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### Cooperative learning on an international masters

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## **Title: Cooperative learning on an International Masters**

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### **Abstract**

Postgraduate taught provision in Anglophone higher education contexts is becoming increasingly populated by cohorts of students from a wide range of linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds. However, the voices of these students on their learning experiences remain largely unheard. Little previous research exists on the experiences of higher degree students as they participate in group work in multi-cultural settings. This study investigates the perspectives of students from a variety of educational backgrounds on their experiences of cooperative learning in multi-national groups on a Masters programme at a UK university. Seven focus groups were conducted with students from a range of countries including Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC) and non-CHC backgrounds. Students perceived group work as often lacking adequate structure, leading to feelings of confusion and insecurity. While it was apparent that a complex interplay of cultural, cognitive and linguistic factors impacted on the functioning of collaborative learning, the data highlighted the need to provide students with more structure and guidance for cooperative learning environments and the importance of creating intercultural learning opportunities for students to better understand the impact of cultural backgrounds on approached to cooperative learning in multi-national situations.

**Keywords:** Cooperative learning; Internationalisation; International students; Pedagogy

### **Introduction**

The Higher Education Statistics Agency reports that in 2013, 2014 and 2015, the top ten non-EU sending countries of international students to the UK, included three Confucian-Heritage-Cultures; China (sending more than five times the number of students sent by any other country on that list or than any EU member state), Hong Kong and Singapore (HESA, 2017). Thus, international student cohorts in UK higher education (HE) institutions are characterized by a predominance of students from Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC), offering both opportunities and challenges for building intercultural understanding. Cooperative learning is one area where cultural diversity plays out. This study explores higher degree students' experiences of cooperative learning on a one-year UK Masters' programme. The paper contributes to the

student voice in the HE literature, speaking to understandings of learning within culturally diverse student cohorts, thus enriching and deepening our understanding of the nexus of factors that interact to generate successful or unsuccessful cooperative learning events in HE settings.

HE teaching typically combines direct (e.g. lectures) and cooperative (e.g. group work) modes of learning. More recently, e.g. in the UK and the USA, social constructivist views of learning have inspired a move away from 'traditional' lecture models towards cooperative learning (Phipps et al. 2001). Cooperative learning can range from informal group discussions to structured activities focusing on team formation and accountability (Dingel, Wei and Huq, 2013). In this paper, the term refers to all forms of learning requiring some form of group work towards a common goal. Direct teaching refers to the teacher-directed approach typified by the lecture.

### **Cooperative learning**

Cooperative learning can provide a means for students of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to come together (Wright and Lander, 2003). Furthermore, such forms of learning offer opportunities for interactive engagement, seen to encourage student participation, stimulate critical thinking and requiring peer interaction (Tlhoale et al., 2014). In turn these features are considered to promote deep learning.

Underpinning cooperative learning is Vygotsky's student-centred notion of Social Constructivism (Barkley, Cross and Majro, 2005), whereby students assimilate new knowledge constructing their own understandings shaped by prior knowledge, experience and the learning context. This view of learning aligns with Brew's (2012) notion of knowledge as a product of interpretation and negotiation. Such a view gives central importance to peer interactions and dialogue (Svinicki, 2004). Within social constructivism, social interdependence theory proposes that cooperative learning relies on positive goal interdependence. Lewin (1935) argued that the essence of a group lies in the interdependence created by common goals. Laal (2013) notes that group interdependence can be positive (cooperation), negative (competition), or non-existent (individualistic efforts).

For many universities in the UK and beyond, effective engagement with others, implying skills such as problem-solving, turn-taking, negotiation and so on, has come to be considered a key graduate attribute. The implication seems to be then that these skills *can* and *should* be taught, but also that we should not assume that students already possess them, although this view is not uncontested (Barrie, 2007). Cooperative learning provides a context for practising and developing such skills. However, these opportunities are only maximised if cooperative learning events are characterised by a set of basic elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, social skills training, and group processing (Johnson et al. 1981). Successful cooperative learning also requires students to be open to the approach, understanding its objectives, conventions and educational benefits. The absence of these elements can result in a 'decline into non-functional groups' (Phipps et al. 2001). Nevertheless, much cooperative learning in HE settings is rather ad-hoc, not necessarily conforming to the elements outlined by Johnson et al. (1981) and focusing exclusively on content-area learning rather than on the skills of cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning can be considered a subset of peer learning, seen to benefit students when clearly structured and organized (Hodgson, Benson and Brack, 2014). However, Wright and Lander (2003) argue that university settings often require that students work in groups not of their choosing and that in this context students' attitudes towards group work are crucial in determining the success of cooperative learning. CHC learners in particular, are seen to be sceptical about the value of peer learning and assessment due to a Confucius-inspired perception of knowledge and expertise as lying with the teacher rather than peers (Liu and Carless, 2006).

Despite the considerable body of research on the effects of cooperative learning, little is known about the perceptions and experiences of this mode of learning among students from different cultural and educational traditions.

### **Perceptions of cooperative learning**

In a study investigating students' perceptions of working in international groups, Volet and Ang (1998) found that both Australian and Singaporean/Malaysian students preferred to work in culturally-similar peer groups where group members agreed with rather than challenged their way of thinking. This is particularly significant given the internationally diverse context of U.K. postgraduate education outlined earlier in this paper, inevitably requiring students to work in culturally diverse cooperative learning groups. Phipps et al. (2001) found that, while some cooperative learning aspects are positively received by students, this mode of learning is generally considered ineffective in terms of motivation and learning. Students highlighted a need for greater guidance to avoid learning going off task or lacking direction. The authors thus proposed that effective cooperative learning requires considerable planning and structure.

Indeed, highly structured cooperative learning can result in positive learning experiences as observed in Hänze and Berger's (2007) comparison between a collaborative jigsaw activity, and traditional direct instruction. The former resulted in increased cognitive activation and involvement, stronger intrinsic motivation and greater topic interest. Likewise, Peterson and Miller (2004) found that cooperative learning, when compared with large group learning, enhanced student engagement and optimised levels of challenge; although students reported being more self-conscious and having more difficulty concentrating during group-work. Another key aspect of cooperative learning is the perception of the teacher's role. McCabe and O'Connor (2014) found that university students expect an effective teacher to be able to direct, offer guidance and provide constructive criticism and advice, playing the role of 'silent manager' (353).

### **Culture and cooperative learning**

Recent educational research has placed emphasis on the importance of sociocultural and contextual influences on teaching, learning and understandings of knowledge (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This has led to a more nuanced understanding of the situated nature of learning balanced against a desire to avoid false dichotomies of educational approaches and cultures (Ryan and Louie, 2007). One such dichotomy characterises CHC students as preferring teacher-led learning, and non-CHC students preferring cooperative approaches. This dichotomy is problematic because educational cultures differ between Mainland China and 'Commonwealth background' contexts such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, in part because of differing historical backgrounds (Li, Remedios and Clark, 2010). While research conducted in Hong Kong and

Malaysia (Tiong and Yong, 2004) suggests that students react positively to cooperative learning, in exploring high school ESL learners, Liang (2004) found more conflicting perceptions among Mainland Chinese learners. Chan and Rao (2009) identify ways in which a Western interpretative lens has led to misrepresentative dichotomization of teaching and learning processes among Chinese students. Examples include: memorization vs understanding where memorisation is seen in western contexts as surface-level learning and Chinese students instead use memorization to achieve understanding and higher-level learning outcomes (Dahlin and Watkins, 2000); effort versus ability where western psychologists posit effort and ability in opposition to each other, while Chinese learners believe that ability can be improved by hard work (Hau and Salili, 1996) and extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation, where western literature proposes intrinsic motivation as essential for deep learning, while Chinese learners deploy a variety of extrinsically motivated strategies to achieve deep and meaningful learning outcomes (Biggs and Watkins, 1996).

The CHC learner has been characterised by some as ‘passive, dependent, surface/rote learner prone to plagiarism and lacking critical thinking’ (Ryan and Louie, 2007, 406), not adapting well to cooperative learning. Arguably, such a characterisation is underpinned firstly by misunderstandings of the CHC learner (Gram et al. 2013). Wen and Clement (2003), argue the important role that the notion of ‘face’ among CHC learners plays, leading students to be more sensitive to the judgements of others, and to lessen the possibility of making mistakes by avoiding participation. Secondly, a dogmatic understanding of what constitutes effective interaction in group settings may also generate misunderstanding. One such example is perceptions of the role of silence in learning; in contexts adopting social-constructivist models of learning, silence is seen as a failure to learn (Jaworski and Sachdev, 2004) and full participation is characterized by verbal contribution to the group. However, this conceptualization of silence has been challenged in Asian educational settings, where silence is recognized as having a communicative purpose. Working in Hong Kong, Jin (2012) provides empirical evidence of silence being used as a means of enacting active participation in problem-based learning. In a study considering cultural approaches to cooperative learning, Wright and Lander (2003) compared Australian-born Anglo-European students and overseas-born South East Asian students. They found significant differences in the number of verbal interactions of both groups when placed in mono-ethnic groups versus bi-ethnic groups. This was particularly strong among the South East Asian students. The authors interpreted the findings to suggest that South East Asian students felt inhibited by the presence of the Australian students in the bi-ethnic grouping. A key implication of this study was the need for cooperative learning approaches to be culturally responsive and to allow for a redefining of group roles.

These studies highlight important differences in the characterisation of learning processes across cultural contexts and the ways in which culture and learning approaches interact to shape participation. The need to problematize the application of educational philosophies across contexts without considering fundamental differences in conceptualizations of effective learning clearly emerges from previous literature. Furthermore, the use of any forms of labels, in this case CHC and non-CHC, while pragmatically inevitable is always conceptually problematic. The influence of CHC and non-CHC philosophies on learning will no doubt continue to attract debate. Nevertheless, beyond this distinction lie also a range of factors that play a part in attitudes and approaches to learning, whether parental influence, prior learning experiences,

beliefs about learning and so on; namely individual learner differences. Research exploring the ways in which individual and group differences interact to shape cooperative learning experiences would constitute a meaningful contribution to the field.

### **Research Focus and Research Questions**

Most research investigating effects of cooperative learning has been conducted with participants educated in systems where cooperative learning is frequently implemented, thus being familiar with the norms and expectations of such learning. By contrast, learners from educational backgrounds where group work is less frequently utilized are likely to require a process of acculturation to cooperative learning. This can be particularly demanding in the case of one-year Masters programmes, which allow scant time for adaptation. There is a lack of research on the perspectives of students from diverse cultural backgrounds on group work in such contexts. The exploration of these perspectives is fundamental for understanding the student experience and developing HE pedagogies responsive to the habitus that students bring to cooperative learning contexts.

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

- What are students' experiences of cooperative learning?
- To what extent can cultural background be seen to play a role in these perspectives?

### **Methodology**

Data reported here was part of a larger study investigating students' experiences of an MSc TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) programme through the lenses of expectations, relevance and impact. This paper focuses on findings related to students' expectations and experiences specifically relating to modes of learning. The study adopted a multi-method approach, using questionnaires and focus groups as complementary data collection tools. Questionnaires provided an understanding of the broad landscape of students' views, while focus groups yielded richer, more in-depth understandings.

### **Context**

This study was conducted at a UK Russell Group University. The study (the MSc TESOL programme) involved a cohort of 245 students, most of whom took the programme over a period of 12 months. 88% of students came from CHC contexts (China, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan), and the remainder from Europe and the USA.

Courses on the programme typically comprised a weekly one-hour lecture followed by a two-hour workshop. Lectures provided an overview of the topic, focussing on key theoretical concepts and research findings, while workshops comprised a range of cooperative learning activities, allowing students to contextualize concepts within their own frames of reference, and to critically compare different theories to practice.

### **Participants and Procedures: The Questionnaire**

The questionnaire surveyed students' perceptions and experiences in relation to the broader scope of the study. Items were on a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire gathered data on the

degree of alignment between students' pre-programme expectations, and their actual experiences. It was administered to the participants in January of the academic year. 87 valid responses were collected. This included: 77 females and 10 males; an age range of 21-44 (mean = 25.2); 11 different nationalities, including, Chinese (59), Taiwanese (7), UK (3), Greek, Japanese, Korean (2 each), US, Swedish, Cypriot, Chilean, Czech (1 each). Of 68 students who reported their overall IELTS scores, all were within the range of 6.5 to 8.0, (mean = 6.96). The final sample constituted 35% of the total student cohort. Thus, every attempt was made to include a variety of viewpoints, we would not wish generalize our findings to the entire cohort. Rather we believe they offer valuable insight into students' experiences and perceptions of cooperative learning in culturally diverse student cohorts.

### **Participants and Procedures: The Focus Groups**

The data focus in this paper comes from seven focus groups of 2-5 student participants. Allowing for representation of different cultural groups, the distribution of the focus groups was as follows: 1 x Korean; 1 x Japanese; 1 x Taiwanese; 1 x 'English-speaking-world' (ESW), namely from the UK and the US; 1 x European (EPN), for whom English was not their first language; and 2 x Mainland China. These groupings represent programme diversity, rather than generalizable cultural trends.

Focus group participation was invited from a random selection of students within each cultural grouping. Since the researchers were tutors on the programme, recruitment of students and conduct of the focus groups was undertaken by a research assistant with an academic background in education. Focus groups were deemed appropriate for gathering in-depth data, since the study sought to understand the extent to which groups of students from diverse cultural backgrounds had similar or different perceptions of cooperative learning. Focus groups rely on interaction within a group who discuss a topic supplied by the researcher. Participants interact with each other rather than the interviewer, allowing their own views to emerge.

The research assistant began the focus groups with introductions and setting out the aims. Pictures were used to represent co-operative learning and teacher-centred learning respectively as they were implemented on the Programme. These pictures provided a common framework of understanding to shape discussion, avoiding the need for explanations that might bias responses. Students discussed their perceptions of the extent to which these modes of learning were implemented on the programme; their experiences of them; the value they attributed to them; the extent to which their perceptions had changed since the beginning of the programme; and the extent to which the implementation of these modes of learning reflected practices in their own context.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive analysis for trends and patterns was conducted on questionnaire data. Focus group analysis followed Miles and Huberman's stages (1994) for generating meaning from qualitative data, involving counting frequencies of occurrences, noting patterns and themes, using informed intuition to examine plausibility, and clustering data into categories, types and classifications. Three members of the project team conducted individual coding of emergent themes. Inter-coder agreement was established through iterative analysis and re-analysis, generating a core list of

themes. No pre-supposed themes were imposed on the data and each focus group was analysed on its own merits in the first instance.

Working across Guba's four criteria for trustworthiness, the study employed a range of strategies as outlined by Shenton (2004). The methods employed were both appropriate to the research questions and well-recognised in the field as a means of ascertaining perceptions and exploring experiences. The researchers had deep familiarity with the research context, having been working there. Data were triangulated through the use of questionnaires and focus-group interviews, strengthening its dependability, and was also discussed with staff and students at the institution, ascertaining its confirmability.

### **Limitations**

A key limitation of this study lies in the fact that, while the study sought to distinguish between cultural groups, it nevertheless faced the same problem as all such studies, namely how best to group students in order to allow for patterns to emerge while not imposing cultural stereotypes. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the study can pave the way to future studies offering detailed examination of the nature of cooperative learning in HE.

### **Findings**

Questionnaire data suggested: (1) a mismatch between expectations and the reality of teaching modes on the programme; and (2) differences in expectations between CHC and non-CHC students. The first case is exemplified by the following:

- 55% of students agreed that they had fewer lectures than expected, 66% expected more input from teachers, and 55% had expected more support from academic staff. This highlights an expectation of greater teacher involvement.
- 46% of students felt less confident to speak up in class than they had expected and 54% had expected greater value to be placed on their ideas in seminar discussions. These findings indicate negative experiences of contributing in class.

The comparison between the CHC students and others needs to be treated with caution as there were 70 responses in the former group and ten in the latter. However, it is noteworthy that:

- A higher percentage of CHC students (59% vs 40% for Non-CHC) had expected more lectures, with the same numbers (59% vs 40%) expecting more support from staff. However, while 80% of the Non-CHC learners expected more input from teachers, 63% of CHC students agreed with this.
- Confidence levels were lower among CHC learners: 50% agreed that they felt less confident about speaking up in class than they expected, compared to 20% for Non-CHC.
- 67% of CHC learners, and 60% of Non-CHC learners, felt interaction with peers promoted their learning.

These findings suggest mixed reactions to cooperative learning. Considering the sample as a whole suggests that while students had expected more direct teaching, over 60% felt that peer



interaction was beneficial, and, indeed, a higher proportion of CHC than non-CHC learners had this view.

Analysis of focus group discussions identified key themes relevant to the research questions. Quotations in this section have been chosen primarily for their power in reflecting the views of the wider group. Where quotations are selected for their uniqueness, this is indicated.

### **Clarity versus Doubt**

The data initially indicated that students coming from CHC traditions viewed cooperative learning as confusing, inconclusive, and lacking definitive answers.

*KOR-P17: ... I mean group discussion very often you know, we don't have any conclusion that's kind of make me frustrating...*

*TWN – P17: ... sometimes we feel confused about what to discuss ... sometimes I feel confused if the answer is right or wrong, yeah I feel uncertain about what people say is it ok...*

These views accord with previous literature on peer-learning and peer-assessment indicating students' scepticism regarding their value in terms of learning outcomes (Liu and Carless, 2006). There is the suggestion that students do not know what they are expected to discuss during cooperative learning. At the same time, however, there is the suggestion that students still hold what Greene (2009) refers to as a naïve view of learning, wherein knowledge is right or wrong and given, in this case, by the teacher. These views are well expressed by a Korean student, using a 'sink or swim' metaphor to characterise her groupwork experience and highlighting the sense of confusion that can result from cooperative learning:

*KOR-P17: Before we doing some group work ... we need some summarize or conceptions like some kind of explanation about what we are going to do because sometimes I mean very often I am kind of confused about the concept and ideas we are talking about and many times I feel like I am in the middle of the sea, you know swim in the middle of the sea because they just put me there just to find your way to swim out of the sea, that's what I feel.*

This data appears to conflict with social constructivist models that see knowledge as evolving through a process of co-construction. It is clear that students perceive a need for greater structure in group work. Among students from non-CHC contexts, perceptions were more mixed, with some students likewise expressing a sense of insecurity:

*EPN-P1: ... you feel safer with teacher directed learning... you will definitely get something whereas with peer discussions it's kind of, you might get something or you might not...*

However, others perceived it as a valuable opportunity for clarifying understanding:

*EPN-P2: ... I think that the group discussions help clarify what they actually told us in the lectures...*

It is interesting that across the groups there is little mention of cooperative learning being an opportunity for developing new ideas, with benefits only framed in terms of reviewing and

clarifying knowledge delivered by the teacher. Student comments also demonstrate an emerging theme of ‘insecurity’, with students appearing to view teacher-directed learning as ‘safer’ than cooperative learning.

### **Co-construction of knowledge**

Some students indicated that in spite of a personal preference towards individual learning, they could perceive the benefits of group work.

*TWN-P20: ... I think I prefer individual learning. ... but I think I also gain a lot from this kind of group discussion because you can kind of negotiate the meanings and gain different kind of knowledge from different people, different culture...*

The flexibility of group work for seeking clarification, as well as pointing towards areas for further exploration, was also valued:

*CHN-P11: I think it's [group work] quite useful and if you don't understand what the people is talking you can interrupt he or she and just ask and so that we can get fully understanding of what she say*

Comments such as these could again be considered as reflective of Greene's (2009) mature learner, who develops a view of knowledge as constructed rather than given.

### **A Need for Guidance**

At the same time, other comments implied more traditional views about learning:

*TWN-P19: ...I prefer the teacher guidance because I think, well, I can get more information...*

*CHN-P10: ...we need a guider to guide us how to understand and to explain more to us*

Although these comments suggest that the teacher possesses a greater body of knowledge than the student, both students describe the teacher's role as a ‘guide’, contradicting assumptions that CHC students view learning as a transmission process and aligning with the findings of McCabe and O'Connor (2014) that Irish students believed effective lecturers adopt the role of silent manager, offering guidance and advice. Nevertheless, the ‘guide’ metaphor implies someone who knows the way and takes the lead, still indicating a form of hierarchy. It was notable that this view of the teacher was prevalent across all groups.

*EPN-P3: obviously the teacher is the authority...*

*ESW-P8: sometimes in group work you talk about the same things for five minutes and everybody is just saying the same thing and you are not really getting anywhere*

The latter comment suggests the need for a ‘guide’ to enable interaction to ‘move forward’, suggesting that the effectiveness of cooperative learning is dependent on the structures that are put in place and the roles that are assigned. The lack of structure apparently characterising this experience of cooperative learning seems to have resulted in a lack of direction and a lack of evidently useful learning outcomes.

## **A Balanced Approach**

This expectation of more guidance is reinforced by students expressed wish for more lecture time, when asked about the balance between cooperative learning, and direct instruction.

EPN-P2: *My feeling is that lectures are really short. I'm used to having lectures of 90 minutes...*

CHN-P10: *I think maybe it should be a little more lectures at our programme...*

These findings are supported by Petrovic and Pale's study (2015) where students indicated they would attend lectures despite their inherent disadvantages, because they believed this was where they would acquire most knowledge and get an idea of the depth of knowledge that is required. In the current study it is interesting that both CHC and Non-CHC students express a positive orientation towards direct teaching:

ESW-P8: *... I wish they would say this is how you do it. This is how you do this and this is the question you have to ask yourself to find out what this is, you know.*

ESW-P7: *I think some of us just want an answer.*

ESW-P8: *Yeah.*

ESW-P7: *We just want a definite answer, like what is this? Can you tell me what it is? You know...*

ESW-P8: *Yeah.*

ESW-P6: *I would agree with that. I would like more of this- teacher directed- because I agree... I don't feel like I get enough answers...*

During the focus groups, students identified a number of problematic features of cooperative learning experiences. Two areas in particular were highlighted and will be considered in further detail. The first related to the degree of interdependence and accountability within the group, and the second to perceived cultural tendencies and their impact on participation.

## **Interdependence in Cooperative Learning**

Students from western educational backgrounds focused heavily on a lack of positive interdependence and individual accountability, perhaps stemming from insufficient structure and a need for greater guidance on how to engage effectively in cooperative learning. These views reflected Phipps et al.'s (2001) concern that cooperative learning can decline into non-functional groups, when the necessary structuring is not in place:

ESW-P7: *(...) I do like group work but it's difficult on the course because you are not getting a lot out of a lot of people so it doesn't work. Idealistically I would prefer group work but a lot of my classmates don't participate so therefore what's the point of having a group, you know?*

ESW-P8: *If everyone was participating as much, it would be fine but it's not the case.*

ESW-P6: *(...) Exactly. And usually with group learning, depending on their group, I often find myself the only one speaking...*

This exchange highlights a lack of positive interdependence and accountability among the students, as experienced by the participants, in turn leading to ineffective communication and a frustrating learning experience. Students within the ESW group felt they were expected to lead the discussion:

ESW-P9: *In one group I got us to draw lots because I was fed up with being the one to present. I said no, I said we'll draw lots and I wrote 'speak' and 'not speak' or something and then this person ended up being me unfortunately, but why do they always look at me to do it? That's not fair.*

While this could be viewed as a perceived, rather than real, expectation, a comment from the Taiwanese group appears to support this perception.

TWN-P22: *... I want to listen more like a western classmate's educational system, educational curriculum. I would expect to hear that kind of different culture's learning and that kind of thing.*

However, the desire to learn from other cultural groups runs in both directions:

ESW-P6: *(...) actually I would like to hear what the non- native speakers...*

ESW-All: *Yes!*

ESW-P6: *(...) and especially the Chinese people have to say cause I might just go there someday, I'm interested in hearing their thoughts...*

### **Student perceptions of the role of culture**

There was a strong suggestion that cultural differences represent a key source of breakdown in cooperative learning:

EPN-P3: *Peer discussion is a bit up in the air, a bit disorganised, maybe due to the very big cultural differences, also due to the fact that we have turn-taking, who talks first, who talks next...*

The ESW group expressed a strong sense of frustration in relation to perceived cultural differences:

ESW-P5: *I think the elephant in the room, we are talking about here is the non-native speakers, they tend not to communicate and you find the native speakers are trying are basically just trying pushing along the discussion, the dialogue and it does get frustrating after a while.*

ESW-P7: *I don't think the elephant in the room is necessarily the non-native speakers, it's the Chinese students.*

ESW-P8: *Yes, unfortunately yes.*

ESW-P7: *(...) That's who it is. Cause I can think that we have Polish students*

ESW-P5: *That's what I was meaning, Chinese...*

ESW-P8: *It's in their culture to not participate...*

ESW-P7: *(...) and I find that frustrating, having spent a lot of money and I really just wish that I had some classmates so I could speak...*

The conclusion that Chinese students do not know how to participate seems to imply a pre-conception of what participation should look like, in other words that silence in the group does not constitute participation. This echoes the findings of previous work highlighting the ways in which different conceptualisations of effective learning shape interpretations of specific learning

events (e.g., Chan and Rao, 2009; Jaworski and Sachdev, 2004). In contrast, CHC students believed a lack of preparation, rather than cultural differences, was the explanation for problems in cooperative learning:

*CHN-P10: I think if we prepare well for the tasks that we will do, so it's more beneficial for us in this way but if the person in the group are not prepared well or maybe they don't read for the course maybe it's not that efficient...*

The different attributions point to a need for explicit exploration of the role of culture in cooperative learning. Given the problematic nature of dichotomising cultural groups, the present study chose to adopt a grounded approach where culture was allowed to emerge if the students considered it relevant. Data indicates that students did consider culture an issue, echoing the findings of previous work (e.g., Wright and Lander, 2003; Cox, 1993). As such, there is merit in further exploring the theme in order to ascertain where these perceptions come from and to what extent they are echoed across cultural groups.

## **Conclusions**

Previous research has argued the benefits of cooperative learning (Ruiz-Primo et al. 2011) as motivating (Bartle, Dook and Mocerino, 2011) and confidence-building (Caulfield and Persell, 2006). However, cooperative learning needs to be characterized by group member interdependence, a sense of accountability and an understanding among students as to the purposes and potential benefits this mode offers in terms not only of content-area understanding, but also social and communicative skills (Johnson et al. 1981). Findings reported here support this view, indicating that an apparent lack of structure in cooperative learning episodes among students leads to lack of direction and a sense of confusion. Our anecdotal knowledge and understanding of the context also indicates that the rationale behind the adoption of cooperative learning, while outlined in programme materials, was typically not discussed with students.

Non-CHC students attributed their negative reactions to cooperative learning to CHC peers' 'failure' to orally participate in group discussions, while CHC students characterised their participation as listeners and were more likely to cite a lack of preparation as the source of problems in cooperative learning. This paper has focused on cultural influences rather than linguistic; nevertheless, the broader data supports previous suggestions of a role for language proficiency in students' higher education experiences (Hennebry, Lo and Macaro, 2014). The findings suggest further work is needed to develop intercultural understanding between students from different cultural and educational backgrounds and between students and academic staff. While an increasing body of literature specifically focusing on CHC students argues that dichotomising groups of students is unhelpful (e.g., Ryan and Louie, 2007; Li, Remedios and Clark, 2010), this study, supported by previous work (e.g., Volet and Ang, 1998; Wright and Lander, 2003), suggests a need to acknowledge and understand diversity, integrating this understanding into HE pedagogy.

A complex interplay of cultural, linguistic and cognitive factors, together with habits formed through years of educational experiences, all impact on experiences of cooperative learning. One such challenge identified by our participants was the cognitive demand of applying new knowledge verbally during interaction in an online context, raised by both native-speaker and

non-native speaker students, but exacerbated by limited experience of cooperative learning or lower levels of language proficiency. Rather than dichotomising CHC and Non-CHC students, it may be more constructive to view all students on various continua of cultural awareness, cognitive processing capacity and linguistic skills.

This study highlights various issues that might usefully be explored in future research. Particularly valuable would be investigations of ways of generating more positive cooperative learning experiences among international student cohorts, with varying levels of structure and scaffolding. Research is also needed on the potential impact of awareness-raising activities, making implicit cultural assumptions explicit and enabling students to develop greater understanding of the cultural and linguistic challenges of cooperative learning.

Pedagogical implications also arise. Opportunities could be created for students to engage in dialogue engendering intercultural understanding, unpacking pre-conceptions and developing an understanding of how cultural differences and similarities are enacted in cooperative learning (Wright and Lander, 2003). Meanwhile, structuring cooperative tasks can help to support students with the cognitive demands of group tasks, whether through guided worksheets, safe spaces prior to workshops for students to talk through difficulties, a strong emphasis on preparation, or the instructor taking an active 'guiding' role during group work. In all this, the role of linguistic proficiency needs to be further explored and HE institutions need to beware of accepting students with linguistic skills below those needed for successful academic study (Trice, 2003).

This study has highlighted ways in which an impromptu approach to cooperative learning can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding among students, in turn leading to problematic cultural stereotyping and unhelpful dissonance. Above all, this study points to the importance of adopting a planned and reflective approach to cooperative learning tasks in the HE classroom, carefully thinking through the stages and structure of tasks and the role that students play in the learning activity.

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