There is some evidence to support this contention in the frequent comments by students which describe group work as being one of the major differences between Chinese and English educational environments. This might indicate that one element of language support which is missing for these students is preparation for loosely-structured academic contexts, and particularly for collaborative tasks. I elaborate on this issue in the discussion section of this chapter.

#### **4.2.2 Relationships**

Van Manen (1990) advocates “relationships” as a key topic for structuring interviews in phenomenological research. I asked students about their relationships with other students, their parents and their teachers, using these categories as nodes to code my interviewees’ comments (see Table 75). However, this led to considerable overlap, particularly between the categories of relationships with other students and group work since students’ experiences of group work were clearly influenced by their relationships with other students. These comments could therefore be coded in either category or in both.

On further reflection, it was clear that the thematic overlap was only a problem because of the way I was using software to code my data, but there was actually no ambiguity in what the students were saying. I therefore decided to re-code comments relating to students’ working relationships in the classroom under the category of “group work”. These findings are summarised in the section below on group work as a component of Active Learning pedagogies (section 4.2.4). In this section, I report findings regarding social relations with other students, which have an indirect impact on students’ experience in the classroom, but are not necessarily related to their experience of any particular pedagogy.

My interest in students’ relationships with their parents emerged in the first pre-pilot group interview where interviewees spontaneously discussed parents as sources of inspiration, motivation, and sometimes, pressure. The effect of parental pressure on students’ general motivation was also investigated by Vansteenkiste *et al.* (2005), and I thought that this theme might offer useful

insights into students' attitudes to study. However, I found it difficult to relate students' relationships with their parents to their experiences of Active Learning pedagogies. Since this particular category of relationship has no clear significance for my research questions, I do not report students' comments here.

On the other hand, I found students' comments on relationships with teachers very revealing as they highlighted links between students' expectations and their current experiences. The diversity of comments on this theme made it difficult to generalise and there seemed to be a number of factors which moderated these relationships. However, the frequency and intensity of comments on this issue led me to conclude that relationships with teachers are a significant factor in students' experiences of particular pedagogies. The following sections therefore summarise my interviewees' comments on relationships with other students and with their teachers.

Learning to communicate in English was mentioned by seven students as one of the prime motivations for coming to the UK and the group work on certain modules was seen as providing opportunities to do this. However, some Chinese students did not seem to take advantage of these opportunities, preferring instead to work with other Chinese students. Even where Chinese and non-Chinese students worked together, this did not often result in their mixing outside the classroom:

"Our communication is limited to greeting each other in class or sending a simple email to each other after class." (CS24)

The reasons given for this were numerous and varied, particularly lack of confidence and language difficulty. Existing friendship groups amongst home students was another issue commented on as creating difficulties since it made it harder for Chinese students who were joining the course at an advanced stage to break into firm friendship circles. For example, one Chinese student, who had been studying at the University for some time and had formed friendships with home students in earlier years, found these relationships dislocated as many of her earlier classmates had gone onto their placement year, an opportunity not open to the Chinese students. Consequently, she did



not know anyone in her classes despite having been at the University for two years already. As a result, she found that her group mates were not as easy to work with as those of previous years.

On the other hand, where students had developed good relationships with home students, the latter were very helpful to them, often spending time working with them and advising them on how to improve their written work and pronunciation. Several students mentioned positive experiences such as going out with non-Chinese housemates and classmates, having birthday parties at home or going out to parties. Meeting non-Chinese students in town to work together was also seen as contrasting with the way Chinese students seem to gather and work together in each other's houses.

Friendships were mentioned as an important by-product of studying together, and these included home students, who were valued for their local knowledge, and long-lasting friendships with other Chinese students. However, there were sometimes tensions between both sets of friendships. For example, one interviewee explained that not having enough friendships outside the Chinese community was problematic as there was a tendency for students to gossip about the negative experiences that some of them had had in their dealings with non-Chinese students, and this gossip became the main source of information for their opinions rather than direct personal experience. This indicates that there are strong social and/or cultural barriers between the Chinese and non-Chinese students. One student gave a useful account of some of these cultural barriers:

"Well, to be honest, I've learned a lot ... really a lot. 'Cos when you come here it's a totally new world to you. You need to learn how to make friends with English people, which is a big thing for a lot of Chinese students. Because you need to show respect for others' cultures. It's like ... I don't know ... people here, like students ... you know, they party a lot and maybe sometimes they drink alcohol, which ... Chinese students don't do that. We just prefer to watch TV after class for entertainment. But when you're really trying to make friends and you try to ... in a group of English students you need to lower your barrier and do some things to really get into the culture." (CS13)

These comments demonstrate that for some, but not all Chinese students, cultural differences are perceived as social barriers.

It is difficult to generalise about the impact of such friendships on students' perceptions of Active Learning pedagogies. Where students did make friends they seemed able to tap into their local knowledge for help with some of their projects. On the other hand, established friendship groups were sometimes difficult to break into and this seemed to be less a question of the students' nationality or culture than the fact that they joined the university at an advanced stage of their programme.

Nineteen students made comments concerning the relationships between students and teachers and these were clearly linked to students' experience in the classroom. I found it convenient to group these comments according to whether they related to teacher roles or to various contextual factors, e.g. the quality of their interactions, which seemed to influence the students' perceptions of these roles. I used the four roles of friend, facilitator, transmitter and parent as thematic categories since these were either explicitly used (friends and parents) or strongly implied (facilitators and transmitters) by the interviewees themselves. These last two are also frequently used in the literature on Active Learning to contrast Active Learning and traditional (teacher-centred) pedagogies (Tiberius, 1986; Meyers and Jones, 1993; Stinson and Milter, 1996).

A number of students made a strong distinction between the roles or styles of teachers in the UK and China. However, other students thought that teacher roles were not that different, or that they were linked more to the personality of the teacher than to the culture of these countries. This variety of perceptions of the underlying reasons for teacher roles lends support for research approaches which challenge the use of national culture as an appropriate determinant in qualitative investigations of educational experience. A number of researchers, including Leung and Crisp (2011); Cortazzi, Jin and Zhiru (2009); and Jin and Cortazzi (2011b), do this by using cognitive linguistics, particularly metaphors and metonymy, to identify individual conceptualisations of learning and teacher roles. Using teacher roles to categorise my interviewees' comments is therefore a technique which sits comfortably within this tradition.

In talking about teachers as friends, some students felt that the friendliness of teachers in the UK was in marked contrast to the more formal behaviours of teachers in China. Examples included chatting with students after classes or

outside the classroom setting, and not forcing students to do anything. Other comments expressed what might be seen as a typical facilitator role of the teachers on Active Learning modules:

“The teacher talks with us at different stages of the work. For example, the teacher makes suggestions about which aspects we should research, such as patterns of consumption, while reminding us of the requirements of essay writing. He provides us with additional models besides those printed in the textbook. So we have a clear direction and purpose when doing research.” (CS24)

These comments seemed to link the facilitating role of the teacher with the nature of the activities on these modules, but there were also comments which implied that this teacher role could lead to poor learning experiences for some students if they were used to learning in a much more supportive environment:

“I think Chinese students are used to that way ... that kind of conduction by the tutors [guidance from the tutors]. When we were in China, if we met problems, they would tell us: “Oh, you did it wrong because this shouldn’t be like that.” Here they like ... you don’t actually ask for much help from the tutors unless you are really in trouble.” (CS5)

One interviewee actually saw no point in attending classes if students perceived the content of the lectures and seminars to be unrelated to the assignments. In these cases, the teachers did not seem to add any value for the students:

“I think, for the courses with the testing of writing and presentations, we enter the classroom, and the class ... I mean the class formation [content?] is just people ... the teaching ... the teachers are talking about their topics and they let us discuss them. But when we go to the testing for our essays, it is different from the course ... from the classes we take. I mean, in the classes the teachers just let us view the videos or they talk about the cases. But for writing we have to choose the cases for ourselves and investigate them. So it’s different from the class because I know many people, they didn’t come to class anymore, but they still passed.” (CS9)

This comment was made in response to my attempt to elicit examples of where tutors were unhelpful and it suggests that there was a significant divergence between what some students expected from the seminars and lectures and

what their tutors actually delivered on these modules. For some students then, teachers as facilitators were seen as serving little purpose.

For nine students, Chinese teachers tend to see their role as confined mainly to the transmission of knowledge, which tends to result in more formal interactions: "very strict and not like a friend" (CS20). An explanation offered by one student was the need for Chinese teachers to deal with larger numbers of students than would be the case in the UK, leaving them little time to deal with personal issues. However, not all students saw this in a negative way. One student commented that: "In China the tutor is important. He will tell you how to do things and what to do" (CS11), suggesting that the role of "transmitter" was seen as appropriate to the Chinese context.

One explanation for this might be that in China classrooms are commonly perceived as relatively structured environments compared with the UK. There is some support for this view in the literature on Chinese learners (Cortazzi and Jin, 2001; Ho, I., 2001; Watkins and Biggs, 2001). On the other hand, generalising from limited evidence can lead to incorrect conclusions. For example, there is evidence that teaching styles have been undergoing significant change in recent years in response to educational reforms (Law *et al.* 2009; Marton *et al.* 2009) and changing value orientations in contemporary China (Yang, 2009). If true, this would imply that labelling certain styles as typically Chinese could be very misleading.

Six interviewees referred to the relationship between teachers and students in China as like that between parents and children, and one student put this down to the respect for Confucian traditions: "A teacher will be your father if he teaches you for one day" (CS8). At first sight this appeared to confirm a one-sided or authoritarian relationship which might explain certain behaviours such as students being silent in class in order to show their respect, and expecting their teachers to push them to learn. However, this interviewee went on to explain that the relationship was reciprocal since it carried responsibilities for both parties:

"Tutors and students are like parents and children. And they help each other... But if they [the students] need help and the teacher doesn't help them, they will complain. And they will not like them. So it's not really a bad experience, it's just the situation if the teacher doesn't help them or doesn't care about their feelings when they need help." (CS8)

Other students appeared to agree with this view that the parent/child relationship was typical in Chinese educational contexts:

"Yeah, because in China we learn the traditional ways of thinking: teachers are like your parents so you should respect them. So, in our mind, in the Chinese mind, we will respect the teacher and not talk too much." (CS17)

Whilst there is some support for this view in the literature on Chinese learners (Liu and Jackson, 2011), it was not shared by all of the interviewees. One student considered that the approach of teachers towards their students was not very different between the two countries: "If there is a difference, it's not about the nationality. It's just about the personality of individual teachers" (CS9).

Grouping these comments under the thematic categories of teacher roles enabled me to conclude that Chinese culture does not necessarily pre-dispose teachers and students to having a particular type of relationship. Whilst some students referred to certain teacher roles as traditionally Chinese or Confucian, others found that teacher roles varied depending on the type of class activity or the teacher's personality. However, whilst relationships with teachers seemed to play a significant role in students' perceptions of their experiences in the classroom, a number of contextual factors were also mentioned, which are presented in the final part of this section.

I categorised a number of my interviewees' comments on their relationships with teachers under the sub-category of "contextual factors" and these included understanding teachers, teacher interventions and quality of experiences. The reason for separating these comments off from the comments on teacher roles is that they referred to aspects of the classroom context which influenced students' perceptions of their teacher's role. For example, three students reported finding it hard to understand some of their teachers, but they refrained from asking for clarification since this might indicate a lack of respect. Five

students expressed a preference for a more interventionist role by the teacher, rather than allowing groups to operate autonomously. Finally, the quality of experiences certainly seems to influence the extent to which students are either approving or disapproving of the roles of their teachers.

Some students commented that compared with European students, Chinese students had substantial difficulty understanding their teachers in lectures and wished that teachers would spend more time talking to them after class. One student gave an interesting insight into how some Chinese students dealt with this problem:

"I would not ask for the explanation to be repeated a second time even if I haven't understood it. And I would not ask all the questions that I don't understand to teachers myself. Instead, we allocate the questions to several students and we take turns to ask the teachers. We convey the teacher's explanation to each other." (CS24)

Other students commented that in some cases it was the teachers themselves who had comprehension problems since they failed to appreciate the comprehension difficulties of their Chinese students, erroneously assuming that when students needed help with their assignments, the help they required was with the formal aspects, such as the format for essay writing, rather than with their comprehension of the question at a more basic level.

Another aspect of understanding commented on by one student concerned teacher feedback, which was sometimes difficult to interpret:

"I mean when we communicate with the teacher about the work in the process and when we show our initial work to the teacher, he usually reacts with 'good' or 'excellent' as long as no major mistake is made. We Chinese usually understand 'excellent' as 'the best', while an English teacher may use it often as a way to encourage students. He comments on the work which is worth a mark of 70 or 80 per cent as 'excellent', and gives the same comment on the work which is worth 50 or 60 per cent, which encourages students to go on with the work." (CS22)

This kind of problem required a deeper understanding of the norms of language in use within a UK academic environment, which this student clearly acquired over time, but which presented her with difficulties in the initial stages of her

sojourn. The basis of this problem was the student's misinterpretation of her teacher's linguistic intervention. However, other students confirmed that in a number of cases the type or level of teacher intervention was problematic. For example, some interviewees mentioned that they wished their teachers would intervene during certain aspects of group work, e.g. in selecting group members to work together, since some Chinese students felt at a disadvantage because of their shyness or the feeling that some home students did not want to work with them for fear of having their marks negatively affected.

The lack of teacher intervention in group work was also criticised by another student, who felt that teachers were unaware of the difficulties experienced by some Chinese students because they only paid attention to whether the task was being accomplished and seemed uninterested in the relational dynamics between the group members:

“CS8: The most important thing is your team work, your group work, your communication. It's your attitude to work and whether you apply yourself or not. This is the most important thing, but I think that the teachers don't know or don't think it's important so many people have problems.

I: So you think the teachers concentrate too much on the outcome ... the work done?

CS8: Yes, not on the group work process. They care about it a little bit, but when they come over they ask us only about the work. There is only a basic question about how your group is getting on, but I think the group work is the most important thing.”

This comment highlighted the perceived need for more tutor intervention and the feeling that some tutors were not sufficiently aware of the group dynamics or were not interested in this aspect of the work as they were more concerned with outcomes than process. Since Active Learning pedagogies place strong emphasis on collaborative processes, this aspect of group work needs to be monitored closely by teachers. This student clearly supports more active teacher intervention when group members are not working well as a team. Another student commented that although teachers provided supportive comments in class, since much of the group work activity takes place outside the classroom, this was insufficient: “We get advice from tutors in class, but not when we go to the library or refectory to do our work” (CS23).

These comments revealed a superficial, or at least, an unsatisfactory relationship between some students and their teachers, with the latter remaining out of touch with the realities of the working relationships amongst the students. For those students who particularly appreciated an interventionist teacher approach, the teacher role of facilitator seemed to be problematic. In these cases the students' experiences of Active Learning seemed to be dependent on the nature of teacher intervention in their learning activities.

In view of the diversity of experiences of my interviewees, it is impossible to generalise about differences between Chinese and UK teacher roles. For example, when prompted to comment on the importance of the student/teacher relationship in their learning, although most felt it was important, several suggested that it was not the main ingredient for academic success. Other important factors mentioned included the effort and attitudes of individual students and their competence in English. However, even students who reported poor experiences agreed that this relationship was an important element.

In conclusion, the theme of relationships provided a generative framework for certain parts of these interviews, without directing participants towards specific statements of opinion, and without directing me towards particular conclusions or interpretations. Good relationships within mixed-nationality groups clearly provided certain students with rich and stimulating working contexts within which to improve their language skills and academic knowledge. On the other hand, some interviewees perceived home students as either hostile towards, or distant from them, as implied by their exclusive use of the term "foreigner" to describe all non-Chinese people. These students seemed to make more use of the social and academic opportunities offered by their Chinese classmates than those who felt more confident in their relationships with "foreigners".

Whether with home or other Chinese students, relationships were spoken about frequently and in some detail in all of the interviews. Since this thesis is based on a narrow sample it would be unjustified to judge the emphasis given to relationships as a typical Chinese cultural trait, but there is enough evidence



here to justify my contention that relationships with other students are an important element in these students' experiences of Active Learning pedagogies.

Furthermore, the theme of relationships between students and their teachers was taken up enthusiastically by a number of students in connection to pedagogical styles and their own levels of interest. However, although categorising students' comments according to various teacher roles was a useful heuristic device, it became clear that a number of significant contextual factors impinged on these relationships, including: students' ability to understand the teacher; the behaviour of teachers, particularly their interventions in group work; and the degree of friendliness of the teachers towards their students. I return to the theme of relationships in section 4.2.4 in relation to group work processes, and in the discussion section 4.3.2, where I use Berger and Luckmann's (1967) concept of social structure to explore the nature of this dimension of students' experience of Active Learning pedagogies.

#### **4.2.3 Skills**

Many of my interviewees spoke readily about the kinds of skills they thought they developed whilst studying in the UK in general and on the Active Learning modules in particular, so this theme produced a lot of data. However, although the theme of skills emerged clearly in the interviews, I modified my approach to it during the interview process as I had some initial uncertainty about whether students were referring to life skills or specific academic skills. Furthermore, although the findings in this section emerged from the data, they were partly interpreted in the process of analysis by my use of theoretical constructs from other researchers, particularly Schraw and Moshman (1995) and Iwai (2011), as thematic sub-categories. In this procedure I used what Kelle (2007: 198) calls a Straussian approach to Grounded Theory by adopting extraneous constructs as sensitizing concepts or coding paradigms (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

With the benefit of hindsight, the connections between students' metacognitive skills and their experiences of Active Learning pedagogies seem an obvious area for exploration. However, at the time of carrying out these interviews I was still unsure of how I might go about coding such comments later on since I had done very little reading in this area. During the process of data analysis I searched for relevant articles and I found Schraw and Moshman's (1995) work particularly helpful in providing a taxonomy of three distinct types of metacognitive theories: tacit, informal and formal. These authors also propose a tri-partite classification of sources of metacognitive theories (cultural learning, individual construction and peer interaction) which I found convenient to incorporate into my data analysis to provide a more finely calibrated understanding of the theories. For clarification, I present a summary of the main outlines of these concepts in the following paragraphs.

Tacit metacognitive theories grow gradually and are based on beliefs acquired from peers, teachers, one's culture or one's own or others' personal experiences. Tacit metacognitive theories are often persistent since they are not based on a systematic review of evidence: "Perhaps the most salient aspect of a tacit metacognitive theory as opposed to an explicit one is that an individual is not readily aware of either the theory itself or evidence that supports or refutes it" (Schraw and Moshman, 1995: 359). I found a number of my interviewees' comments corresponded to this notion of an unsystematic, tacit understanding of their cognitive performance based on personal experiences such as: previous educational experience; the use of generic language and study skills; and the personal qualities and communication skills which enable certain students to be more successful than others in group work.

Informal metacognitive theories may be fragmentary and rudimentary, but they contain some degree of explicit metacognition according to Schraw and Moshman (1995). An important aspect of informal metacognitive theories is that they allow their users to deploy them strategically to modify or redirect efforts in specific tasks. These authors find that informal theorists usually outperform tacit theorists in complex problem solving. Comments in this category referred to more abstract and systematic concepts such as: differences between teaching styles and the cognitive skills expected of learners in the UK and China; the "real world" versus theoretical nature of certain assignments learning activities

and the corresponding learning skills such as critical thinking and evaluation developed by learners on these modules; and the uncertain nature of collaborative learning environments.

Formal metacognitive theories are highly systematized accounts of cognitive processes and Schraw and Moshman cite several authors, including Schön (1987), who consider them to be quite rare, even amongst professionals, but state that: “When they exist, formal theories may exert a profound impact on performance and on the understanding of performance” (p.361). An example of the use of a formal theory is when one student used Belbin’s team roles (Belbin Associates, 2011) to discuss the interactions among group members on one of her business simulation modules.

Table 8 summarises how Schraw and Moshman (1995: 362) describe the sources of metacognitive theories and I will refer to this tripartite framework in my discussion.

**Table 8: Sources of metacognitive theories**

<b><i>Cultural Learning</i></b>	socially shared conceptions about the nature of cognition received through informal experience and formal education
<b><i>Individual Construction</i></b>	individuals spontaneously construct metacognitive theories by comparing their cognitive experiences with those of others and by reflecting on the nature of cognition
<b><i>Peer Interaction</i></b>	the active construction of metacognitive knowledge through “collective and socially shared reasoning processes”

In addition to providing a useful set of constructs for the purposes of data analysis, Schraw and Moshman’s (1995) work also led me to wonder whether there might be a link between well-developed metacognitive theories and positive perceptions of Active Learning pedagogies, a theme which I develop further in the discussion chapter. In the following section I have organised my interviewees’ comments using the three sub-categories of tacit, informal and formal metacognitive theories, and within each of these I discuss the extent to which these theories indicate cultural learning, individual construction or peer interaction.

Most interviewees’ comments concerning metacognitive skills implied that they had tacit theories, many of which were based on cultural learning, in which previous experience provides learners with conceptual equipment for making

sense of their current experience. A number did this by comparing their experiences in China and the UK, often concentrating on the differences in teacher behaviours, as in the following example:

"For example, in China the teacher points out specifically what you need to review before the exam. But here, I don't think the teacher does the same thing. In class, the teacher does not have any so called "the most important points for the final exam" for you." (CS21)

One student commented that at the beginning of her sojourn she felt that all of her Chinese classmates were using the knowledge they had learned in China, but that later on, as they learned more about their subject from a variety of sources, it became easier for them to follow their courses.

Similarly, two other students tried to explain their difficulties with referencing by referring to different practices in China and the UK:

"CS11: Yeah, because the Chinese think ... this is a word, why can't I think it? Why do I need to reference?"

CS12: Yeah, that's in China. We think we can use it. We think it's common knowledge."

The students explained their experience here as a difference to which they had to adapt and interpreted it as a basic difference in the way the printed word is treated in the two countries.

Peer interaction was also mentioned as a source of metacognitive skills as some students referred to working with students of other cultures as being an important source of fresh ideas and perspectives. However, the value of this aspect of group work varied according to whether the student saw broader, long-term benefits or was focussed on specific, task-related objectives. One student was very clear about his preferences:

"If we have a case study of a world famous company, of which I have some background knowledge, I prefer to work with foreign students in order to learn different ways of thinking. If I have to choose a local company, for example, a Chinese national company, I prefer to work with Chinese classmates because we have the same background knowledge and it's easy to communicate with each other." (CS24)

In this case the student's purposes were entirely instrumental and he saw no general advantage in working with non-Chinese students. However, for another student, the experience of living and working with non-Chinese people has produced a gradual, but long-term change:

"I think I have changed my ways of thinking gradually through meeting, living and talking with people from different countries or different places with different family backgrounds." (CS20)

For another student, the value of working with non-Chinese students was not self-evident and depended on their contribution to the task in question:

"I don't think it is a necessary prerequisite to work with local or European students for good group work. I once worked with a European student in a group and I did almost all the work myself because he contributed very little. So, not every European student is hard working." (CS22)

Another student (CS8) gave a number of different reasons why Chinese students did not like to work in mixed-nationality groups, and summed up the skills set needed for successful group work as "strong personal ability" and "communication skills". Although these are not generally used technical concepts, they give a clear sense that, for this student, successful collaborative work requires a combination of confidence in interpersonal relations (a personal skill) and linguistic competence (an academic skill).

The previous comments show that these students reflected on their personal experiences to form basic understandings of their performance. This corresponds to what Schraw and Moshman (1995) call tacit metacognitive theories as they are based on an unsystematic review of their own and other students' previous educational experiences, generic academic skills and personal qualities.

In the second group of comments, which I interpreted as illustrating informal metacognitive theories, students seemed to have formulated some kind of informal theory based on comparisons between their educational experiences in China and the UK. In this category, students' use of terms was sometimes idiomatic since they were not referring to formal metacognitive theories, but I had a distinct sense that they were beginning to theorise their experience.

As with tacit theories, a number of these comments indicated a cultural learning origin. For example, one student referred to a skill which she had learned in the UK as "communication", which seemed to be a more or less formal theory, but which her further elaboration showed to be an example of a loosely used term to summarise how she had adapted to a difference in the structure of the learning environments between China and the UK:

"The most [important thing], I think, is communication. I've learned how to communicate with the tutors and with friends. Maybe in China we don't usually see the teachers after class because we think they have taught everything in the class. So we do not need to find them after class. But here, it's quite important, if you have questions ... you can find the tutor and they can help you". (CS14)

Another student (CS13) talked about how in China, when tutors ask a question, "everybody will give the same answer to the question because this is the right answer", but in the UK by contrast, "the tutor doesn't expect this because when they ask a question they want you to put your own thought into the question, not the exact answer to that." Later on she referred to critical thinking and evaluation in explaining the academic expectations she had learned in the UK:

"But for my stage in the MBA, like the tutors are expecting some of your thought about the theory, like critically thinking or evaluating the theories. You can say they're wrong, you can say they're right. It's your choice to do that. But in China you can only say they're right." (CS13)

Although these expectations seemed to relate in part to the postgraduate academic level of this student, her comment also shows that she thought critical thinking and evaluation were related to differences in academic cultures.

Other comments indicated a more individual origin of some informal metacognitive theories. For example, some students used the terms "active learning" and "traditional teaching styles" to distinguish between various modules or activities. Terms such as "real world", "real experience of working in a company" were used to describe some aspects of the assignments; and "adaptation", "autonomy" and "independence" for some of the generic cognitive skills acquired. Elaborating on the types of skills referred to as autonomous, CS20 mentioned: "So you have to plan your after-class time effectively, for example, when to preview and review the textbooks, and when to look up the

references for essay writing," and summed this up by saying: "I've learned to plan my time rationally". Other examples included: improved ability to plan research activities; negotiating group meetings outside class; study skills such as writing essays in the appropriate format and with correct referencing; and learning how to give presentations without referring to notes.

Several students referred to teamwork and communication skills as key skills developed during interactions with their peers. For some students, these skills were actually more important than the content of the courses since they would be valuable in working situations. This comment was typical:

"Maybe they [some students] think that [getting] the work done is the most important thing. But in fact I think what we should learn mostly in the University, in the business school, a foreign business school, is our teamwork skills, communication skills and not really the business knowledge." (CS8)

More specifically, some students commented on how group work tasks provided them with opportunities to develop these skills, especially where the task involved looking at business from a variety of cultural perspectives. One student commented on how the emphasis on practical tasks actually exposed Chinese students to situations where they might "lose face", which not all of them were willing to do:

"So I suggested to my group members who were doing the financial part, I said: "Maybe you can pretend you want to set up a business. Go to a bank and try to get a loan for a business. You will know ... you will understand it then." But they didn't like that idea. They thought they would lose face. But I think if you study and you are afraid to lose face, I can't understand it. That's what I did." (CS19)

This student used the Chinese cultural concept of face (*mianzi*) to interpret the actions, or inactions, of some of her peers. Similarly, another student commented on how the uncertainty of Active Learning assessments provided a stimulus for further exploration: "It is changing and uncertain during the process, which can stimulate me to explore the truth" (CS22). All of these comments reveal a growing consciousness of skills development and ability to deploy these newly developed skills in appropriate situations. For this reason they seem to be examples of informal metacognitive theories.

As might be expected, few of the comments in these interviews indicated the use of formal metacognitive theories. In particular, there was little detailed reference to formal theory where cultural learning could be identified as the source of such theory. This might in part be due to linguistic limitations which discouraged students from talking about such things. However, it could also be that the students related very little of their metacognitive knowledge to formal theories learned in China. There were comments from several students which referred to Chinese sayings which they had learned as children, but these governed behaviour and relationships rather than learning approaches.

One student referred to a formal theory concerning individual behaviour, that of team roles by Belbin (Belbin Associates, 2011). According to this theoretical framework, team roles fall into nine different types such as monitor, evaluator, resource investigator, plant, complete finisher etc. Using Belbin's framework, this student constructed a theoretical explanation of her team's experience, as follows:

"I think, er, it's a test of your personality in business. It's a verbal test or something ... I can't remember, but we were in the same type. Because businesses require you to be different types like a leader, a plant and a finisher. But we were all the same, we are all plants, which means that if we hold different opinions we will really argue with each other." (CS13)

Although the formal theory used here was taken from a well-known theorist of team work, this student used it to construct an original interpretation which plausibly explained what she had observed in her team.

Other students referred to specific academic theories, either cultural or more generic business theories. For example, one student explained how he had used specific cultural theories to interpret a case study for one of his group assignments: "I learned how to perceive the underlying problems from the cultural perspective, then approach and resolve those problems by applying cultural theories, which is useful if a company wants to increase its profits" (CS21). Another student commented that although Active Learning teaching and learning methods were practical, they needed to be implemented after students had learned more traditional or foundational business knowledge.



"I think traditional learning styles are necessary to provide a foundation of knowledge although they are a little bit boring. Suppose that we were running a restaurant, we must learn some classic frameworks about the business world first, which provide models to start a business." (CS22)

Whilst neither of these students goes into detail about the theories they refer to, they are clearly aware that these are formal or academic theories which can be used to solve specific real world problems and this differentiates their comments from those referred to above. For this reason I consider them to be evidence of the use of formal metacognitive theories by these students.

In this section I have used Schraw and Moshman's (1995) distinctions between different types of metacognitive theories and their origins as convenient sub-categories to classify interviewees' comments on metacognitive skills during my analysis of interview transcripts. Apart from being a useful analytical tool, this procedure helped me to demonstrate that a strong element of my interviewees' accounts of their experiences was focussed on skills development. In view of these findings, it seems that students' appreciation of particular pedagogies is partly related to the extent of the opportunities they provide to develop certain skills. I return to this theme in the discussion section.

#### **4.2.4 Active Learning pedagogies**

For the purposes of analysis I grouped students' comments on Active Learning pedagogies under the four categories of group work, case and investigative studies, simulations and work-based learning, a typology based on the various pedagogical models which are used in the Business School. In fact most of the interviewees associated these pedagogies with group work, which they also saw as the main difference between the teaching styles in China and the UK. The comments on group work were by far the most numerous and detailed, and therefore I restrict my detailed discussion to this category.

Interviewees' comments on group work seemed to be based either on their previous expectations or on conclusions they had arrived at as a result of their experience. I coded the former as advantages and disadvantages of group work depending on the students' opinions, and the latter respectively as positive and

bad experiences. This distinction seemed important because students' opinions of group work did not always correspond to their own experience. For example, a student might have had a poor personal experience of group work, but still commented on the advantages of group work when it goes well. A further type of comments concerned the processes of group work, which I coded separately since they often revealed some of the relational dynamics as well as practical issues which other comments lacked.

During the transcript analysis I became aware that three aspects of group work were of especial interest to most students: social interaction, language issues and task completion. I therefore decided to use these themes as organising sub-categories for my analysis since this allowed me to compare comments across categories and explore the extent to which they were interlinked. In this way, group work can be seen both as fulfilling the expectations of some students that it would lead to greater opportunities for social interaction with other students, at the same time as facing some students with almost insurmountable relational challenges where they had poor experiences working with other students. Likewise, group work offered opportunities to improve language skills and obtain language help from other students, but it also pushed some students beyond the limits of their linguistic competence by requiring them to negotiate or plan their work with other students. Finally, the combination of positive or poor interactional experiences and surmountable or insurmountable linguistic challenges led to either satisfactory or poor completion of group work tasks.

Comments on group work indicate that interaction with other group members was a crucial determinant of students' perception of this kind of work in either positive or negative terms. There were cases of very positive experiences where cooperation among group members was very successful. In these cases all students seemed to be fully involved in the processes of planning, monitoring and evaluation of group tasks. In contrast to these, other students were clearly disconnected from the group task and ignored by their fellow group members. The processes of group work are discussed in more detail below.

Difficulties with certain working processes clearly influenced some students' general perception of the appropriateness or success of group work within their course. In analysing this group of comments, I found some of the ideas about

metacognitive skills, particularly the three group work strategies mentioned by Iwai (2011): planning, monitoring and evaluating, to be useful as organising concepts. These are illustrated in Table 9. I encountered these ideas during the process of analysis when I needed to find out more about how metacognitive knowledge is defined by researchers working in this area. I used Iwai's notions of group work strategies as sensitizing concepts or coding paradigms (see Table 9), in line with Strauss's (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) axial coding methods as described by Kelle (2007).

**Table 9: Group work strategies (after Iwai, 2011)**

<p>Planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choosing group members</li> <li>• Division of tasks</li> </ul>
<p>Monitoring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordination of individual contributions</li> <li>• Discussion, debates and negotiation</li> <li>• Preparation and mutual support</li> </ul>
<p>Evaluating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer review of contributions</li> <li>• Task completion</li> </ul>

The process of choosing group members refers to the way group tasks are set up and therefore relates to the category of metacognitive skills which Iwai (2011) calls "planning strategies". Nine of my interviewees commented on their preferences in terms of the nationality mix of the group membership, but there were also allusions to power dynamics in the classroom. For example, where students were allowed to select their own group membership, there was often a preference for working with group members of the same nationality as this appeared to reduce the friction caused by language and communication difficulties amongst group members. Some students also felt that certain home students preferred not to work with international students, either because they wanted to stay in friendship groups or because they were afraid that their marks would be unduly affected by the lower performance of international students. On the other hand, one of the Chinese students expressed a preference for working with home students for precisely this reason:

"As a Chinese student, you might feel worried about the difficulty in communicating with foreign students, but it is better to discuss with foreign students to get correct information rather than keeping away from them." (CS20)

Other students expressed a preference for working in mixed-nationality groups in order to practise their English. One student even mentioned carefully choosing "the right seat" in order to be put in mixed-nationality groups when groups were being formed in the first seminars. Since choosing team members seemed to present some students with a difficult dilemma, one interviewee recommended that teachers should select the groups themselves rather than leaving it to the students. The implication here seemed to be that the teacher's selection of group members would be more likely to produce mixed-nationality teams than would be the case if students were free to choose their own groups.

For another student, the choice of working with home or other Chinese students depended on the kind of task which was being undertaken: "For instance, if an investigation is being undertaken, a foreign student will be useful because foreign students are better at doing oral questionnaire surveys while our Chinese students are suitable for note-taking and we can analyse data together" (CS24). This student's clear pragmatic rationale with regard to the process of selecting group members contrasted with the apparently more defensive reasons offered by several others, who seemed apprehensive about the linguistic and cultural difficulties which they might face, including disrespectful treatment they might receive from certain unfriendly home students. This perception indicated an inequitable distribution of power in the classroom which was felt more acutely by certain students than others.

Although nine participants mentioned the ways in which tasks were divided up amongst group members, some of the comments regarded the early stages of designing the way the group assignment task should be set up in order to include contributions from all group members, whilst other comments related to the way individual tasks were carried out by individuals and put back together by a group coordinator or leader. Using Iwai's terms then, the former category of comments concerned planning strategies, whilst the latter concerned monitoring strategies, although some comments cover both aspects.

For example, one interviewee's comments were quite detailed regarding the way the group divided up the tasks amongst group members and gave one of their number a coordinating role as "group leader":

"We have four members in the group. Two of us are Chinese and two are Africans. One of the African students suggested a local English company as the case study. We are not familiar with this company, so he works as the group leader and distributes some minor tasks to us while he does the major tasks. For example, he asks us to search for and collect some references, and then we hand them over to him. Or he asks us to do some analysis on modes of payment. He combines and completes the work, and then presents it to us." (CS24)

Another student gave a similarly detailed commentary on the process of task division, but in this case there was less sense of participation by all group members:

"CS15: After she [the group leader] told us what to do it was like individual work and I just thought: Why do we need to be in a group then? Two by two would be fine. We don't need to be in a group. And she was just like ... not satisfied with our ... [pause].

I: Performance?

CS15: Yeah."

These examples illustrate respectively successful and unsuccessful group work performances. In the first example, communication amongst group members seemed to be effective enough for planning and monitoring of performance to be carried out. By contrast, in the second instance it appeared that the Chinese students were not fully involved in the monitoring phase. In this case, monitoring of contributions by the group leader seemed to take the form of evaluation and even admonition for poor performance, which gave this student the impression that the other group members had been disempowered and reduced to completing an individual assignment.

Explaining how task division could lead to the individualisation of the group assignment, another student emphasised the importance of cooperation throughout the various processes involved in the completion of the assignment:

"Each person does their individual work when we divide the work, but outside this division we still need to connect to each other. And we really need much more communication and many connections because our work is, our work is group work. It's one assignment and the divided work is connected very seriously, so we need to communicate. But in most of the groups, I know it becomes individual work. So it's not like group work, it doesn't improve our team work." (CS8)

Five students commented on the difficulties they found in participating in all aspects of the group work because certain individuals dominated the assignment. They saw task division as problematic because they were left out of any collective decision-making. In these cases, even where the Chinese students had been involved in decisions about planning how collective tasks were to be divided up, they were not involved in the process of monitoring since they merely handed their work over to the group leader.

Five interviewees also commented on the importance of group discussions in the planning phase of group assignments. Some interviewees described the ways in which disagreements over planning strategies were handled, either by voting or debating various possible ways forward, as illustrated by the following comments:

"I worked with Chinese students, my friends ... they were all my friends. We needed to discuss what business we were going to do and it was so difficult because different people had different ideas. So we chose one way to make a decision like ... if people say ... we gave them different options which they wrote down and then we put up our hands, and more people ... if more group members accepted one of them, then we chose this one. This is the way we chose." (CS19)

"Because there are usually four or more than four members in a group, each has to work on his or her own part and contribute it to the final draft of the whole project. If each member is satisfied with the combination of all parts, then that becomes the final version." (CS20)

"We were trying to make a strategic plan for Sony. We had several long discussions in the library. I think the ways in which we understand and approach issues are different. So we had divergent points of view and had two versions of the presentation. Although it is permissible for us to present two plans and have the teacher evaluate them, eventually we reached an agreement to keep our differences in one plan." (CS22)

These comments clearly show that advanced negotiation skills are essential for all group members to participate in the planning and monitoring processes of

group assignments. Unfortunately not all Chinese students were well equipped in this respect since they lacked confidence in their ability to communicate with non-Chinese students. Certain individuals therefore felt that they were at a severe disadvantage on modules where group work was an important part of the assessment.

A further group work process described by Iwai (2011) as belonging to the monitoring phase is preparation and mutual support. Regarding this process, several students discussed the support they received from other students in informal study groups. These informal groups were unlike the formal work groups where group members met up to work together on their group assignments. In informal study groups, students (Chinese and non-Chinese) offered to help each other by checking through their writing assignments or preparing presentations by listening and asking questions which the presenter intended to "plant" in their audience. These groups seemed to be particularly common amongst the Chinese students and were seen as an important support mechanism. They were informal since the students were not usually working together on group assignments. Informal study groups were therefore not involved in the planning phase of assignment completion, but they often played an important part in students' monitoring and evaluation.

In formal study groups, the success of group work processes was explained as being closely related to the ability of group members to communicate with each other, although other factors were clearly important as well. There was some indication that the Chinese students tended to meet up and work together at home, whereas the mixed-nationality groups met either in town or in the library as shown in the following comment:

"All Chinese students, they would like to ... not in the uni, they would like [like] to go back home and discuss it [the work] in Chinese. And basically they talk, play [take it easy] talk, play and [they take it] very easy and after that they will translate [the work] into English and they will try to take notes to do the presentation or the simulation, but in mixed culture student [groups] we have to go to, like, Starbucks and talk altogether in English. Sometimes we don't all speak good English [so] we just speak slowly, slowly, slowly. Finally we will find out how we can handle the questions. That's the difference." (CS10)

This might have resulted in the work in mixed-nationality groups being more structured since the meetings took place in contexts which were physically and temporally more structured. On the other hand, meeting each other outside the home sometimes proved too difficult to manage, and this could lead to a breakdown of the planning and monitoring processes. In one case students had reached agreement on how to divide up the task (planning phase), but were unable to monitor their progress until the day of the presentation, resulting in their being poorly prepared for the task. One of the students attributed this situation to poor communication between them, although she did not specify any reason for this. It is possible that part of the problem was the unwillingness of her partner to engage in the work through lack of interest or laziness, but the fact that he seemed to have completed the task on his own indicates an unwillingness to cooperate face to face.

Persistent absenteeism from group meetings and laziness were mentioned by some students as problems, even when working with other Chinese students, so linguistic communication seemed not to be the main problem here. On the other hand, the failure of group work processes was sometimes attributed to the desire of certain students to work on their own, as shown in the following comment:

"Last year, sometimes maybe we were in a group and some people wanted to work very hard. And some people, it's just like: it's not my business. If you do it, finish, and give me a task. Give me my own task and I will finish it, yeah?" (CS17)

The final phase identified by Iwai (2011), i.e. evaluating, consists of the processes of peer review of contributions and task completion. The first of these concerns the allocation of marks according to the contributions of each group member. Some interviewees commented that certain Chinese students felt unable to fully participate in this process and, as a result, they were obliged to accept the decision of their group leader. One student seemed to be entirely satisfied with this situation: "I will feel satisfied with 20% because the African student has done most of the work" (CS24). Another student described a more participative experience in which evaluation of individual students' performance was agreed on by all group members. However, in the worst case one student



described how he had no idea how the marks were divided up and was shocked to receive a poor mark for one group assignment based on the evaluation of the other team members, all home students, who seemed to dislike him and therefore agreed to give him a poor mark.

Regarding task completion, some interviewees seemed to have a clear view that the completion of group assignments differed from that of individual assignments. For one student, the important processes of group work were essentially collaborative:

"It demands several people thinking together and sitting together to think and calculate different opportunities and finally to conclude what is the best opportunity of advantage together." (CS18)

The comments in this section indicate substantial diversity in students' experiences of group work. Some of my interviewees provided detailed accounts of how their group work assignments were carried out and this enabled me to investigate these processes more fully using Iwai's (2011) typology of group work processes. There were some examples of positive experiences, where students felt they had benefitted from being able to work collaboratively to complete complex practical tasks, but also some cases of poor experiences where the students clearly felt excluded from some of these group work processes. In the latter cases it seemed that some group assignments were actually carried out as separate individual tasks, which were then stitched together by the group leader, or by the dominant group members. It is possible that the design of some of the group assignments was partly responsible for this since it allowed students to deal with the work in this way. It is also possible that some tutors paid less attention to the group dynamics than they might have done and as a result failed to notice when group work was not being carried out collectively.

Overall the variety of comments on Active Learning pedagogies confirmed that it would be impossible to generalise even about the perceptions of this group of interviewees since individual students had differing opinions based on their own experiences or those of others about which they had been informed. Nevertheless, it seems clear that most of these students were aware of some of

the potential benefits of these pedagogical styles, including the practical nature of the learning tasks and the opportunity to develop team working and language skills. However, they differed in the extent to which their experiences had confirmed these expectations. Whilst some students had found group work challenging and rewarding, for others the complexity of the task was baffling, either because of the way their groups divided the group task into individual parts, or because the relational dynamics of the group had left them feeling excluded by fellow group members.

Interaction with other group members was obviously an important element of students' experience of group work and the previous sections of this chapter have shown how linguistic ability and confidence in building positive relationships shaped this interaction. Furthermore, by highlighting the separate group work processes, I discovered that students who were fully involved in planning, monitoring and evaluating had more positive experiences than those who seemed to be largely focussed on task achievement. This was particularly true where students' participation was reduced to the completion of individual tasks, which left them excluded from or only partially involved in the monitoring and evaluation processes.

One conclusion from this might be that group tasks need to be more carefully designed to incorporate genuine collaborative activity, as recommended by several researchers (Plastow, Spiliotopoulou and Prior, 2010; Higgins and Li, 2009; Strauss and U, 2007), rather than merely consisting of a larger assignment that can be broken down and put back together in the final stage by one of the group members who has a coordinating role. Another possible conclusion might be that tutors should spend more time coaching students in group work processes so that they see full participation in collaborative activity as the correct way to complete group assignments. Discussion of the processes of planning, monitoring and evaluation might help students to avoid premature closure of the task and realise the importance of the participation of all students in all group work processes. In the following discussion I return to the theme of group work and propose that further research should be carried out to establish links between students' metacognitive skills and their performance of group work tasks.

### 4.3 Discussion

This section is a summary and discussion of the main findings of this research. The discussion will draw on the work of a number of authors that I have found useful for my own understanding, and will attempt to locate my findings within broader theoretical domains of pedagogy and social psychology.

As the literature review demonstrates, a great deal of work has been carried out in recent years to investigate differences between the learning cultures of Chinese students and the host institutions where they are studying. Implicit in much of this work is an assumption that marked differences in educational traditions exist between the so-called Confucian Heritage Cultures and so-called Western cultures. This thesis contributes to a growing body of research which questions the simplistic dichotomies upon which such work is based. It does this by exploring the perceptions of a number of Chinese students regarding Active Learning pedagogies based on their experience of several management modules in a UK Business School and therefore uses an approach which foregrounds the students' own voices.

Semi-structured conversations with a number of students revealed that many of them favour Active Learning pedagogies and understand that these approaches offer students a number of advantages over traditional pedagogies. These include the possibility to participate in group projects whose outcome is greater than the contributions of each individual group member; the potential for interactions which contribute to the development of language and other advanced academic skills; the development of strong working and social relationships with other students; and a number of motivating academic projects which are close to "real business situations" and therefore offer more effective professional training than traditional pedagogies. There was also a suggestion that the loosely structured learning contexts associated with Active Learning pedagogies provided appropriate training opportunities for dealing with "messy" managerial problems requiring integrated solutions, but were less appropriate on certain financial management modules, where solutions are required which conform strictly to certain specified accounting procedures.

However, beyond the finding that many of the students I interviewed had favourable views concerning Active Learning pedagogies, there are a number of areas about which students expressed particular concerns and which I have identified as principally related to the three topics of language, relationships and skills. These topics are explored further in the following sections.

#### **4.3.1 Language and *joint action***

Interviewees' comments regarding language imply that many of them consider themselves ill-prepared for certain academic tasks, particularly in the initial stages of their sojourn, and that much of the language support currently offered seems to be ineffective in improving their confidence at that stage. Group work presents these students with severe challenges since successful outcomes depend on their ability to fully participate in the discussion of approaches to problems, negotiation of tactics, monitoring of progress and evaluation of complex outputs. Most students felt that this was a greater problem in the initial stages of their sojourn, but for some there was a marked increase in their group work capability later on as they developed more confidence in their language skills. Coping strategies in the earlier stages included informal group study and discussion within the social networks offered by other Chinese students. However, since these networks obviated the need for them to communicate in English with home or other international students, they did not provide opportunities for language skills development which these students expected from studying in the UK.

In this section I introduce Shotter's (1993, 2005), concept of "joint action", which, following Bakhtin (1986), he also calls "dialogically structured activity", and which is used to challenge the ways in which cognitive psychology interprets how we co-create realities during our interactions with each other and with our social environment. Shotter explains that the co-creation of reality, or joint action, which is at the heart of social constructionism, proceeds through "conversation", a term he uses to encompass the broader aspects of the processes of interaction. Joint action occurs in a "zone of indeterminacy", and therefore amounts to far more than the sharing of information amongst participants, since it involves responding to utterances which cannot be known

beforehand, and therefore participating in a process of joint negotiation of meaning. The conversational nature of this process implies that participants in joint action cannot rely on pre-determined themes or understandings (which would merely amount to a transfer of information), but must allow spaces for their interlocutor to respond to their utterances and in turn respond to what they hear. Shotter argues that most of our learning takes place in this way, since we constantly have to negotiate our way into and move in the social realities within which we live. At the same time, we exert an influence over those realities so the process is one of interactive conversation. This is a departure from the transmission of fully-formed concepts and schemas traditionally associated with cognitive psychology.

Applying the notion of joint action to classrooms in which Active Learning pedagogies are used, it is clear that these pedagogies require students to co-create knowledge in a way that is different from what is sometimes conceived of as more traditional pedagogical approaches, where previously packaged knowledge is delivered to passive students, whose task is then to demonstrate their understanding in certain restricted and predictable ways. By contrast, Active Learning pedagogies challenge students to co-create knowledge through interacting with others in ways with which they may not be familiar. This might be uncomfortable for some tutors as well since their traditional role of transmitters of knowledge has to be transformed into a less clearly defined facilitating role where the curriculum is no longer driving the teaching process.

For Shotter, traditional approaches to psychology have focussed on aspects of actions and events, that is, the extent to which people are either in control of their lives (actions) or comply with structures or actions as directed by others (events). It could be similarly argued that within traditional approaches to education there is an emphasis on compliance and a relative lack of opportunity for the development of autonomous action. This can be observed in the emphasis on elaborating explicit curriculum requirements, learning outcomes and the skills which students are expected to master. All of these are determined beforehand and students are then judged on their performance of the required skills or the predetermined "learning outcomes". However, joint action describes a zone of uncertainty which lies between action and event

since it implies an outcome which cannot be predetermined, but which is the result of the interactions of individuals in the co-construction of meaning. Shotter contends that both the behavioural and cognitive traditions of psychology have avoided dealing with this aspect of our everyday ways of being in the world.

“Joint action” reflects a central principle of Active Learning pedagogies. The constructivist approach to learning which these pedagogies embody relies very heavily on the ability of students to converse, that is, to negotiate meanings with other group members and with tutors. Shotter (1993: 39) refers to this negotiation process, which enables individuals to participate in their social environment, as “authoring their reality” and alludes to the ways people may feel excluded by being unable to participate in this process. This is reminiscent of what many of my participants said about their experiences of group work. They sometimes referred to the difficulties they had in communicating with other group members as “language problems”, but some of the issues they described (e.g. certain students dominating the task; the division of group work leading to individualised tasks) were clearly more complex and could be more broadly conceptualised as ‘conversational problems’, that is, the inability to participate in joint action as required by Active Learning pedagogies.

These conversational problems result in much more than a feeling of incomprehension or inability to complete a specific task. They lead to a sense of “ex-communication”, that is, exclusion from the social and educational structures to which the students belong. Most of these students eventually passed all of their modules and went on to graduate with Honours, but in some cases they felt excluded from or alienated by the academic context in which these processes (events) took place. So, using Shotter’s terms, where joint action breaks down or becomes dysfunctional, students feel alienated as they are unable to author their reality:

“Individual members of a people can have a *sense* of ‘belonging’ in that people’s ‘reality’, only if the others around them are prepared to respond to what they do and say *seriously*; that is if they are treated as a proper participant in that people’s ‘authoring’ of their reality, and not excluded from it in some way. (Shotter, 1993: 39)

In this account of joint action, Shotter makes much of the link between being taken seriously by others and one's sense of "authorship" of the reality to which one belongs. This link seems to explain very well why some of my interviewees used the term 'respect' to indicate what they felt as the main obstacle in working with non-Chinese group members. Others talked about being 'ignored' and these are both aspects of exclusion from joint action. For Shotter, the feeling that one's contribution is not valued is closely connected to a sense of not being valued or respected as a human being. This link is crucial in order to appreciate that when students feel they are only partially involved in group work tasks, there is far more at stake than the completion of those tasks or the opportunity to develop their linguistic skills.

I explore the issue of relationships in the following section, where I discuss the notion of social structure. However, at this point I concentrate on the implications of Shotter's notion of joint action for our understanding of language. If joint action highlights the "zone of indeterminacy" in social interaction, and language is the most important means by which this interaction takes place, it is clear that joint action also calls for a special understanding of language in use.

Shotter refers to the ideas of Bakhtin (1986) and Volosinov (1973) (the same author using a different name) to make a clear distinction between what he calls the "rhetorical-responsive" conceptualisation of language as 'utterances' and the "representational-referential" aspects of understanding. The former is a way to understand the interactive or dialogical aspects of language. Following Bakhtin, Shotter challenges the characterisation of conversation as an interaction between a passive listener and an active speaker, since listeners must already be actively preparing themselves to respond to what they are hearing:

"When the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he [*sic*] simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution, and so on. And the listener adopts this responsive attitude for the entire duration of the process of listening and understanding, from the very beginning – sometimes literally from the speaker's first word". (Bakhtin, 1986: 68, quoted by Shotter, 1993: 52)

Shotter's distinction between the representational-referential and rhetorical-responsive aspects of language points out the way in which utterances, as enacted forms of language, involve speakers and listeners in co-creation against a background of significant indeterminacy. This distinction implies that all participants are required to be able to call upon communicative skills which go well beyond a mastery of the (ideal) structures of language.

The indeterminacy which the rhetorical-responsive understanding of language highlights, seems to be an important source of the struggles experienced by some students in Active Learning classrooms. At the same time as requiring students to understand a large amount of complex academic content, Active Learning pedagogies remove the support of a highly structured learning environment with textual material, set questions and pre-determined answers. Students are required to give unique responses to questions, which they may have set on their own or in collaboration with others, since they are involved in the co-creation of meaning in an interactive environment. Shotter sums up the significance of the rhetorical-responsive account as its opening up of the study of speech acts to areas beyond the systematic (ahistorical) aspects of language use:

“The importance of this account of utterances lies in the way in which it opens it up to study, those *dialogical or interactive moments* when and where there is a ‘gap’ in the stream of communication between two (or more) speaking subjects. And no matter how *systematic* the speech of each may be while speaking, when one has finished speaking and the other can respond, the bridging of that ‘gap’ is an opportunity for a completely unique, unrepeatable response, one that is ‘crafted’ or ‘tailored’ to fit the unique circumstances of its utterance.” (Shotter, 1993: 53)

This interpretation implies that it would be unhelpful to teach speaking skills by emphasising only the structured, systematic aspects of spoken language, since this fails to develop students' ability to respond to unique conversational situations. Whilst enabling students to learn the ideal or theoretical structures of language (e.g. syntax and vocabulary) will be appropriate for many situations in which structured knowledge is to be transferred under predictable and pre-determined conditions, these conventional language skills will be less effective in the less structured knowledge environments associated with Active Learning



pedagogies, where participants collectively negotiate meaning through a back-and-forth process of dialogue.

Based on this analysis, I recommend that the tutors and managers of sending institutions and host universities design language support resources aimed at enabling students to operate successfully in the “zones of indeterminacy” of action-centred learning contexts. It is likely that this will involve much more emphasis on enabling students to “ask good questions” and participate confidently in negotiations over problem formulation, task allocation and evaluation than appears to be the case in highly structured language training activities.

#### **4.3.2 Relationships and social structure**

A second theme which was prominent in the interviews was relationships, particularly with teachers and other students. I summarised the students’ views about their teachers using the notions of teacher roles and contextual factors. Whilst using roles as categories in this way ran the risk of over-simplifying my participants’ accounts, they provided useful heuristic devices for articulating the differing expectations which these students held of their teachers. In most cases, students thought that their teachers in China had conformed to the role of transmitter of knowledge, but there was also a strong element of teacher as parent figure.

Where students found teachers in unfamiliar roles on their business modules, they seemed to interpret them as conforming to the norms of teaching in the UK. In this way a number of students commented positively on the relatively relaxed relationships between students and teachers here. This is not to say that they felt that all UK teachers were like friends, but there seemed to be more cases of this than the students would have expected to see in China. Concerning the teacher as facilitator role which is characteristic of Active Learning pedagogies, most students appreciated the fact that this was different from the role in more traditional, teacher-centred, settings since it gave students greater opportunities for interaction.

However, the comments which I categorised as referring to contextual factors show that students' perceptions of teacher roles are also affected by their understanding, the extent of teacher intervention and the quality of the experiences. So where communication was a greater problem, the relationship between teacher and student was seen as a distant one, and students' silence in class was explained as their desire to show respect (teacher as parent). Similarly, although the role of teacher as facilitator was greatly appreciated, a number of comments confirmed that at times more teacher intervention would have been appreciated, especially where certain students felt left out of group work processes. Finally, where students had negative experiences on their modules, they were more likely to be critical of the teacher.

Relationships with other students were an important theme in all of the interviews. There were some accounts of good relationships where students had made friends with home or other international students and sometimes received a lot of help with their academic work, especially working through language problems. Other comments confirmed a deep social divide between most of the Chinese students and other students, both home and international, who were nearly always referred to as "foreign". Some students also inferred the presence of perceived hostility, which resulted in a number of Chinese students either being unwilling to work with non-Chinese students, or feeling ostracised or ignored by their non-Chinese group members.

The social alienation felt by some of my interviewees prompted them to recommend teachers to be more interventionist in Active Learning modules and to pay more attention to the group working processes than they sometimes appeared to. These students concluded that the outcomes focus of certain teachers led them to assume that group work was progressing successfully, even in cases where some students in certain groups were being ignored by their fellow group members. In some cases, Chinese students deferred to the "group leader" to take decisions regarding allocation and integration of individual work tasks. This sometimes, but not always, had positive results in terms of the assignment completion. However, in most cases the Chinese students felt that they had little control over the process aspects of the assignment.

Although relationships are not commonly investigated in research on Chinese learners in international contexts, close analysis of the interviews I carried out for this thesis confirms that, for these students, relationships were a crucial factor in their interpretations of their experiences on these courses. The constructivist underpinnings of Active Learning pedagogies strongly support paying attention to this area since the quality of the relationships among group members must inevitably impinge on group work processes. For this reason, I attempt here to discuss the topic of relationships with reference to the concept of “social structure”, which originated in social psychology and was famously developed in Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) work: “The Social Construction of Reality”.

In the section on “social interaction in everyday life”, Berger and Luckmann explain how social interaction in everyday life takes place typically in face-to-face situations. This interaction is modified by a process they call “typification”, by which we locate others within our “social structure”. Typificatory schemes depend on the directness or indirectness, both spatially and temporally, of our encounters with others. The more direct and frequent our encounters, the richer and more vivid our typification, whereas more anonymous or indirect encounters lead to less concrete and sparser typifications. I reproduce some of Berger and Luckmann’s text here for clarification and then show how the notion of social structure, particularly the aspects they refer to as “typification” and “anonymity” might be used to explain some of the experiences of isolation and disconnectedness expressed by some of my Chinese interviewees.

“An important aspect of the experiences of others in everyday life is thus the directness or indirectness of such experience. At any given time it is possible to distinguish between consociates with whom I interact in face-to-face situations and others who are mere contemporaries of whom I have only more or less detailed recollections, or of whom I know merely by hearsay. In face-to-face situations I have direct evidence of my fellowman [*sic*], of his actions, his attributes, and so on. Not so in the case of contemporaries – of them I have more or less reliable knowledge. Furthermore, I must take account of my fellowmen in face-to-face situations, while I may, but need not, turn my thoughts to mere contemporaries. Anonymity increases as I go from the former to the latter, because the anonymity of the typifications by means of which I apprehend fellowmen in face-to-face situations is constantly “filled in” by

the multiplicity of vivid symptoms referring to a concrete human being". (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 46)

Many interviewees talked about their classmates in terms which seem to express the anonymity some of them felt towards the non-Chinese students. This must have been a frustrating outcome since experiencing a different culture and learning about different ways of thinking are frequently mentioned as motives underlying the decision to come and study in the UK, or sometimes expressed as important opportunities offered by the same. Clearly these things can only happen through being exposed to having to work with students of other cultures. Indeed a number of students described how they were challenged by different ways of thinking or different customs during their UK sojourn.

However, a frequent experience of some of these students was the lack of face-to-face communication with non-Chinese students, which led some to say that studying here was like studying in China since they only got to work with other Chinese students. This was powerfully reflected in their exclusive use of the term "foreign" to mean non-Chinese. It was almost as if these students felt that they were still in a Chinese learning and social context so the same terms applied. Non-Chinese students then were "foreign" and Chinese students, by implication, the norm. One reason for the imperviousness to change of this perspective must have been the paucity of face-to-face encounters with local students. As face-to-face encounters are described by Berger and Luckmann as "prototypical encounters with others", we could say that the most frequent access these students had to non-Chinese students remained indirect, and therefore their typification of them remained relatively anonymous.

To use two other terms of Berger and Luckmann's, for many of my interviewees, local students remained contemporaries rather than consociates, which is to say that their relationship remained of an indirect and anonymous nature. Berger and Luckmann summarise this notion as follows:

"At one pole of the continuum are those others with whom I frequently and intensively interact in face-to-face situations, my "inner circle", as it were. At the other pole are highly anonymous abstractions, which by their very nature can never be available in face-to-face interaction. Social structure is the sum total of these typifications and of the recurrent

pattern of interaction established by means of them. As such, social structure is an essential element of the reality of everyday life.” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 48)

Using this notion of “social structure” to describe the variegated pattern of interactive communication among individuals, it is possible to conceive of the social structures experienced by many Chinese students, particularly those with limited linguistic capability, as being quite different from those of home or other non-Chinese students, who do not suffer from the same linguistic limitations. Given that the effectiveness of Active Learning pedagogies is predicated on constructivist principles, particularly the notion of knowledge as co-constructed in interactive encounters with others, it might be concluded that the relatively sparse fruits of encounters between students of different nationalities are evidence that these pedagogies are not as efficient for these students as more traditional styles would be.

Nevertheless, if social structure is an important element in the ability of students to benefit from constructivist pedagogies, and there is strong evidence here that it is, then it seems reasonable to expect course design and classroom practice to reflect this. This could be attempted through the use of an institutionally agreed framework such as the “Interaction for Learning Framework” promoted by Arkoudis *et al.* (2013), although a planned approach to spontaneous interaction might strike some as contradictory. Alternatively, at a local level, tutors could pay more attention to the relational dynamics between group members and be prepared to intervene where these threaten the process (not just the outcome) of task completion. The evidence in this research of inconsistency among tutors seems to support Clark, Baker and Li’s (2007) recommendation for HEIs to develop a “consistent philosophy for collaborative learning assignments that is understood by all lecturers” (Clark, Baker and Li, 2007: 9). This might well involve a more deliberate approach to developing the academic and socio-cultural skills required of students, as recommended by Strauss and U (2007) without trying to force interaction through the imposition of a planned framework. I develop this recommendation in the following section.

#### **4.3.3 Metacognitive skills and performance**

A third important theme of these interviews was skills. In this discussion I

concentrate on metacognitive skills since these skills were closely associated with questions of pedagogy by my interviewees.

Schraw and Moshman's (1995) work on metacognitive theories led them to believe that although many teaching programmes had tried to improve learning both by encouraging students to be more interactive with their peers and by developing their awareness of learning strategies, few had sought to encourage students to develop metacognitive theories: "Lacking a theory, many students are unable to explain their cognitive performance or to plan effectively" (Schraw and Moshman, 1995: 367). One inference that can be drawn from this conclusion is that students with low levels of metacognitive knowledge might find it difficult to understand the aims of non-traditional pedagogies such as Active Learning and as a result might have negative perceptions of them. This could be tested using a well-designed research instrument. If perceptions of pedagogical design were found to be related to the metacognitive knowledge of individuals rather than their nationality, cultural background or previous educational experience, this would be a further challenge to the dichotomous and "large cultural" interpretations we have referred to in the literature review.

Another important aspect of Schraw and Moshman's work relates to the origins of metacognitive theories. These fall into the categories of self, culture and peer interaction. Since peer interaction is linked to active participation and good communication skills, this source remains more or less inaccessible to less proficient language users, who would consequently be forced to rely heavily on "self" and "culture" as sources for their metacognitive theories. Students who have access to all three sources *may* develop the full range of metacognitive knowledge whereas the least successful students might only rarely progress beyond tacit theories.

However, Schraw and Moshman (1995) are not certain about the precise relationship amongst the various elements involved and conclude that their influence is interactive rather than additive:

"For example, the communication of specific information about cognition via direct instruction may enhance a student's ability to construct an informal or formal theory of his or her own cognition. Similarly, peer

discussion and collective theorizing about cognition may enhance the effectiveness of direct instruction. In general, we believe that cultural learning, individual construction, and peer interaction *are not* mutually exclusive pathways to self-regulation, but are interrelated.” (Schraw and Moshman, 1995: 365)

Since metacognition is a largely unobservable process, they propose a number of possible research designs for investigating the relationship amongst these factors using verbal reporting techniques, a comparison of the performance of tasks by individuals using theories in action with others using formal metacognitive theories, or computer modelling techniques. If there is any link between performance and metacognitive knowledge then this is certainly an area worth investigating further, particularly using qualitative research designs with a view a view to establishing the direction of cause and effect.

The work I have found which investigates this link tends to focus on particular types of learning environment or learning tasks. For example research with EFL/ESL students (e.g. Zhang and Sirinthorn, 2012) links high levels of metacognitive knowledge to successful performance, but this is confined to task completion within restricted skill domains such as reading and writing. Pifarre and Cobos (2010) investigate learners in computer-supported collaborative environments, but their aim is to establish the effectiveness of this particular environment for promoting metacognitive skills, rather than to investigate the link between such skills and performance.

There is some evidence that learning environments change students' epistemological beliefs (Tolhurst, 2007) and that students with more complex epistemological beliefs perform better on certain problem-solving courses. However, Tolhurst's review demonstrates that there is disagreement about whether epistemological beliefs are general or domain-specific. This raises the question of whether students on modules which use Active Learning pedagogies are likely to perform better if they are given a more explicit instructional element within the course which is designed to develop their understanding of its underpinning philosophy and aims.

After this brief review of work carried out in this area, it seems that further research is needed to investigate how Active Learning pedagogies, and particularly group work, can benefit from the development of students' metacognitive skills. As shown in the review of literature on Active Learning pedagogies, teachers are encouraged to "provide opportunity for and support reflection on both the content learned and the learning process" (Savery and Duffy, 2001:3). However, although embedding a reflective element within the instructional design might appear fairly straightforward, it is likely that without careful preparation, some teachers and students might not understand the need for this element (see Nijhuis, Segers and Gijssels, 2005), particularly if it is separated from the main classroom or assignment task and assessed as an isolated unit. It is therefore important for further studies to establish more precisely the role of metacognitive skills in students' performance of this kind of task in order to make a sound recommendation for pedagogical practice.

In this discussion I have applied a number of concepts and theoretical frameworks from social psychology and pedagogy to interpret the key findings of this thesis. The understanding I have gained from this interpretive process has led me to make three broad recommendations:

1. In addition to preparing students for predictable situations likely to be encountered in well-structured educational contexts, language training should attempt to develop the advanced rhetorical skills needed in the ill-structured environments associated with Active Learning.
2. Institutions which incorporate Active Learning pedagogies should seek to develop more consistent approaches to collaborative assignments which focus on group working processes as well as task outcomes, and which are well understood by both teachers and students.
3. The development of metacognitive skills through Active Learning pedagogies should be promoted through the use of explicit reflective elements which are embedded within the teaching, learning and assessment activities.



In the following chapter I return to my original research questions and discuss the extent to which these findings either enable me to answer them or provide orientations for a restatement of the questions to inform further research. I then link my discussion of Active Learning pedagogies in Business Management education to a broader educational debate and draw on Biesta's (2006, 2010) ideas regarding the functions of education and Hannah Arendt's (1998) theory of action to propose an *action*-centred conceptualisation of Active Learning.

## Chapter 5 - How much *action* is possible in Active Learning classrooms?

In this thesis I set out to investigate the perceptions of Chinese Business Management students on courses using Active Learning pedagogies at a UK Business School. To do this I took a phenomenological approach using semi-structured interviews and a data analysis method with strong elements of Grounded Theory. This research design conforms to the exploratory tendency which is characteristic of the more recent research on Chinese learners and is in contrast to the more positivist approaches used by a number of earlier researchers in this area who imposed particular interpretations on their data, particularly those deriving from dichotomised cultural perspectives. My research sought to answer two principal questions: firstly, how my interviewees described their learning experiences on modules which used Active Learning pedagogies at a UK business school; and secondly, to find out how effective they considered Active Learning pedagogies to be in supporting their learning on these modules.

In answer to the first question, it is evident that there was a great deal of diversity in students' perceptions of these pedagogies. This diversity can be observed in the variety of experiences described during the interviews, both positive and negative, and in the extent to which the interviewees used abstract conceptualisations, particularly regarding relationships and skills, to describe their experiences.

My sub-questions (see p. 15) supporting the first question were formulated to specify more precisely the kind of detail I was interested in regarding my interviewees' perceptions without being so precise that they would be forced into talking in particular ways about pre-specified topics. In answer to the first sub-question (1a), many students felt that Active Learning pedagogies provided them with opportunities to build their intercultural competence through working together with non-Chinese students. Furthermore, although the challenge of working in a foreign language was a predictable topic, interviewees offered useful information about how their language skills left them better or worse equipped to tackle the challenges of building good working relationships with

their group members, especially with non-Chinese students, and of completing collaborative tasks which they sometimes only partially understood. Further reflection on the rhetorical/responsive functions of language in “joint action” suggests that students’ linguistic preparation rarely equips them for interactive learning activities which require advanced skills of negotiation in loosely structured learning environments. As a result, many students describe language in terms of a great obstacle they face when studying on modules which use Active Learning pedagogies.

Regarding the second sub-question (1b), although most students found important differences between their experiences of studying in China and their experiences in the UK, there was no consensus over what might be called a Chinese or Confucian style of education and how that might differ from the UK context. Some students had already encountered activities typical of Active Learning pedagogies such as simulations and group assignments before they came to the UK. They explained this by stating that many of their teachers in China had studied abroad themselves or were interested in alternatives to traditional teacher-centred pedagogies. Furthermore, many of the teachers in their Chinese universities are themselves from outside China and they tend to use more active teaching styles. There is a strong sense here in which firmly held contrasting perceptions between Confucian and Western educational traditions, always ontologically dubious, are being eroded by the rapid internationalisation of education.

Regarding the third sub-question (1c), whilst many interviewees expressed great appreciation for Active Learning pedagogies as motivating and effective, not all of them did so. It is possible that pedagogical preferences are linked to personality, particularly the extent to which individuals feel at ease with highly structured or more loosely structured learning environments. It is also likely that some highly structured knowledge domains (Accounting might be one of these) might not be suitable for Active Learning pedagogies such as Problem Based Learning since students need to learn very specific procedures for setting out information, which are prescribed by professional bodies. The evidence from my interviewees suggests that there is unlikely to be a close enough association between such preferences and students’ nationality or previous educational

background for useful generalisations to be made here.

The second aim of my research was to explore the extent to which students felt that Active Learning pedagogies were effective in supporting their learning. The justification for investigating this theme is that there might be an expectation, based on a deterministic interpretation of dichotomous cultural theories, that Chinese students would not understand why they were required to engage in what Perkins calls a “double-learning agenda”, that is, a set of complex management topics and a new theory of learning. In fact these interviews confirm that most students take the pedagogy in their stride and positively appreciate the way it attempts to provide realistic (i.e. “messy”) management situations through which they can develop practical managerial skills. Again, dichotomous interpretations of academic cultures might be less useful to practitioners than a deeper understanding of their students’ adaptability.

The sub-questions (see p. 15) supporting this second aim were designed to provide further detail of students’ perception of the effectiveness of Active Learning. Investigation into how well they understood what was required of them on these modules (2a) revealed that some students deferred to the assumed superior language skills or local knowledge of certain individuals in their work groups and this often led to their understanding of only a fraction of the whole group assignment. This problem seemed to be exacerbated by poor working relationships and low levels of confidence in their ability to negotiate with other team members, particularly home students. Supporting Active Learning through a reflective element focussing students on metacognitive skills would almost certainly help them to understand the importance of developing effective working relationships. Given students’ comments on the ineffectiveness of the language support they received, it seems that some of them were already aware of this, but felt that they needed a different kind of training, perhaps one which would better equip them to engage in the dynamic and interactive processes of learning required on these modules.

In response to the second sub-question, there is evidence in these interviews that many students had a very clear impression that Active Learning provided opportunities for them to develop a range of metacognitive skills. Some

discussed ways in which studying in the UK had changed their thinking by helping them to develop their independent learning skills, although this was sometimes the result of living and studying abroad and not exclusively linked to their experiences of Active Learning pedagogies. For others, these modules had given them the opportunity to develop their cross-cultural skills through the experience of working with students from other countries. Many of them saw this as a valuable asset for their chances of finding work after graduation. Some students also had a clear impression that Active Learning had contributed to their awareness of higher cognitive skills development, although there was some variation in their ability to express this using the highly conceptual language associated with these skills. Close analysis of comments regarding metacognitive skills confirmed that students' metacognitive theories were mostly informal and based on either cultural traditions or their own observations. Furthermore, the literature on metacognitive knowledge indicates a link between the students' metacognitive skills and their performance in problem-solving tasks. If this is the case then a strong recommendation can be made that on courses where Active Learning pedagogies are practised, the course design should include a strong reflective element to raise students' awareness of these skills.

On reflection, I would argue that any assumption that innovative pedagogies such as Active Learning presented Chinese students with special problems due to their previous educational experiences would be difficult to sustain. This thesis shows that this assumption overplays the dichotomy between academic cultures and underestimates the degree of adaptability of students. However, perhaps more importantly, this study has identified a number of aspects of student experience which imply that the full potential of Active learning pedagogies is not always realized in practice. In this concluding discussion, I argue that my findings support the proposition that Active Learning pedagogies constitute a radical challenge to current Business Management educational practices by offering an *action*-centred approach, that is, "a space in which unique, singular individuals can come into the world" (Biesta, 2006: 95). Furthermore, I propose that the three experiential components of language, relationships and metacognitive skills should be seen as three aspects of action, that is, as three manifestations by which it is possible to judge whether

students are not just *active* in the sense of busy, but *acting* in the sense of *authoring* their worlds in collaboration with others.

In order for Active Learning pedagogies to fulfill this promise, it is necessary to reconceptualise the function of Business Management education, which might currently be seen, to a greater extent than many other subjects, as a route designed for the exclusive acquisition of functional managerial skills, with little regard for the ways in which it can provide opportunities for students to express themselves as unique human beings. Using Biesta's (2010) terms to describe the functions of education, it could be said that Business Management courses have been concerned to serve the functions of qualification and socialisation, whilst paying less attention to subjectification. The term subjectification expresses the way in which education serves not just the purpose of inserting individuals into their societies as fully functioning members, but provides spaces "where they can bring their beginnings into a world of plurality and difference in such a way that their beginnings do not obstruct the opportunities for others to bring their beginnings into the world" (Biesta, 2006: 138). Active Learning pedagogies do this by requiring students to respond in unique ways to challenging or difficult situations in ways which cannot be pre-determined on the basis of past experiences or menus of formulaic responses. In this respect Active Learning pedagogies challenge all students equally, regardless of previous academic experiences or academic culture. For this reason, characterising students using simplistic cultural categories makes no sense, since this would reduce Active Learning to a set of teaching techniques that can be adapted to suit the cultural characteristics of the students.

In my review of research related to Chinese learners, I noted the objections of some of the more recent researchers (e.g. Kumar, 2011; Chan and Rao, 2009; Ryan and Louie, 2007; Clark and Gieve, 2006) to the use of a discourse of dichotomisation, that is, ways of conceptualising and speaking of national cultures as homogeneous and fixed. All too often this dichotomous perspective leads to an emphasis on, and exaggeration of, the differences between Chinese or Confucian-heritage cultures and so-called "Western" or "Socratic" educational cultures. Since neither of these terms is precisely defined or robustly theorised, they can serve to confirm unhelpful stereotypes and lead to inappropriate

pedagogical designs which attempt to enable Chinese students to adapt to the norms of their host institutions. In this kind of approach, Chinese students are viewed “in terms of the characteristics that they lack, rather than those that they bring to their new learning environments” (Ryan and Louie, 2007:406). Along with Papastephanou (2005) and Webb (2005), Ryan and Louie (2007) argue that the dichotomisation of cultures has not only unjustly labelled non-Western cultures as deficient, but it has also led academics and students of the host country to miss the particularly important opportunity to learn more about their own cultural practices, and to develop their own responses to the opportunities offered by the internationalisation agenda. In this respect, although it is sometimes argued that metacognitive awareness of learning across cultures is a useful outcome of Chinese students’ experiences of international education (e.g. Cortazzi and Jin, 2011; Zhou, Xu and Bailey, 2011), there seem to be fewer expectations of what host institutions can learn from the experience.

To avoid these unhelpful outcomes Ryan and Louie (2007) recommend that researchers avoid the use of discourses containing overgeneralised ‘models’ and ‘virtues’ of specific, national educational systems. They state that recognising cultural complexity entails a “meta-cultural awareness” (p.416) and advocate the adoption of concepts such as Papastephanou’s (2005) “cosmopolitically sensitive education” and Kostogriz’s (2005) “critical pedagogy of space”, which takes into account “the multiple and contested nature of learning” (Kostogriz, 2005: 203). In relation to this, Kostogriz and Tsolidis (2008) develop the notion of “transcultural literacy in diaspora space”, as a valuable metacognitive skill which extends beyond the binaries of cultural difference, and which is “more in keeping with the intensified flow of texts and people across the boundaries of nation states” (Kostogriz and Tsolidis 2008: 134). The idea is to avoid imposing a normalising (Western) framework on our pedagogic practices by creating a third space in which all participants are called to encounter the other, and no individual is seen as deviant from the “norm”.

In this research I set out to explore the experiences of Chinese students on a number of Business Management modules which were designed along Active Learning principles and I expected to use my participants’ accounts as empirical evidence to judge the extent to which these pedagogies were appreciated by

the students, that is, whether they felt that the course design had been effective in supporting their learning on these modules. The answer to this question is broadly affirmative since the students I spoke to seemed to have favourable opinions of the way the learning and assessment activities allowed them to apply theories to practice, to deal with realistic management problems, and to develop valuable team working skills, including those required for successful intercultural communication.

However, by linking effectiveness with stipulated learning outcomes this question fails to explore the extent to which these pedagogies were actually about *action*. For example, a number of the comments revealed that many students failed to participate fully in group work activities and often felt excluded from significant processes such as planning, monitoring and evaluating the contributions of individual group members. My analysis indicated that language difficulties, poor relationships and variable metacognitive skills contributed to this experience of exclusion. Since Active Learning pedagogies are strongly underpinned by social constructionism, and therefore challenge students to participate in the co-construction of knowledge, these three experiential components are particularly important aspects of students' experience on these courses. Consequently it is worth reflecting on how these components can be conceptualised as legitimate areas for intervention by teachers *qua* facilitators.

I propose that Active Learning is not solely, or even primarily, about activity, with the implication of keeping students active or busy, since other pedagogies could also achieve this without inviting or requiring students to make unique responses to their environment. Instead, Active Learning needs to be understood as being about *action*, that is, a set of pedagogies which enable individuals to co-author their reality by making unique contributions in an indeterminate environment over which they have limited control. However, this interpretation of action makes it a difficult concept to deal with as an object of pedagogical practice. This is because whereas activity is observable and its final product can be evaluated using pre-determined criteria, action seems to be a more cerebral phenomenon which can only be identified through deep questioning.



In this concluding discussion I propose that language, relationships and skills be identified as dimensions or aspects of action by which, as teachers, we can judge the extent to which our pedagogic practices provide spaces in which our students can “come into the world as unique, singular individuals”. In the following section I will reflect on each of these three dimensions in turn before proposing that Active Learning should be seen as a form of action-centred pedagogy which redresses the balance among the three functions of education which Biesta refers to as qualification, socialisation and subjectification.

Language use can be seen as varying in complexity and abstraction between the extremes of realist-representational forms at one end of the continuum, and rhetorical-responsive forms at the other. However, more than just varying in levels of complexity and abstraction, these forms actually reflect the extent to which our students are participating in true dialogue (conversation) in which their contributions are taken up by their peers and used in ways which represent further examples of authorship. Conversation in this sense clearly involves active listening as well as being listened to since it can only be performed by two or more individuals who are willing to respond to each other’s contributions. In this way, domination by certain members of the group can be seen as problematic as they might be silencing or curtailing the contributions of the other group members. This is not to deny the inherent value differential between the contributions of different individuals in terms of their relevance to a given task. However, in conversational task completion, it is important for each member to respond to the various contributions of all group members.

This notion of conversational language use has implications for teacher interventions both in the students’ home institutions before their arrival in the UK, and in their host institutions in mixed-nationality classrooms. In order to support international students before their arrival in the UK to become confident conversational users of language, language teaching needs be aimed at preparing students to deal with the kinds of complex and unpredictable situations they are likely to meet in Active Learning classrooms. This could be summed up as a conversational approach, which recognises that in addition to mastering the ability to use language in referential and representational ways, students need to be given opportunities to develop advanced rhetorical and

responsive skills which will enable them to take part in the complex negotiations required to perform a wide range of group work processes. For this to succeed it might be helpful for language teaching to take place within the context of academic classes, and not separated off as generic language instruction. Teachers in the role of facilitators in Active Learning classrooms in the host institution can also benefit from this approach since it will enable them to attend not only to whether their students are using the representational forms of language required for completing learning and assessment tasks, but also to the ways in which their students' language use manifests itself as rhetoric and response in fully participative interactions with other group members. By attending to the ways in which language is used in complex negotiation, it will be possible for teachers to evaluate their students' involvement in the process aspects of the task as well as the assignment outcomes, thereby helping their students to avoid premature closure.

This conversational approach can only make sense if viewed, not as an innovative teaching technique or style, but within the context of a fundamentally different conception of the purpose of education. In this broader sense, this conception of language allows us to see it not as a set of skills to be acquired, but as "a human practice in which students can participate and through which they can find new ways of expressing themselves, new ways of bringing themselves into the world" (Biesta, 2006: 139). In this way, Active Learning can be understood as providing students with opportunities to "author their realities" (Shotter's term), or using Biesta's terminology, opportunities for subjectification. This is not of course to deny the need or desire for students to learn how to communicate in comprehensible or grammatically correct language, since this is also an important function of education. However, this conversational conceptualisation recognises that, beyond its qualificatory and socialising functions, more attention needs to be paid to how language functions as a human practice.

Relationships can be conceptualised as a second aspect or manifestation of action. Using Berger and Luckman's notion of social structure, relationships within work groups seem to vary along a continuum between the extremes of anonymous relationships in which individuals treat each other as

contemporaries with whom they have minimal face to face contact on the one hand, and as consociates with whom they work face to face on a regular basis on mutually respectful terms. The question of whether the relationship between group members reflects a space for human action can be answered by observing the extent to which individuals attempt to see situations through the eyes of their group members. In this respect, Biesta's (2006) discussion of Arendt's (1998) notion of "visiting" is very useful. Visiting involves relating to others in ways which enable individuals to see things from those others' perspectives without falling into the opposing traps of either giving up one's own perspective (empathy) or allowing one's own perspective to predominate (tourism), since these both "tend to erase plurality" (Biesta, 2006: 91). Visiting ensures plurality by respecting the particularity of all group members, and is therefore the enactment of relationships by autonomous and mutually respectful human beings. This can be summed up as a practice-based or action-centred concept of relationality since it focusses on the ways in which relations are enacted.

The third aspect of action is metacognitive skills, which vary between, at one extreme, skills which are entirely dependent on one's culture and past experiences, and which therefore result in certain ways of learning and doing being seen as "normal" whilst others are ignored or rejected; and at the other extreme, skills which enable their possessors to respond to and participate in joint action with others, and which result in all members being aware of their own and their group members' respective roles in complex task completion. This kind of action can be evidenced through learning journals and reflective sub-tasks in which students are encouraged to discuss their interpretations of the learning process and their experience of participating in specific group tasks, perhaps using certain cognitive or activity frameworks such as the group work processes framework as scaffolding for their reflections.

Within Active Learning, the space for action can therefore be conceptualised as the extent to which students are able to utilise rhetorical-responsive forms of language to collaborate on mutually respectful terms (as consociates) in the co-creation of knowledge. In an Active Learning environment, all consociates are, by definition involved in the learning project and involve all others. So where

dysfunctional group dynamics are evident, these are seen as problematic, not just because they relegate certain group members to the status of contemporaries, but since they relegate all group members to that status. This is because even dominant group members can only be consociates if they respond to the other group members by allowing them also to author their beginnings.

Biesta (2006) explains how Western philosophy has shifted from consciousness, which takes the knowing subject (*ego cogito*) as the point of departure, to intersubjectivity, as exemplified by Dewey's communication; Mead's symbolic interaction; Wittgenstein's forms of life and Habermas's communicative action. In this tradition, Biesta recalls Arendt's understanding of action as dependent on plurality since "we can only come into presence in situations where we act upon beings who are capable of their own action" (Biesta, 2006: 49). For Biesta, the most important educational question therefore concerns inter-subjective space, and specifically requires us to ask ourselves whether our classrooms are spaces in which it is possible for people to come into presence as "unique singular beings".

Relating this question to the theme of my research, it would be proper to ask: "How much space for action is provided by Active Learning pedagogies?" Whilst most of the students I interviewed had positive comments on the opportunities for interaction and collaboration, for some of them at least, the space provided by Active Learning approaches was an uncomfortable one, which offered limited opportunities for action, and which sometimes forced them to undergo difficult encounters with other group members. Careful reading of their comments indicated for example that relational and language difficulties represented serious obstacles to their full participation in group work. However, regarded as a set of action-centred pedagogies, Active Learning seems to provide significantly more space for action than traditional approaches. In particular, by challenging students with elements of plurality and indeterminacy, these pedagogies afford students the opportunity to experience learning as a constructive process of joint action from which it is not possible to retire to one's private comfort zone in order to complete individual learning tasks.

Biesta (2010) has labelled the current social and political context of education as the “Age of Measurement”, an age in which the mantra of evidence-based practice has resulted in an obsession for measuring outcomes. In this climate it is tempting to recommend Active Learning pedagogies on the basis of their enabling students to achieve the learning outcomes prescribed by Business Management curricula more effectively than traditional pedagogies. However, as Biesta points out, effectiveness is an “instrumental value” that tells us something about the ability of certain processes to bring about certain outcomes, which can be easily measured using final grades for the purposes of comparison with alternative processes. The problem with basing our pedagogical approaches on instrumental values is that they tell us little about the desirability of such outcomes.

In order to understand the case for considering Active Learning pedagogies as action-centred approaches, it is necessary to engage with questions concerning the purpose of education, and Biesta’s conceptual framework identifying the three functions of education enables this case to be understood. By providing “a space in which unique, singular individuals can come into the world”, Active Learning pedagogies attempt to redress the balance between these three functions. However, it is also important for teachers to note that understanding their classroom as a “space for action” requires them to regard knowledge related to their subject as emerging from students’ interactions with each other as well as with the materials they provide. For some teachers this may require both adopting a practice-based perspective of learning and a shift in their understanding of their own role from an exclusive focus on the transmission of knowledge to a broader facilitating role which includes a responsibility for maintaining the plurality of their local educational environment.

## Appendices

## Appendix 1: The evolution of my research questions

(Table 10 below illustrates the first “fine-tuning” of my research questions in early October 2011 after transcribing the pre-pilot and pilot interviews, but before carrying out the main interviews)

**Table 10: Research Questions in October 2011**

Main research questions	Sub-questions
<p><b>How do Chinese students respond to the Active Learning pedagogies used at a UK business school?</b></p>	<p>In what ways do the previous educational experiences of Chinese students affect their learning experience on Business Management courses which adopt Active Learning pedagogies?</p> <p>What do Chinese students consider to be the greatest challenges facing them on these courses?</p> <p>How do their perceptions of challenge change during their sojourn in the UK?</p>
<p><b>How appropriate is the use of Active Learning pedagogies at a UK business school with large numbers of Chinese students?</b></p>	<p>Which teaching, learning and assessment approaches are favoured by Chinese students?</p> <p>How well do Chinese students feel they understand what is required of them on modules which use Active Learning pedagogies?</p> <p>How effectively do Chinese students feel Active Learning pedagogies improve their subject knowledge and metacognitive skills?</p> <p>What changes, if any, to the teaching, learning and assessment approaches would be welcomed by Chinese students?</p>

Table 11 shows how, after conversations with my supervisors, I had further refined my research questions:

**Table 11: Research Questions in mid-December 2011**

Main research questions	Sub-questions
<p><b>How do Chinese students describe their learning experiences on modules which use Active Learning pedagogies at a UK business school?</b></p>	<p>What do Chinese students consider to be the greatest opportunities and challenges facing them on these courses?</p> <p>What do Chinese students consider to be the important similarities and differences between their previous educational experiences in China and their experiences here?</p> <p>Which teaching, learning and assessment styles are favoured by Chinese students?</p>
<p><b>How effective do Chinese students consider Active Learning pedagogies to be in supporting their learning on these modules?</b></p>	<p>How well do Chinese students feel they understand what is required of them on these courses?</p> <p>How effective do Chinese students consider Active Learning pedagogies to be in providing opportunities to develop their metacognitive skills (e.g. awareness of their personal learning styles, cross-cultural skills and awareness of higher cognitive skills development)</p>



## **Appendix 2: Text of email and summaries sent to interviewees**

Dear name,

please find attached a summary of the interview you kindly did on date. It is intended to reflect the meaning of your responses and is based on a close reading of the transcription of the recording of your interview. However, it is possible that, because of mistranslation or my misinterpretation, I might have misunderstood your meaning in some areas. I would like you therefore to take a look at the summary and let me know if it is a true summary of your opinions. If it isn't, please let me know if you would like me to make any changes.

I would also like to ask your permission to use the information from this recording as evidence in my EdD and in any further publications or presentations I might undertake in the future. As you can see from this summary, personal names will not be given in order to avoid identification of yourself or anyone you mentioned in the interview. However, if at any time you wish to withdraw your permission, please let me know and I will delete your interview from my database.

Once again, I would like to thank you for giving up your time for this and for providing information which I feel will make a valuable contribution to any discussions about how we can improve our service to Chinese students who study on our management programmes in the future.

Best wishes,

Colin Simpson

### **Example 1: Summary of second Chinese interview and participant's response.**

#### Second Chinese Interview 28/11/11

This student said that before coming to the UK her expectations were that she would graduate on time with a Bachelor's degree in International Business and improve her English. She wants to study advanced management methods as she plans to run her own company one day. She felt these were her reasons for paying the high tuition fees to study here.

She felt that the main difference between studying in the UK and in China was the language as very few of her courses in China were taught in English and even some of her major courses used Chinese textbooks. In China, the class discussion is also in Chinese. On the other hand, she said there are so many Chinese students in some of the seminars here that there are few opportunities to speak English anyway. She has thought about trying to join groups with non-Chinese students, but feels that they actually prefer to sit together in the same way that Chinese students prefer to sit together.

She feels that studying here gives her the opportunity to experience different ways of learning. For example, in China the teachers always go over the main points to learn for the exam, whereas here you have to study hard by yourself after class and plan your time effectively. There are opportunities here to work with non-Chinese students, and the teachers here encourage the students to discuss freely and ask questions, whereas in China there is very little opportunity for student discussion.

This student then went on to discuss her experiences of group work here. She described how students here have to do research and look up references and then combine their work for the group assignments. As an example, she talked about the Operations Management module, where students have to give a group presentation which counts for 60% of the total mark for the module. She also mentioned the Cultural Issues module, where students had to give small group presentations which were not assessed. For this task the students were given a case study to discuss, then had to decide on the most important cultural problems illustrated by the case, and work out solutions. The assessment for that assignment was an individual written report, but the group members were supposed to agree on the same set of problems.

This student found the hardest thing about studying here to be the written work as she had not been required to do many formal essays during the first two years of her undergraduate programme in China. Writing an essay of between 1500 and 2500 words every week made her feel under pressure. Part of the problem is feeling unprepared to write essays. She said that even after consulting with the teacher after class, she sometimes didn't know if what she had written was right. The requirements for referencing are also very strict here and you lose marks for using the wrong format.

This student doesn't feel any of the courses are easy and had no chance to change any of the eight courses she is doing this year. She feels the style of lectures followed by seminars is a good combination as there are fewer students in the seminars so there is more chance to consult with the teachers. She feels that written assignments should all be double marked as the standard of assessment differs between teachers. She finds the assessment feedback useful, but although all of the assignment briefs have assessment guidelines, these are sometimes too general to be of much use. For example, they refer to "critical analysis" as an excellent standard, but don't make it clear what this actually is. She also feels that there is a great gap between the marks she expects for her written work and the marks she actually receives, although this could partly be because of her experience of the grading system in China, which is different from the one used here.

Asked how she knows when group work is going well, this student felt that it went equally well whether she worked with just Chinese students or in groups with some non-Chinese students. However, she was dissatisfied with her mark for the individual report for Cultural Issues because she learned that one of the other students had received a mark of 94%, and she couldn't understand how there could have been such a big gap between her marks and his.

Asked how she thought group projects supported her learning of subject knowledge, this student felt she benefitted greatly from discussing her ideas with group mates and getting their suggestions for improvements. She felt group work "enriches her ways of thinking". She went on to explain in detail how her group's work in the Cultural Issues module involved applying cultural theories to underlying problems, which would be useful for a company seeking to increase its profits. Being able to work with other students on this kind of assignment meant that she got more ideas than she would have had if she had just studied the case on her own. However, she felt that the success of group work depends on how active the group members are, and she felt that there were not enough good and active students in her seminar group.

Regarding which other kinds of skills, apart from academic subject knowledge, group work helps her to develop, this student mentioned communicative skills, which were developed by learning to communicate with non-Chinese students. She said that sitting in the right place (at the front) in the first class was important because this is when the groups are arranged. Group work also gives an opportunity to develop social skills, but unfortunately the students don't do anything together after class.

As suggestions for changes, this student strongly recommended double marking written assignments. She also suggested that Chinese and non-Chinese students should be divided equally in all classes so that they don't gather in single nationality groups. Unless this is done, there is no difference for Chinese students between studying here or in China.

Finally, this student noted that although there are differences in teaching styles between China and the UK, some of the teachers here are themselves Chinese.

**Sent:** Tue 28/02/2012 7:55 PM

**To:** SIMPSON, Colin

**Subject:** RE:

Dear Dr Colin,

I heard that you didn't feel well a couple weeks ago, are you feeling better now?

After reviewing the summary, it seems that most of the content are correct, but I could not remember very clearly as she [the Chinese interviewer] asked me all kinds of questions at that time. I guess you might confuse "the big gap" on the second page and the second paragraph, I wanted to say my level of work is very far from someone got 94% in his work, but it doesn't mean that I couldn't understand how there could have been such a big gap, I am just very surprised that he got 94%, amazing!! Apart from this, on the second page and the four paragraph, I am confused in the second sentence and the last one. Since I didn't remember what she asked me about, I guess I wanted to say sitting in the right place is important in the first class, especially when we had to arrange in a group and discuss together. People might always sit in the same place next lecture. This is a strategy if I want to discuss with home students. Finally, the last paragraph, I was a bit surprised that here are some Chinese tutors, it doesn't mean that I don't like Chinese tutors here.

Of course you can use it as your database, I would like to answer any questions in the future if possible. I hope this interview is useful for your research studies.

Best wishes,

## **Example 2: Summary of seventh English interview and participant's response.**

### Seventh English Interview 3/11/11

On the difference between teaching styles in China and the UK, this student commented that in China the teacher teaches everything to the students in detail and students don't have to think too much. In the UK, teachers teach the main points, but expect students to think about the work and learn independently.

This student noted that many Chinese students work together in the group work and so they speak Chinese and use examples from China. She mentioned that this year she has an Indonesian group mate so they always speak English together and she prefers this.

On similarities and differences between studying in China and in the UK, she said that in China teachers are patient in class and answer questions in detail, but in the UK teachers are sometimes happy to spend time after class emailing or talking with students about the work, sometimes even at weekends. This is less common in China. There are similar teaching skills in that in both countries teachers give general information about the courses, but where in the UK teachers encourage students to find out the answers to their questions, in China the teachers usually just give the answers straightaway. This means that Chinese students get used to expecting answers from their teachers.

On Active Learning modules, this student felt they had to find a lot of things out for themselves and sometimes their language made this difficult. She gave the example of the small business enterprise module where the students in her group couldn't do the financial report, so they went onto Chinese websites to find out how to do it. The Chinese students spend a lot of time looking up words on their iPhone dictionaries, and often don't want to answer the tutors' questions in class because there are some words they don't understand, especially because certain English words have a range of different meanings.

She found the small business module very realistic, like an exercise in a real life company. However, she felt that one of the difficulties on this module was that the students didn't have a firm understanding of all of the elements required to complete the assignment successfully, especially how to do financial reports. She felt that they needed to be better prepared for this kind of exercise, but said that in her case it could also be that she didn't always pay attention when the teacher was talking. She felt that the Active Learning style was helpful for learning subject knowledge, but only if you pay attention to the lecturer. This student said she didn't like traditional lectures because they are too long and students find it hard to concentrate, so she prefers the Active Learning styles, including group work and group presentations. Amongst the challenges of this kind of work she mentioned getting appropriate information from independent research, and putting it together in the correct format. She said that many Chinese students feel the need to check with teachers after class to make sure

they understand the assignments. This is because of their language difficulty as well as the style of the Active Learning assignments.

Asked about what can sometimes go wrong in group work, this student said that some students work harder than others, and many students just want to work on individual tasks by themselves, so they don't have an overall grasp of the whole group assignment as they don't know what the other students are doing. She feels that students need to learn to cooperate more, partly because some group members don't work hard enough, but also because some members don't keep in touch with the others.

This student mentioned that many Chinese students are under-confident about making contributions in class or in group work because they feel their English is not good enough and they don't want to be embarrassed. So they prefer to just listen. She prefers to work in mixed-nationality groups, but this year is working just with other Chinese students. This works well if all of the students understand the subject because they have no problems communicating. However, if you want to learn English, mixed-nationality groups are better. It also depends on the students' motivation: if the students are just interested in passing the module then working in just Chinese groups is fine. She enjoys working with her Indonesian partner because they speak English and she can learn about different ways of thinking.

This student enjoys the teaching style here and gave an example of a tutor who walks around the class a lot, asks questions and tells jokes in class. This tutor also makes a point of remembering students' names and asking questions of all students, not just the boys, like certain other tutors. This student also likes it when lectures are broken up with a short break to go out and buy coffee.

Asked how she knows when things are going well on Active Learning modules, this student said she likes to check her understanding with the tutor and with other students, which is very common with Chinese students.

On Active Learning teaching styles, this student said she had some experience of this already in China as some of her teachers liked to try out different styles or had studied abroad themselves. However, a difference is that tutors in China are more formal as they expect to be treated with the same respect as parents. By contrast, tutors and students here sometimes chat about everyday matters and even tell jokes. The traditional Chinese attitude to teachers also makes a lot of Chinese students sit quietly in class as they feel this is a way of showing respect.

On skills developed, this student felt that on Active Learning modules students developed teamwork and independent learning skills, both of which are important for later working life. As examples, she talked about researching information for assignments and managing her time, planning meetings with group members and planning a work timetable to complete the assignments. She feels that learning on Active Learning modules is more flexible and more relaxed, whereas in lectures it is harder to feel motivated. She mentioned how the students even do some of the group work together in restaurants in town.

On possible recommendations for changes, this student suggested giving students more time to practise presentations, because giving timed presentations is a difficult skill. She felt it was not necessary to give students

more time to prepare or to make the presentations longer, but to give the students timetabled, but non-assessed practice opportunities. She also mentioned that serious facial expressions and gestures from the tutors during presentations made the students feel nervous, so positive body language would be helpful. This student feels that over time it gets easier to communicate in English as you adapt, but it is very difficult for Chinese students in the first period of their stay.

**Sent:** Thu 01/03/2012 2:22 AM

**To:** SIMPSON, Colin

**Subject:** interview:

Hi, Colin

Thanks. I had little bit different view to Chinese students' behaviour in class. In China, we had over 60 people in the same room, but now we sit together about 26 Chinese in English class. It is better so much than the previous way of studying in the class because each of us is going to be noticed by teacher within questions and the processes of group discussion. However, we really need to improve the skill of speaking English and listening in the process of sitting in the class. I knew the Uni had arranged Chinese students sit in the same class with foreign students (including English students) one year ago and actually they had less communication than we thought. I suggest that the Uni arrange Chinese students and foreign students sit in the same classroom but the total number of students can be controlled between 23-30. The range of number is suitable to balance students' communication problems and their cooperation improvement, both of them need to learn more from each other after all. Thanks!

Your student

### Appendix 3: A memo on misinterpreting a participant's comments.

*I: Ok. What about understanding the other students?*

*CS9: The other students ... [pause] ... I think it wasn't a problem because I had, I think, three foreign students as group members. And sometimes we discussed our group work. And, because all of us are very patient, if we couldn't understand, we changed the words and explained what we meant. So I think it was ok. But if we wanted to discuss very deep questions or topics, it was a little different ... difficult.*

*I: That was the main difficulty. So, what you are referring to here is working with home students, right?*

[I think this is an incorrect conclusion as the student was talking about working with other foreign students. On the other hand, the term "foreign students" is sometimes used by interviewees to mean non-Chinese students, so I am not sure. If she was referring to working with other non-home students, then she seemed to be saying that because they were all speakers of English as a foreign language they were patient with each other and able to try to reword their utterances whilst having discussions. The problems occurred when they were trying to discuss "deeper" (presumably more complex) issues, where their lower level of language competence became an obstacle.

On the other hand, if by "foreign students", she means non-Chinese students, then she seems to suggest the same, i.e. that on basic issues communication was fine, but on more complex issues it became more difficult. Her later utterances seem to suggest that she was talking about working with other non-home students since her later comments tend to underline the difficulty of working with home students. If this is indeed the case, then the interview's conclusion: "What you are referring to there is working with home students" is incorrect. I should have given her more time and an opportunity to correct me here, but understand that the difficulties are partly due to deference and unwillingness to "correct" the interviewer. The lesson here is to be more sensitive, listen more carefully and not jump to premature conclusions.

This is a good example of the danger of misinterpreting students' comments. I clearly have misunderstood what the student meant by "foreign" students here, assuming that she meant home students (i.e. non-Chinese), but she actually meant international (i.e. "non-home" students). This is the only way the rest of her comments would make sense. The fact that she did not correct me despite offering clarification of her point (a clarification which was clearly incompatible with my first interpretation), shows just how difficult it is for some interviewees to express their views to an interviewer who is in a position of privilege both within the interview situation and more broadly within the university. In this case the interviewee is unable to openly challenge the (nonsensical) meaning making of the interviewer, and chooses to ignore this error and pursue her clarification, which results in an indirect challenge, since this clarification is at odds with my initial interpretation.]

#### **Appendix 4(a): a complete transcript.**

I: And I've got nearly two hours there, so that's fine if I just leave that there. Ok, the things that I'm talking to students about are about Active Learning pedagogies which is the Active Learning modules ... like simulations and group work projects and things like this, which you have on some of your modules. Yeah, perhaps this year, but certainly last year. And so I've been asking people to talk to me about that sort of thing, but before we go onto that, can I ask you: before you came to the UK, what differences in teaching and learning and assessment styles were you expecting that there would be between China and the UK?

CS17: Ok, so in China, the teacher in the class ... the teacher will teach everything for you. They will teach every detail ... every detail to the students. And the students, they also don't need to think too much, yeah? But in the UK, the teacher will teach the points, teach us the main points, and make us think about it, yeah? So it's more concerned about independent study.

I: Now, were you expecting that to be different before you came here? Was that a difference that you expected?

CS17: Maybe, because there are too many Chinese students. Sometimes I don't like it because we can always talk in Chinese. When we discuss, we can use Chinese to discuss. But fortunately, I'm in a group and there's one person who is from Indonesia so we can talk English, yeah? It's very good. But others, they always talk about [in] Chinese.

I: They talk in Chinese?

CS17: Yes. So maybe it's not good.

I: Ok, let me ask you: what, in general, what similarities and what differences do you feel that there are in the teaching and learning styles between China and the UK?

CS17: The teacher will ... if you ask the teacher they will explain in great detail. They will explain in detail and they will be patient. And the teacher in the UK, they will spend more time to teach you after the class. They can email with you. Even if it's on Sunday or Saturday, it's ok.

I: In the UK?

CS17: In the UK, yeah.

I: Ok, so communication with the teacher at the weekends ... you don't normally have that in China?



CS17: Yeah, sometimes the teacher ... sometimes, I think, the teacher will think maybe: It's my weekend so it's not my business. Yeah?

I: What about the similarities between the UK and China? Do you think in some respects that the university ... that the teaching styles at the universities is quite similar?

CS17: Ah, yes. So the teacher will ... how can I say? ... maybe the teaching skills ... the teaching skills will be similar, yeah.

I: What do you mean by that?

CS17: They will ... I mean, overall they will talk about the course in general and then they will explain it and ask questions to students and make us think about it. And then she will explain it to us. But in the UK, the teachers will ask you questions and then help you find out the answers with the questions. But in China, the teachers will say out the answers directly and we will feel: Ah so. And then we don't think about it too much.

I: Ok, so in China, you feel that you get less experience of finding the answer?

CS17: Yeah, yeah. You're always waiting for the answer.

I: Ok, right. That's interesting. Thank you. Let's, er ... let me ask you about the modules which use Active Learning teaching styles. So, for example, simulations and the modules with group projects, yeah? Can you remember doing modules that have this kind of style? [pause]. Can you remember the simulation module and the small business enterprise module?

CS17: The small business, yeah. You mean between the UK and China, right?

I: No, I'm just talking generally now about those modules because the style of teaching is different from more traditional styles, isn't it? Because the students do simulations and group work projects, and things like this. So can you tell me about your experiences on those modules? How did you get on?

CS17: [hesitant]. Yeah. Sometimes we couldn't understand the financial problems, so we had to ask the other students ... or the tutor. Or maybe we would talk about it with each other ... and search on the internet. And sometimes we would use translation. We would translate to Chinese and search the Chinese data ...

I: ... databases?

CS17: Yeah, Chinese databases. And then we could understand. Yeah.

I: Right, yeah. So, on those modules you didn't understand all the parts of the project?

CS17: No, we couldn't understand all of the course ... in English especially.

I: So you had to find out: You had to study to find out?

CS17: Yeah, so sometimes you will see the students, they use iphones ... , not telephones, mobile phones ... they use ... maybe you think they are playing, but actually they are not, they are translating. They translate, translate ... because sometimes you ask questions and the Chinese students don't understand, so they don't want to answer you. So they stay quiet, because we don't understand maybe one word so they can't understand the whole thing, so they translate, translate ...

I: That's interesting, the use of the mobile phone. It is distracting because some teachers probably think that the Chinese students are not paying attention because they are using their mobile phone, and they don't understand maybe.

CS17: Yeah, like me, I always translate. Yes, sometimes there is one English word which has many meanings, yeah? So sometimes we will get confused.

I: So, what else can you tell me about your experience on that module? On the simulation ... what were the things about that module which you found most challenging?

CS17: So, it was just like an exercise in society. Just like that. So we have a chance to contact real life ... in society. We can ... sometimes a small business ... we can open a business company and we operate it. So it's a good chance I think. So it's a real exercise.

I: Ok, you mean it's authentic, it's real?

CS17: Yeah, it looks like we are really opening a company. That's it, yeah.

I: Yeah, and what did you find difficult about that?

CS17: The challenging thing, I think ... [pause]. It's a lot of information and a lot of knowledge about a company's operation. Like management and financial issues ... we didn't understand at the start ... so we had to find out more about that and then we could study ... we could start to do the module. So we should know more about the knowledge and we can learn, yeah? We started to learn more about this kind of information on the internet or by asking other students.

I: So do you think that your knowledge of those sorts of areas of business were ... do you think that you didn't have enough knowledge at the beginning of that module? Is that what you were saying?

CS17: Yeah ... [pause]. You mean ...

I: So I'm asking: do you feel that your ...

CS17: Oh, I think so ... I have not mentioned about the point, I think?

I: Ok.

CS17: Right ... you can tell me, yeah? So what is the point, do you think? What do you want to know?

I: My question was, do you think that you had enough subject knowledge at the beginning of the module? Were you properly prepared to do that module?

CS17: No, sometimes because we ... sometimes maybe I'm lazy, maybe. I don't know the teacher or what they will teach us ... what they will talk about in the class, so we will wait. Maybe it's normal behaviour, I think, for me.

I: So, can I ask you: when we talk about those modules like that, the simulation and the small business enterprise, we consider them to be Active Learning because they are different from traditional modules where you just have a lecture followed by a seminar, yeah?

CS17: Yeah.

I: Do you feel that the style of teaching, the Active Learning style of teaching on those modules, do you think that it helped you to learn subject knowledge or was it not helpful?

CS17: Erm, I think helpful.

I: Helpful?

CS17: If you listen to the teacher ... what they taught, what they're saying carefully, I think it's helpful.

I: Yeah. Do you think that that style is more helpful or less helpful than a traditional style of teaching?

CS17: ... er ... [long pause].

I: Say, for example, with a lecture followed by seminars? ... [pause]. ... or essays? ... or an exam?

CS17: You mean the style?

I: Yeah.

CS17: You mean the style is essay?

I: Yeah. What we call ...

CS17: You mean the teaching style or ... ?

I: The teaching and the learning style. The things that you have to do on that module. Did they ... did that style of learning ... did it help you to learn subject knowledge or would you have found a more traditional approach with a lecture, seminar, maybe essays, would that have been better?

CS17: ... yeah, so I think, I don't like lectures.

I: You don't like lectures?

CS17: No, I don't like them. Most people don't like them. Because we have researched in the class last week, yeah? So most of the students, they don't like lectures because many students are sitting there and they listen to the teacher, yeah. We always ... are not concentrating on this topic, yeah? We are talking and discussing. So ...

I: So you prefer the Active Learning style of teaching and learning?

CS17: Yeah, and I think that presentations and essays is good, yeah? But it's hard.

I: Yeah? What kinds of things are hard about that?

CS17: So, [pause] ... maybe it's the searching for information for the subject of the assignment, yeah? So, and the structure, yeah? And ... what is the main point? So we will always ask the tutor after class, yeah? And we'll make sure we know it and we can start it. Yeah.

I: So, from what you're saying there, one of the difficulties about the Active Learning style is that sometimes you're not sure what is required?

CS17: Yeah, you're not sure.

I: you're not sure what you have to do?

CS17: Yeah, 'cos it's in English so we want to make sure.

I: That's interesting. What kinds of things on these modules, like the simulation, like group projects and things like that, Active Learning modules, what sorts of things sometimes go wrong on these modules? [pause]. What ... do you have any experiences ... any bad experiences on those modules where things didn't work very well for you?

CS17: [pause]. Er, you mean ... which ...

I: Well, say for example, on the simulation, where you have to work in groups like in the small business enterprise module you work in groups, and you know, any other modules like that where you have to work together with other students. What sorts of things sometimes go wrong? Or, what can go wrong? Do you have any bad experiences?

CS17: Oh, ok. Bad ... ?

I: Bad experiences.

CS17: Bad?

I: Bad.

CS17: Bad? How do you spell that?

I: Bad. B.A.D. Bad. Bad.

CS17: B.A.D. Oh, bad. Oh, bad experience. Oh yeah.

I: Can you give me any examples? Can you tell me what happened?

CS17: Last year, sometimes maybe we were in a group and some people wanted to work very hard. And some people, it's just like: it's not my business. If you do it, finish, and give me a task. Give me my own task and I will finish it, yeah? So sometimes when we finished this group work, we didn't know each part. Yeah, we didn't know each part. We only knew our own part. And actually we didn't even know exactly our own part. Yeah, sometimes. So, we always said, if it was in Chinese I'd understand it properly. Yeah? Just like that. So, maybe it's English. Sometimes people are afraid of learning when it's in English, so they will avoid it.

I: Right, so one of the problems you referred to there is, when you have group work, is trying to get people to put their work together in a group task?

CS17: And I think it's best to point it out: if you don't want to join us, please say it and keep quiet or please listen carefully. I know you don't want to do it, but you must do it. And I think it's good, yeah? Always the student will say: "No, I will. I will join you. Don't worry about it. I can work very hard." We can always phone him or her. You have to be patient and be hard. Some students will say: "I know. I'm doing it. Don't worry about it", but actually they're just sleeping. Sometimes, yeah, it's just hard to communicate.

I: Ah, right. So one of the problems ... do you think one of the problems with groups then is that some of the students don't work very hard?

CS17: Yeah, yeah. That's what I said.

I: That's what you were saying. So ...

CS17: Yeah, so ... but we can communicate I think.

I: Oh, you mentioned language as being a bit of a problem as well in that kind of work. Can you tell me a bit more about that? [pause]. In what ways is the English language a problem?

CS17: Yeah, everywhere English is a problem. Sometimes we can't understand one word and we can't answer you. Yeah, it's very important. But if, in a group work or in the class sometimes if there are many students and they are from other countries in Europe, you will feel: I don't want to say anything. Because you can speak Spanish, you can speak French, but we can't understand. We just understand English. But not everything. We don't understand all English words. So we are ... we don't want to say anything ... just listen.

I: So working in mixed groups is more difficult than working with just Chinese students?

CS17: Yeah. But actually, this year I am always working with Chinese students. But it's good. I think if the skill of the ... [pause for thought] ... if the skill of the subject is good. We can communicate very well. Yeah, and we can cooperate.

I: When you say: "If the skill of the subject is good ...", do you mean: if the students understand the subject? [I think she meant: if you get a good mark].

CS17: Yeah, and we can discuss, and we can say ... er different ways to explain and communicate with our traditional Chinese style.

I: So that works as well?

CS17: Yeah. It works very well. So it's easy.

I: So would you say that it's better to work with students of ... who are just Chinese ...?

CS17: Yeah.

I: ... or mixed nationality? Which is better?

CS17: I think if you want to learn English, if you want to practise, yeah? Maybe international groups would be better. But if you want to do this job ... really well, maybe Chinese ... maybe fifty per cent of the students should be from the same countries. That would be good, yeah. So, just like in our group. This year we have six people and five people are from China ... the same city and one person is from Indonesia and we have to ... I prefer to communicate with the Indonesian student. So ... and he likes us. Yeah, we always go to his flat, yeah?

I: So, it's better for your English?

CS17: Yeah, English is better, yeah, and we can communicate about Indonesia and Chinese, the cultures ...

I: The cultural differences?

CS17: Yeah, and we learn more about the different ways of thinking of different countries. It's very good.

I: It sounds very interesting.

CS17: Yeah.

I: Good. Let me just have a look at some of my questions. If I ask you, just in general, what kind of teaching styles do you prefer?

CS17: Teaching styles ...?

I: What kind of teaching styles do you prefer?

CS17: The style is the ... ?

I: The style of the teacher.

CS17: The teacher ...?

I: What kind of teaching style do you prefer?

CS17: Maybe, I think the teacher will ... [pause]. It's good here. [laughs]. Yeah. Because teachers, they have different teaching styles. But we can adapt to it, yeah. I think it's good.

I: So you don't have a particular preference for one type of style? You think a variety ...

CS17: Maybe ... [pause]. Maybe Lily Wang. Yeah, maybe Lily Wang.

I: What is it about her style that you like?

CS17: Her style is er ... she will go around ... she will go around and we can concentrate on her, and she will talk about the main point, and yeah. She will have ... she will ask some questions and she will make some jokes, yeah? And she will mention about everybody. Yeah, sometimes some teachers, they may prefer to ask boys, yeah? And the girls' names they can't remember. Like: "Ah, I forgot. What's your name?" But I found it ... everybody's name she can remember it. So maybe ...

I: That's interesting, yeah. And when you said at the beginning there, that she goes around, do you mean that she walks around? She walks around the classroom?

CS17: Yeah. That's good.

I: So she's not always at the front?

CS17: Yes. No, no. She walks around at the front. But some days, if a teacher always stands there, we want to sleep, yeah? We want to sleep.

I: Because it's hard to concentrate?

CS17: Yes, and if we take a break for five minutes it's good.

I: So, taking a break in class you like as well?

CS17: No, no. Just say: "Go out and get coffee and come back." It's five minutes yeah? So, we like it.

I: Yeah, ok, that's interesting. Thank you. So, just coming back to the thing that you said: ... sometimes it's a bit difficult at first to understand what is required on the Active Learning modules, so you ask the teacher to make sure.

CS17: Yes.

I: Now, when things are going well on those kinds of modules, how do you know they're going well? [pause]. How do you know that something is going well on Active Learning modules?

CS17: Maybe we can collect suggestions from other students. And maybe they have had experience before. And we can ask the tutor. And then ... with our own understanding ... we think: Ah, maybe it's good. When we start we will communicate again and ask: "Is it right? Are you sure? Yeah, maybe I will tell you." I heard from one teacher and one experienced student and they said: "Yeah, it's good. Yeah it's right." So we start.

I: So do you think that there's a difference between that kind of module and a traditional module? Because you're talking about asking students, asking the teacher, always checking to make sure that what you're doing is right. So, is the Active Learning style different from the traditional modules?

CS17: What is traditional?

I: What is traditional? A traditional module would be where the teacher stands at the front and gives a lecture and then you have a seminar ...

CS17: The teacher just talks about the subject? Just tells you?

I: Yeah, and then you have a seminar and essays to write or exams. Yeah, these are traditional because we've been doing this for many years.

CS17: Oh yes. In China it's ... the same in China.

I: Do you think it's more traditional in China, the style, or is it changing?

CS17: Maybe not. It's changing. Yeah it's changing.

I: So did you have experience already of Active Learning styles in China? So ... modules like simulations and things like that?

CS17: Yeah, maybe some teachers, they came from ... maybe they studied and graduated abroad. Or maybe they like to do the job, as a teacher, so they will research more learning and teaching skills, from the books, yeah? So it's good.

I: Yeah. So you had experience then, before you came here, of some teachers using different styles?

CS17: Actually, in the UK, we will feel that the teacher wants to be friends with you, yeah? We can tell jokes sometimes in class. If she smiles, we can say: "Oh, why do you always smile?" But in China, not, absolutely not.

I: So would you say that in China the situation is more formal perhaps than here?



CS17: Yeah, because in China we learn the traditional ways of thinking: teachers are like your parents so you should respect them. So, in our mind, in the Chinese mind, we will respect the teacher and not talk too much.

I: Ok. So you show your respect by being quiet?

CS17: Yeah, and we will say: hi. Just like this: hi. Yeah? Very polite and patient. But in the UK you can say: Hi Sofia, hi Libby. Just like that.

I: So you can enter into conversation with them more easily?

CS17: Yeah.

I: That's interesting. It sounds like that's an important difference.

CS17: Yes, so you can see that many Chinese students in the class, they will always keep quiet, yeah? Always keep quiet. And you think they are not paying attention, and maybe they're not. But maybe some of them are. So actually they ... it's the traditional thinking ways, yeah? We don't want to disturb your talking ... the teacher, yeah?

I: Ok, I understand.

CS17: It's about twenty years of thinking like that.

I: Yeah. It's interesting, isn't it? It is a difference. Ok, can I ask you a question about the skills that you learn on Active Learning modules? So, we talked before about the subject knowledge, and how much of the subject knowledge you learn on Active Learning modules. Do you feel that you learn other skills, apart from the subject knowledge on Active Learning modules?

CS17: Erm ... Active Learning modules?

I: Yeah, things like the simulation, the group work projects ... those styles of teaching which are active, yeah? [CS17 indicates understanding]. Do you learn different skills on those modules, apart from the subject?

CS17: Apart from the subject?

I: Yeah, apart from just general business knowledge. Do you learn different skills? Other skills?

CS17: Yeah. Yeah. Teamwork. Yeah, you have to learn teamwork ... how to communicate, yeah.

I: And do you consider that important?

CS17: Very important. Because if we start to work we should ... we will have teamwork everywhere, I think, yeah.

I: And are there any other skills like that that you can think that you have learned in these modules?

CS17: Independent skills, independent study ... and communicating with the teacher, yeah. Independent skills ... yeah, we ...

I: You mean independent learning? Independent learning skills?

CS17: Yeah.

I: So what ... what kinds of things ... ? What do you actually mean by that? What kinds of things do you do that are independent learning skills?

CS17: Independent is ... we will think more about it, yeah, think about it many times. And we will research. Yeah. We will go into the library to borrow books and get information from there.

I: Ok, so ... I suppose ... my next ...

CS17: And another point is: we will plan. We learn to help to plan ... a schedule, yeah?

I: Er ... help to plan ...?

CS17: The schedule is ... learning what time to go to the library and what time to contact or email the tutor. And what time to ... maybe we can communicate together ... or we will meet. Or in the town centre there is Starbucks and ... yeah.

I: So these are all things that you do as part of that module? Yeah? These are all important things?

CS17: Yeah. It's very good, I think.

I: So, can I ask you ... if you were to think of ... the traditional learning styles, would you say that in traditional classes you don't get those kinds of skills? Do you think that you learn those kinds of skills better with Active Learning than with traditional styles?

CS17: The ... I think there's a big difference for me ... a big difference. Here I feel more relaxed when I'm learning. I enjoy it, maybe ... it's more flexible. But maybe in traditional classes, maybe you will just learn ... just sitting in a class. And it's very heavy for us and we will always think: oh, I have a class tomorrow. It's bad. But in the UK you like to go to the campus.

I: Ok, so it's actually ...

CS17: You feel good.

I: It gives you more motivation?

CS17: Yeah, motivation. You can even be sitting in a restaurant and communicating with group members. It's good.

I: That's interesting. So, things like teamwork, and, as you were saying, independent learning ...

CS17: Yeah.

I: Do you think that independent learning is something you learn more on the Active Learning modules than on the traditional modules?

CS17: Active modules.

I: On the Active Learning modules?

CS17: Yeah. On the traditional modules you have to pay more attention to the teacher ... what they are saying ... what they are asking. You have to be patient, yeah. But sometimes we will get tired, because it's maybe three hours long and we will get tired ... and you want to take a break, but you must pretend to listen very patiently or you will not respect them. So it's tiring.

I: Ok, that's interesting. Can I ask you a last question? Really ... I think ... and this is about if you were asked ... if I asked you to recommend any changes to the teaching and learning and assessment styles ... that we have here at the Business School, what kinds of changes would you recommend, if any?

CS17: Er ... I think ... changes ... [pause]. Yeah, maybe sometimes we feel ... like just like the presentation ... the time ... always we don't have enough time for a presentation. And the teacher will say it's timed ... you have two minutes left ... you have five minutes ... like that. So we feel very nervous. I think if it's the first time on this module for a presentation, then we can have a practice or something else. Because we have a lot of information that we want to talk about and sometimes that is not professional of us, but we can learn, we can practise.

I: So there are two things there: one thing is perhaps making the presentation longer ...

CS17: Yeah ... no, not longer. Maybe you can give us a chance to practise.

I: Ok, so build in more time for preparation and practice?

CS17: No, not preparation. Do not take more time, because it's hard. We will be nervous if you give us more time. Yeah. Because we want a short time, and we want to practise first and not record the score. Yeah, do not ... not formal. And then, maybe the day after and afterwards, on another day, start again.

I: Yeah, to do it in a formal way. So, not to make them longer, but to build in a practice ... where you get the chance to practise it first.

CS17: Yeah, and we want, maybe sometimes we prefer it if the teacher would keep a smile, because sometimes we don't have enough time. The teacher, they become less smiley.

I: You mean too serious?

CS17: Yeah. Very serious. And then we can see it from her of his eyes. It makes us very nervous. Yeah, and embarrassed. I'm always saying: sorry, sorry, sorry. Because we are international students. We don't have more communicate [??] with the teacher, so we will feel more nervous. Because we are international, yeah? Just like that.

I: Yeah ... so when ... I'm not quite sure I caught that. When you said: "We're international students so we don't have ..." er, what? We don't have ...?

CS17: We will er ... in China we will respect the teacher, but maybe in the UK the teacher will make us more relaxed ... Ah, if you keep quiet and change your mind ... change your attitude, sometimes we will feel: "Ah, am I not respecting you?" And that makes us nervous, even if we are doing a presentation ... at that time. Yeah ... afraid. It was an experience last week for me in my group. Everybody felt very nervous.

I: Do you feel that over time you get more used to doing this kind of thing? That your experience changes?

CS17: Er ... so you mean the ...?

I: Over time. Because at the beginning ... I imagine, at the beginning, t's much more difficult, yeah?

CS17: Yeah.

I: Does it get easier?

CS17: Now you mean?

I: Yeah:

CS17: Yes, of course. I mean the ... actually I had a bad experience in my undergraduate course. I think you know it. But now, I think it's good for me and I'm happy now. Because I can communicate and I can ... yeah, I can talk with my friends and ... yeah, it's good. Maybe I know more about ... maybe I have adapted to here.

I: Ok, so over time it gets easier?

CS17: Yeah, but actually ... actually we have Chinese students in the class ... maybe it's good, yeah? Maybe it's good, because sometimes if you're in a group ... we have tried before ... English, Spanish, Indonesian, Chinese, Malaysian ... we have different ways of thinking and maybe some of the students, they want to talk to you. And maybe they want to do it. Yeah, it's very hard. And we don't have their mobile numbers. So it's very hard.

I: Yeah, so the communication's difficult?

CS17: Yeah, we have no confidence to finish it so we will feel it's very hard and then we don't want to talk to the tutor.

I: Yeah, those sorts of problems in communicating with other group members, some other students have talked about as well. Right, well thanks very much, I'm going to call a halt there ...

CS17: Ah, I talk too much [laughs].

I: No, you didn't talk too much at all. You talked a very useful amount ...

# Appendix 4(b): Example of coded transcript

I: That's interesting, yeah. And when you said at the beginning there, that she goes around, do you mean that she walks around? She walks around the classroom?  
 CS17: Yeah. That's good.  
 I: So she's not asleep at the front?  
 CS17: Yes. No, no. She walks around at the front. But some days, if a teacher always stands there, we want to sleep, yeah? We want to sleep...  
 I: Because it's hard to concentrate?  
 CS17: Yes, and if we take a break for five minutes it's good.  
 I: So, taking a break in class, you like as well?  
 CS17: No, no. Just say "Go out and get coffee and come back". It's five minutes, yeah? So, we like it.  
 I: Yeah, ok, that's interesting. Thank you. So, just coming back to the thing that you said... sometimes it's a bit difficult at first to understand what is required on the Active Learning modules, so you ask the teacher to make sure.  
 CS17: Yes.  
 I: Now, when things are going well on those kinds of modules, how do you know they're going well? [pause]. How do you know that something is going well on Active Learning modules?  
 CS17: Maybe we can collect suggestions from other students. And maybe they have had experience before. And we can ask the tutor. And then... with our own understanding... we think: Ah, maybe it's good. When we start we will communicate again and ask: "Is it right? Are you sure? Yeah, maybe I will tell you." I heard from one teacher and one experienced student and they said: "Yeah, it's good. Yeah it's right." So we start.

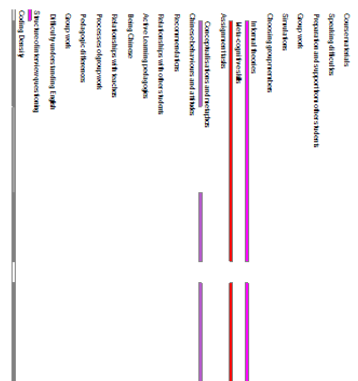
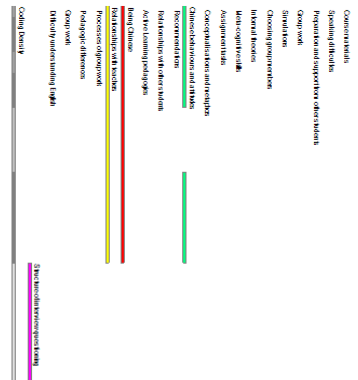
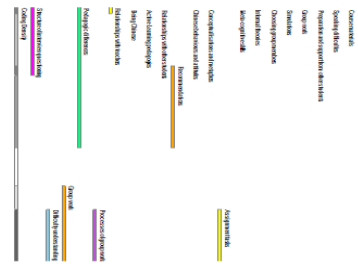
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I: So do you think that there's a difference between that kind of module and a traditional module? Because you're talking about asking a student, asking the teacher, always checking to make sure that what you're doing is right. So, is the Active Learning style different from the traditional modules?  
 CS17: What is traditional?  
 I: What is traditional? A traditional module would be where the teacher stands at the front and gives a lecture and then you have a seminar...  
 CS17: The teacher just talks about the subject? Just talk you?  
 I: Yeah, and then you have a seminar and essays to write or exams. Yeah, these are traditional because we've been doing this for many years...  
 CS17: Oh yes, in China it's... the same in China.  
 I: Do you think it's more traditional in China, the style, or is it changing?  
 CS17: Maybe not. It's changing. Yeah, it's changing.  
 I: So did you have experience already of Active Learning style in China? So... modules like simulations and things like that?  
 CS17: Yeah, maybe some teachers, they came from... maybe they studied and graduated abroad. Or maybe they like to do the job as a teacher, so they will research more learning and teaching skills, from the books, yeah? So it's good.  
 I: Yeah, so you had experience then, before you came here, of some teachers using different styles?  
 CS17: Actually, in the UK, we will feel that the teacher wants to be friends with you, yeah? We can tell jokes sometimes in class. If the smiles, we can say: "Oh, why do you always smile?" But in China, not, absolutely not...  
 I: So would you say that in China the situation is more formal perhaps than here?!

CS17: Yeah, because in China we learn the traditional ways of thinking, teachers are like your parents so you should respect them. So, in our mind, in the Chinese mind, we will respect the teacher and not talk too much.  
 I: Ok. So you show your respect by being quiet?  
 CS17: Yeah, and we will say: hi. Just like this: hi. Yeah? Very polite and patient. But in the UK you can say: Hi Sofia, hi Libby. Just like that.  
 I: So you can enter into conversation with them more easily?  
 CS17: Yeah.  
 I: That's interesting. It sounds like that's an important difference.  
 CS17: Yes, so you can see that many Chinese students in the class, they will always keep quiet, yeah? Always keep quiet. And you think they are not paying attention, and maybe they're not. But maybe some of them are. So actually they... it's the traditional thinking ways, yeah? We don't want to disturb your talking... the teacher, yeah?  
 I: Ok, I understand.  
 CS17: It's about twenty years of thinking like that.  
 I: Yeah, it's interesting, isn't it? It is a difference. Ok, can I ask you a question about the skills that you learn on Active Learning modules? So, we talked before about the subject knowledge, and how much of the subject knowledge you learn on Active Learning modules. Do you feel that you learn other skills, apart from the subject knowledge on Active Learning modules?  
 CS17: Erm... Active Learning modules?  
 I: Yeah, things like the simulation, the group work projects... those styles of teaching which are active, yeah? [CS17 indicates understanding]. Do you learn different skills on those modules, apart from the subject?  
 CS17: Apart from the subject?

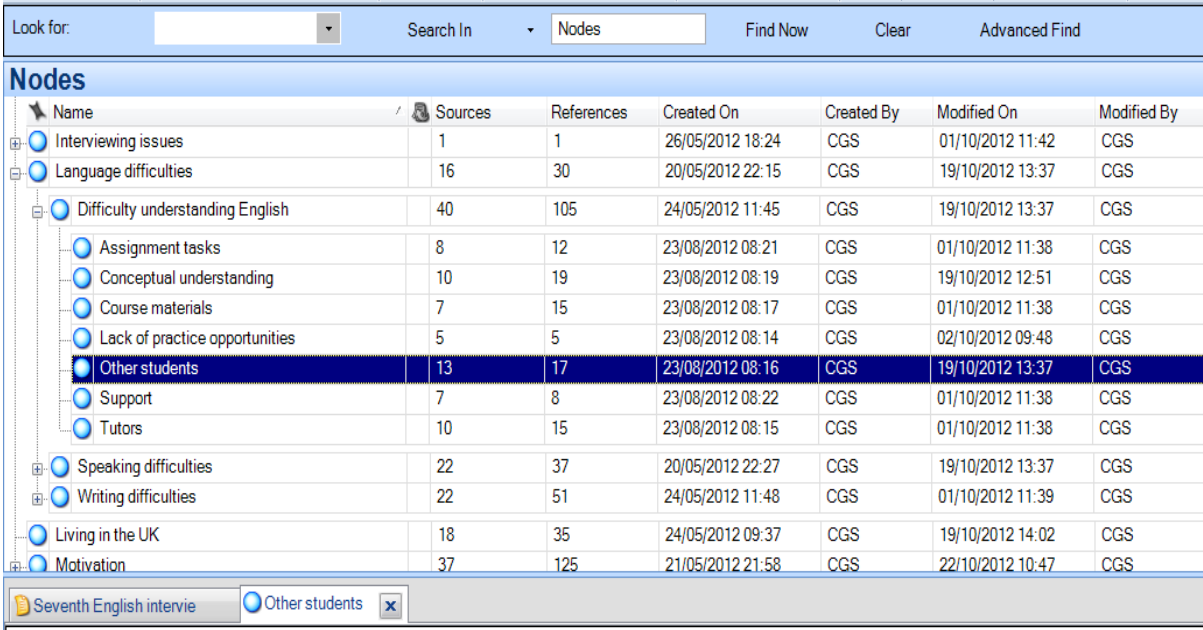
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I: Yeah, apart from just general business knowledge. Do you learn different skills? Other skills?  
 CS17: Yeah. Yeah. Teamwork. Yeah, you have to learn teamwork... how to communicate, yeah.  
 I: And do you consider that important?  
 CS17: Very important. Because if we start to work, we should... we will have teamwork everywhere, I think, yeah.  
 I: And are there any other skills like that that you can think that you have learned in these modules?  
 CS17: Independent skills, independent study... and communicating with the teacher, yeah. Independent skills... yeah, we...  
 I: You mean independent learning? Independent learning skills?  
 CS17: Yeah.  
 I: So what... what kinds of things...? What do you actually mean by that? What kinds of things do you do that are independent learning skills?  
 CS17: Independent is... we will think more about it, yeah, think about it many times. And we will research. Yeah. We will go into the library to borrow books and get information from there.  
 I: Ok, so... I suppose... my next...  
 CS17: And another point is: we will plan. We learn to help to plan... a schedule, yeah?  
 I: Er... help to plan...?  
 CS17: The schedule is... learning what time to go to the library and what time to contact or email the tutor. And what time to... maybe we can communicate together... or we will meet. Or in the town centre there is Starbucks and... yeah.  
 I: So these are all things that you do as part of that module? Yeah? These are all important things?



## Appendix 4(c): Nodal analysis.

Excerpt from a node showing sections from interviews and memos coded under the subcategory “Difficulty understanding English (other students)”.



Name	Sources	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Interviewing issues	1	1	26/05/2012 18:24	CGS	01/10/2012 11:42	CGS
Language difficulties	16	30	20/05/2012 22:15	CGS	19/10/2012 13:37	CGS
Difficulty understanding English	40	105	24/05/2012 11:45	CGS	19/10/2012 13:37	CGS
Assignment tasks	8	12	23/08/2012 08:21	CGS	01/10/2012 11:38	CGS
Conceptual understanding	10	19	23/08/2012 08:19	CGS	19/10/2012 12:51	CGS
Course materials	7	15	23/08/2012 08:17	CGS	01/10/2012 11:38	CGS
Lack of practice opportunities	5	5	23/08/2012 08:14	CGS	02/10/2012 09:48	CGS
Other students	13	17	23/08/2012 08:16	CGS	19/10/2012 13:37	CGS
Support	7	8	23/08/2012 08:22	CGS	01/10/2012 11:38	CGS
Tutors	10	15	23/08/2012 08:15	CGS	01/10/2012 11:38	CGS
Speaking difficulties	22	37	20/05/2012 22:27	CGS	19/10/2012 13:37	CGS
Writing difficulties	22	51	24/05/2012 11:48	CGS	01/10/2012 11:39	CGS
Living in the UK	18	35	24/05/2012 09:37	CGS	19/10/2012 14:02	CGS
Motivation	37	125	21/05/2012 21:58	CGS	22/10/2012 10:47	CGS

[<Internals\Fifth Chinese interview>](#) - § 1 reference coded [1.82% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.82% Coverage

If I have to choose a local company, for example, a Chinese national company, I prefer to work with Chinese classmates because we have the same background knowledge and it's easy to communicate with each other. So I think how the groups are arranged should depend on what kind of group work is undertaken.

[<Internals\First Chinese interview>](#) - § 3 references coded [6.66% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.09% Coverage

When we talk about studying, I can follow the foreign students. But when we talk about the issues of daily life, I can hardly catch their main points.

Reference 2 - 4.75% Coverage

### CS20:

I've been studying here for the past year. I felt that my group members were quite nice. When we first met and got to know each other, I told them in advance that I preferred them to speak slowly with me for I might not be able to follow them. They were quite considerate. In our group work, they explained to me in detail what I was supposed to do. And sometimes, after I finished my part, they would help to check my work including the grammar and spelling. When

we had presentations, they would help to check my writing including the wording and sentence-making. Then I would rehearse my presentation while they helped to improve my pronunciation.

Reference 3 - 0.82% Coverage

**Interviewer:**

Do they really notice your difficulty?

**CS20:**

Yes, they do. And they do speak more slowly with me.

[<Internals\\First pilot interview>](#) - § 2 references coded [2.49% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.47% Coverage

CS8: Yes, it's ... it depends on whether their group, or all the members of their group are all Chinese. So I think it's similar. But, I think, you know in BM305 and BM304 there are not really many non-Chinese students. Most of the students are Chinese. So if there is a group with one foreigner, the language will affect the process of the course, but most of the groups have no foreign, er, non-Chinese.

Reference 2 - 1.03% Coverage

But some others, especially girls, they don't really like to work together with non-Chinese because they are shy. They are afraid. Because group work needs many meetings, they are afraid. Some Chinese students, if they have not enough English skills, they are afraid of working ...

[<Internals\\Fourth English interview>](#) - § 2 references coded [2.75% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.43% Coverage

How difficult did your language make it for you to study here?

CS14: I think it's also quite difficult. Like, when I first arrived here I needed to be familiar with the pronunciation and some like local sayings.

Reference 2 - 1.33% Coverage

CS14: Local sayings, yeah. It's quite difficult. Maybe we need to spend two or three months to get used to ... you need to listen, you need to understand what the local people say. That's a problem.

[<Internals\\Second Chinese interview>](#) - § 1 reference coded [2.23% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.23% Coverage

**Interviewer:** How do you know when your group work on these modules is going well?

**CS21:**

The previous AT&T project went well because all of the group members were Chinese and we communicated in Chinese without any difficulty. Another project we are doing now is about operations. There are two foreign students in



my group. Up to now we have been working well with each other.

[<Internals\\Second pilot interview>](#) - § 1 reference coded [1.24% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.24% Coverage

I: Ok. What about understanding the other students?

CS9: The other students ... [pause] ... I think it wasn't a problem because I had, I think, three foreign students as group members.

[<Internals\\Seventh English interview>](#) - § 1 reference coded [0.59% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.59% Coverage

But if, in a group work or in the class sometimes if there are many students and they are from other countries in Europe, you will feel: I don't want to say anything.

[<Internals\\Sixth English interview>](#) - § 1 reference coded [3.50% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 3.50% Coverage

I: Ok, can you give me any examples of difficult experiences or negative experiences that you've had with group work?

CS16: Er, when I came here, in the first year, and the group members were all English ... English students, and when we discussed, they spoke too fast and I couldn't understand. And sometimes I just sat there and I couldn't understand anything. And when they asked me a question, I'd say: "I don't know. I have no idea."

[<Memos\\Summary of comments about living in the UK>](#) - § 1 reference coded [2.35% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.35% Coverage

CS14: Local sayings, yeah. It's quite difficult. Maybe we need to spend two or three months to get used to ... you need to listen, you need to understand what the local people say. That's a problem.

[<Memos\\Summary of comments on group work>](#) - § 1 reference coded [0.96% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.96% Coverage

If I have to choose a local company, for example, a Chinese national company, I prefer to work with Chinese classmates because we have the same background knowledge and it's easy to communicate with each other. So I think how the groups are arranged should depend on what kind of group work is undertaken.

[<Memos\\Summary of comments on metacognitive skills>](#) - § 1 reference coded [1.21% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.21% Coverage

If I have to choose a local company, for example, a Chinese national company, I prefer to work with Chinese classmates because we have the same background knowledge and it's easy to communicate with each other. So I think how the groups are arranged should depend on what kind of group work is undertaken.

[<Memos\\Summary of comments on speaking difficulties.>](#) - § 1 reference coded [3.60% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 3.60% Coverage

In our group work, they explained to me in detail what I was supposed to do. And sometimes, after I finished my part, they would help to check my work including the grammar and spelling. When we had presentations, they would help to check my writing including the wording and sentence-making. Then I would rehearse my presentation while they helped to improve my pronunciation.

[<Memos\\Summary of comments on the processes of group work>](#) - § 1 reference coded [1.53% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.53% Coverage

If I have to choose a local company, for example, a Chinese national company, I prefer to work with Chinese classmates because we have the same background knowledge and it's easy to communicate with each other. So I think how the groups are arranged should depend on what kind of group work is undertaken.

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