Problems and Prospects of Collaborative Learning in an Asian Cross-cultural Student Group at a Higher Education Institution in England

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This paper reports on part of an investigation into international students’ perceptions of collaborative learning at a higher education institution in England. The research was an attempt to understand how culturally diverse instruction and academic environment influence international students’ learning processes, and to grasp the implications of this potential influence for better instructional strategies. Perceptions of 55 Asian international students from social sciences departments at a UK University, located in the East Midlands of England, were sought. 51 participants responded to the survey. 4 participants, selected purposively from the 51 who responded to the questionnaire, were also interviewed for in-depth exploration of issues coming out of the survey. Findings indicate that cultural differences and educational settings did have an effect on learning preferences and students who took part in collaborative learning felt that they had derived academic and social benefits from it. The paper concludes by identifying a number of teaching and learning strategies for understanding, monitoring and promoting collaborative learning engagement within and beyond the UK higher education system.

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1. Introduction

This study explored Asian international students’ perceptions of collaborative learning (CL) in UK higher education. The idea of CL has been widely researched and applied in teaching strategies in higher education in the United Kingdom (Brown, 2008). The present researchers have been international students in UK higher education, and have observed that Asian international students generally have little experience of CL in their previous education. As UK university education emphasises student-centred learning styles, which include allowing students to work collaboratively, some Asian international students find adjustment to the system difficult when they transfer to this new learning environment. This has the potential to become a learning obstacle which can affect the academic achievement of Asian international students.

Cross and Hitchcock (2007) report that when international students of Asian countries were required to undertake a group task they spent their time chatting about things that were not relevant to the topic at hand, and did not get much work done. Most students tended to complete their work independently, or preferred to ask teachers for help if they could not continue with their work, rather than discuss issues with their classmates or peers. According to Brett et al. (2006), students can learn in a collaborative environment in which they help each other, and when spending time on a group task they benefit from peer interactions. As Cross and Hitchcock’s (2007) research implies, however, international students have not fully understood the purpose of group discussion.

The processes of CL for cross-cultural groups in higher education rely on the socially structured exchange of information between students in groups and where students can develop social skills, leadership abilities and the capacity to inter-relate with others (Bailey, 2005). Students are given the freedom to involve themselves in their groups actively instead of being placed in a teacher-directed classroom (Tatar and Öktay, 2008). In contrast, Asian students are generally used to working within a competitively structured environment. They do not seem interested in cooperation with others, there is no interaction or co-operation required among the group members and so one person’s success is independent of another’s (Hofstede, 2009). In such an environment, natural group working, brainstorming and even mutual assistance will happen rarely (Halverson and Tirmizi, 2008).

This paper, therefore, aims to: a) identify benefits and challenges of CL inherent in a cross-cultural academic environment in higher education and b) delineate how a UK higher education institution develops a cross-cultural academic environment and how culturally diverse education and pedagogy influence the educational processes.
2. Benefits of collaborative learning

CL has been regarded as beneficial for Asian students both academically and socially. Keeping in view their background and generally lack of previous experience in collaborative learning, Asian international students find it difficult to integrate into a CL environment in the UK. A study by Hellstén and Prescott (2004) implies that Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) learners have sometimes been characterised as unwilling to speak and express their ideas, instead waiting for teachers to give them the knowledge needed, and as lacking in creative and critical thinking skills. However, Huang (2005) found that Asian international students become more independent and critical thinkers through CL since students are thereby given an opportunity to engage in group discussion, and because it develops their self-confidence in speaking and expressing their opinions to others. They also have a positive attitude towards their learning experiences with CL. Cross and Hitchcock (2007) argue that Asian international students are motivated to try a more active learning approach, and to develop more learning skills through CL than through other traditional teaching methods.

A social environment is also created though CL (Chung & Chow, 2004). Students can develop social cognitive processes; make new friends; find mutual support; and gain an understanding of friendship in group discussions (Economides, 2008). In cross-cultural groups, CL approaches are a vital strategy for “breaking students’ culture of silence” (Brown, 2008:4). Cross and Hitchcock (2007) have demonstrated that the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) learners are able to do well when working in groups in higher educational settings in England. CL highlights interpersonal relationships and group cohesion. Students from CHC contexts seemed to start to exchange knowledge, information and experience when working in groups and thus perform better. They are seen to have perceived that CL is a good way to build personal responsibility for learning and knowledge. Consequently, CL has been strongly recommended for CHC learners, and group learning is assumed to be culturally appropriate in CHC and in other Asian nations (Chapmana and Pyvisb, 2006).
3. The Role of Teachers in Collaborative Learning

In CL the teacher plays a critical role in contributing to students’ engagement and the success of the group task as a whole (Johnson et al, 2000). Teachers introduce students to the processes of CL by making explicit how one should work in groups, express ideas, and seek help from each other, in order to help students to create new ways of thinking and doing (Gillies, 2006). According to Blatchford et al., (2003:167 – 168), there are four ways in which teachers can make group work effective.

Firstly, teachers may need to consider the content of group tasks and ensure that at least some of the content is fun. In doing so, student involvement can be increased. Secondly, there is the need for ‘scaffolding’ to be put in place. The term was first used by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), within the context of teacher-student interactions, and has a central place in the Vygotskian account of CL. Scaffolding may involve, for example, structuring the group work context and the task in hand. Thirdly, for CL to be able to transfer control of learning more to the students, teachers may need to play the role of guides rather than directors. This is a very important shift in function that will enable teachers to find much more time to observe, explore, question and reflect. Finally, the teacher needs to structure lessons carefully to facilitate learning in groups. Group tasks should include briefing and debriefing in order to make sure all students understand the tasks. Above all, however, and implicit in all these points, is the conception that teachers should be enthusiastic about the exercise and benefits of group working.

In terms of organising international students of Asian countries to work effectively in groups, further considerations are needed. Their prior educational experiences influence the learning, thinking and speaking styles of international students. To form the kind of groups needed for successful CL, cultural issues must be recognised from the outset. The issues may include cultural background, ability of students, work attitude, ethnicity, personality, social class, gender and special needs (Moore, 2005). It is important to improve teachers’ cultural awareness (Eilisha, 2007). Furthermore, inadequate language skills are often understood as one of the difficulties for international students. Consequently teachers may need to avoid using unknown concepts, acronyms and anecdotes when asking international students to work cooperatively (Bulut, 2010).
4. Cultural Diversity & Learning Style

Learning styles are often culturally-based and students from different cultural groups – with different histories, approaches to reality and socialisation practices – differ regarding their learning, thinking and speaking styles (Eilisha, 2007). Ward (2006) devised a list of a variety of factors involved in how culture impacts on Asian international students’ learning approaches. The various factors include international student’s characteristics such as prior education, knowledge, home background, religions, values, learning attitudes and English being a second language (i.e. factors relating to dialect, accent), speaking and thinking styles. Increasing cultural understanding seems to be vital to the way teaching and learning take place with international students in the UK higher education system. Establishing opportunities for understandable communication between international students and lecturers in higher education is also a necessary pedagogical step (Wong, 2004).

Seo and Koro-Ljungberg (2005 quoted in Kingston and Forland 2008: 205), pointed out that: ‘without understanding the role of cultural identity and heritage embedded in a particular cultural framework, higher education (HE) cannot achieve one of its most important goals: to provide quality education for all’. Their research outlined in particular the difference between teacher and student relationships in the UK and China. In the UK, students are expected to be independent learners, to think critically, to challenge the teachers, and to be active participants in the class, but in China, teachers direct the learning process and students are expected to be passive, only speaking upon request. With rapidly changing cultural interactions and the internationalisation of education, possible conflicting perspectives regarding East Asian learning cultures are generated. The traditional model of the East Asian student has been changing to adjust to CL, to thinking critically and to being an independent learner (Shi, 2004). Kingston and Forland (2008) also point out results contrary to misconceptions of international students, arguing that the current generation of East Asian students is becoming increasingly similar to their Western peers.
5. **Research Questions and Data Collection**

The purpose of this research was to explore Asian international students’ perceptions of CL in UK higher education. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the perceived values and challenges of collaborative learning and of working in culturally diverse learning groups?
- What could help Asian international students to bridge the gap put in place by cultural diversity?
- What should be put in place in the context of UK higher education to enhance Asian students’ involvement in collaborative learning, and hence to improve their academic outcomes?

The study was conducted during a seven month period between March and September 2010 using a questionnaire survey and follow up interviews with selected students. The questionnaire was mainly composed of rank order questions which drew on the findings from initial semi-structured interviews in March 2010. The questionnaire was developed in four parts; the first part concerned personal information such as gender, level of study, area of study, years of study, and country of origin. The second part was concerned with perceptions of CL in cross-cultural groups (see Tables 1&2). Part three considered the values and challenges involved in implementing CL, which explored both positive and negative perceptions of CL experience from different aspects (see Table 3). The fourth part was related to perceptions of effective methods of implementing CL (see Table 4). Further interviews with selected participants, following the survey, extended issues raised in the survey, and explored students’ perceptions about their CL experiences in depth.

6. **Quantitative data**

The 51 survey participants selected using purposive sampling, were involved in five different disciplines in the University. 76% (N = 39) of participants were Postgraduate students, and 24% (N = 12) were undergraduates. 52% (N = 27) were majoring in Management, and Economics, or Global-Communication. 57% (N = 29) of the participants had been studying in the UK for ‘one to two years’; 9% (N = 5) ‘more than three years’, and the rest of the participants had studied in the UK for ‘less than one year’ or ‘two to three years’ with 16% (N = 8), 18% (N = 9) respectively. Most participants came from the People’s Republic of China (PRC: 73%), six from Taiwan, five from Japan, and three from Thailand.
Participants were asked to select from four different preferences towards CL (A, B, C and D). 43% of participants surveyed selected that they had ‘Great interest’ or ‘Quite a lot’ of interest in using CL in their classrooms (Table 1). 45% of participants felt that they were ‘A little interested’ in taking part in group work. 12% of participants selected ‘Not at all’ interested in CL. However, when participants were asked about CL in diverse groups, 63% said they had ‘Great’ or ‘Quite a lot’ of interest in using CL in cross-cultural groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key words of questions</th>
<th>A. Not at all</th>
<th>B. A little</th>
<th>C. Great interest</th>
<th>D. Quite a lot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interested in CL (same culture)</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in cross-cultural groups</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table D 3.10-1  
Participants’ perceptions of CL in different groups

Questions were grouped into five categories to rank the five main issues (scored as ‘most important’ issue = 5 to least important issue = 1). The results show (Table 2) that participants agreed that the most important cultural issue at play, with a mean ranking of 4.33, was that of ‘different ways of thinking and speaking’. ‘Different learning attitudes’ got the lowest rank (M = 2.04).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key words of Question</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Mean Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural issues in Cross-cultural group learning</td>
<td>Different ways of thinking</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different dialects/accents</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different learning styles</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different Religions</td>
<td>2.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different learning attitudes</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table D 3.10-2  
Cultural issues when learning in cross-cultural groups
Although a clear preference for studying in cross-cultural groups emerged, there were some difficulties when learning in cross-cultural groups. Analysis of the data suggested that different ways of speaking and thinking were the most challenging aspects for international students when they learnt in cross-cultural groups. Other significant concerns were different dialects/accents and different learning styles.

6.1 Values and Challenges of Collaborative Learning

The following Table (3) shows positive perceptions of CL. Questions were grouped into two categories for the positive aspects of CL: a) Academic benefits: ‘Build confidence/self-esteem’ and ‘Promote positive learning attitudes’ options are equally ranked, with 3.29 each, while ‘Fresh insight’ takes the lowest rank with 2.51. b) Social benefits: ‘Cultural awareness’ takes the greatest rank with 3.24, and ‘Exchange of experience’, ‘Communication skills’ and ‘Social cognitive process’ achieve almost the same ranking with 2.82, 2.78 and 2.55 respectively. The issue of ‘personal responsibility’ takes the lowest rank, that is, 1.92.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key words of Question</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Mean Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>academic benefits</td>
<td>Build confidence</td>
<td>3.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promote learning attitudes</td>
<td>3.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comprehension of lessons</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fresh insight</td>
<td>2.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social benefits</td>
<td>Cultural awareness</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exchange of experience</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social cognitive process</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal responsibility</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table D 3.10-3 Positive perceptions of CL experience

Most students felt that group work helped them to better understand the lessons and stimulated their critical thinking process. In addition, the exchange of experience with different students can promote social cognitive processes and enhance cultural awareness. These benefits were suggested to be similarly effective when working in small groups.
### Table D 3.10-4 Negative perceptions of implementing CL experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key words of Question</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Mean Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>disadvantages of CL</td>
<td>Being carried</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difficult to evaluate</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Too many skills involved</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Takes too much time</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not interesting</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>challenges of</td>
<td>Unclear instruction</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>implementing CL</td>
<td>Teachers’ management techniques</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student lacking confidence</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor language skills</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that ‘Being carried’ in group work was the greatest disadvantage associated with CL, with a ranking of 3.78. That group work is ‘Not interesting’ was given the lowest rank (M = 2.16). The greatest challenge of implementing CL in classroom was ‘Unclear instruction of group tasks’ (M = 2.86). ‘Inadequate language skills’ got the lowest rank (M = 2.02). The analysis of data showed that weaker students being carried was perceived as a key disadvantage of CL. The unclear delivery of instruction was identified as another big challenge. Similar concerns were shown regarding ‘Teachers’ management techniques’ and ‘Students lacking confidence’.

### 6.2 Implementing Methods of CL

This section focuses on participants’ perceptions about how to implement effective CL (Table 5). ‘Group members presenting ideas one by one’ was ranked by participants as the most effective strategy (M = 2.71), and ‘Cooperative presentation’ took the lowest rank of 2.53. ‘Helping each other’ to achieve group tasks was considered as the most important strategy (M = 2.86). Being ‘Appreciated by others’ was deemed the least important factor with a score of about 2.35.
Most participants preferred CL in culturally diverse groups.

### Table D 3.10-5 Perceptions of implementing methods of CL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key words of Question</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Mean Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which forms are effective</td>
<td>Present ideas one by one</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choosing students' role</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free to discuss</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cooperative presentation</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What factors are more important</td>
<td>Helping each other</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers' instruction</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encouragement from teachers</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appreciated by peers</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table D 3.10-6 Effective group organisation

When participants were asked to show their preferences between participating in a mono-cultural group or cross-cultural group (Table 6), 75% participants preferred that group members come from different cultural backgrounds. 51% of participants believed that group members should be grouped according to their different learning abilities. However, 49% of participants agreed that group members should be grouped with same learning abilities.

Table D 3.10D 3.10-5 and D 3.10D 3.10-6 above show that the research suggests a variety of methods for implementing CL. It shows the effective forms of CL, the important factors and the appropriate group organisation, when implementing it. However, regarding CL used in cross-cultural groups, there are many more considerations needed for English teachers. The analysis of the data revealed that international students have a positive tendency towards learning in small groups with students from a variety of different cultural backgrounds. They expressed that studying in a cross-cultural group could enhance cultural exchange, and motivate learning interests. They seemed not to tend to study in a mono-cultural group. Therefore, Eng-
lish teachers may need to note that when needing international students to work cooperatively, cultural understanding should be taken into account in order to meet the international students’ needs and enhance CL outcomes.

7. Qualitative Data

Findings, from qualitative data through interviews with four students, are classified into the four themes: (1) prior and current experiences of CL, (2) the values and challenges of CL, (3) perceptions about the role of the lecturer in UK higher education and (4) suggestions to international students studying in cross-cultural groups in the UK.

7.1 Prior and Current Experiences of CL

Interviewees had diverse views of their CL experiences. Interviewee A stated that the first time she was asked to work in a small group; she was totally unfamiliar with the process of this new learning style. After some time, though, she enjoyed working with other students in groups. Interviewee B and C, however, did not have any strong feelings about the changes of CL experiences. They had some previous exposure to CL and did not find it difficult when they were asked to take part in a small group discussion. When asked about the use of CL compared with teaching practice in their home country, interviewee C mentioned that in China, CL has recently begun to be applied in some subjects, but she believed that the way of implementing it was different than in the UK: ‘... In China, my tutor organised everything for us ... In the UK, my tutor gives us guidance and feedback ... Students have to organise everything (Chinese, Postgraduate, Management, 27/08/10)’.

Interviewee B indicated that she liked the way of implementing CL in UK higher education because here, CL is a kind of student-centred learning approach that promotes the development of different skills and students had more freedom to express their own ideas. She also stated that teachers’ instructions were key to successful group work.

7.2 Benefits and Challenges

The interviewees identified that they benefited from CL not only in terms of academic achievement, but also socially. Interviewees believed that they enjoyed working in a group because they could learn more and learn better than from working alone. They had developed different learning tools, such as building confidence, overcoming shyness, promoting learning interests and improving critical thinking.
skills. The same perceptions were found in the questionnaire (Table 3). They also stated that working in a small group could develop social skills and enhance their cultural awareness. Interviewee D expressed that CL was the best way to get to know other students in groups, and to develop international students’ communication skills: ‘I can get to know different cultures and students and make new friends, it’s fun.’ (Taiwanese, Postgraduate, Mass Media, 27/08/10).

There were, however, evident concerns about some of the challenges of working in cross-cultural groups. These included lack of participation, language difficulties and cultural differences. Interviewees pointed out cultural differences as a barrier during group discussion, but argued that that could be overcome if they tried to be open-minded, and interested in learning from others. The Thai and Taiwanese interviewees showed that they loved to work with students from different countries, but that speaking and thinking styles were influenced by their cultural understanding and personalities, so that it was not easy for them to work effectively: ‘I enjoy work with someone from other country, but it is hard for me ... because there is a language barrier although we all speak English.’ (Thai, Postgraduate, Management, 25/08/10)

### 7.3 The Role of the Lecturers

Interviewees reported that UK lecturers might need to consider international students’ difficulties, such as language skills or cultural and background differences, when they organised group work: ‘... Teachers may get to know how to organise different level of students into group. Besides, some appropriate guidance is required in the group work, when students lose their ways or misunderstand the task.’ (Thai, Postgraduate, Management, 25/08/10). Interviewee B suggested that: ‘... not just simply asking students to sit together ... pass the task papers ... need to tell us what outcomes we should achieve; ... give us some examples of the whole process.’ (Chinese, Postgraduate, Management, 27/08/10)

Further, it was suggested that if teachers knew how to structure a higher quality group work, students achieved a lot more. For this to happen, lecturers, it was suggested should play their role more actively by ‘... watching, listening, questioning and encouraging students ...’ (Chinese, Master in Education, 25/08/10) and by giving clear instructions and encouraging students to engage in discussion.
7.4 Suggestions by Students for Improvement

The final part of the interview asked the interviewees to give their suggestions about ways to improve their own learning attitude towards CL. A general argument was that it was up to the students themselves to make the effort to adapt to a new learning environment. Interviewee D suggested that international students were not adequately prepared for group learning, but they should try to adapt to this new way of learning, by being ‘willing to join group discussion and share ideas; be happy to help other members and be happy to accept group members from different countries.’ (Thai, Postgraduate, Management, 25/01/10).

On the other hand, however, one Chinese interviewee from the management department expressed negative opinions about group work. She said she felt helpless sometimes and angered by the marking methods used in class for group assignments. She explained that she did not like group work; because some students show free-riding behaviour and get high marks in a group assignment (See also Table 3). She, therefore, suggested that the best way for students may be to acquire individual grades. She urged that less confident students should: ‘ask and learn from stronger students ... not just simply copy’. Interviewees suggested that international students should be confident and interested in different ways of learning, dealing with different cultural issues and understanding peoples’ perceptions. A Taiwanese student said: ‘I try to communicate with other students actively and learn the knowledge from cross-cultural experiences ... the most important thing for us to do is to adjust ourselves psychologically. Don’t be afraid to lose face because of poor English.’

Discussion

Findings from both quantitative and qualitative data in this study reveal that CL had a great impact on the Asian international students’ academic achievement and social cognitive ability. Students believed implementing CL could help them to learn faster and better, and that discussing a project with others could enhance comprehension of lessons. Furthermore, the study shows that although international students are interested in working in cross-cultural groups, there remain some general, commonly perceived difficulties regarding this. Inadequate language ability came out as a major issue in cross-cultural groups. The same issue is noticed by Clark et al. (2007), who assert that it is a practical problem that language limits the contribution of international students who are not capable in English; many cannot express sophisticated concepts in English and many are influenced by their own cultural manners and ways of thinking and speaking.
This study also highlights that CL enhances learning in several ways. Participants in this study suggested that CL brings academic and social benefits to them. This study supports literature regarding the value of CL in terms of students’ academic achievement, social cognitive ability and general skills. However, there is a need to improve certain aspects of CL to make it more effective and interesting. Terenzini et al. (2007) argue that CL is a revolutionary pedagogical approach because it guides students to learn creatively and critically. Similarly, Blatchford et al., (2003) suggest that CL not only gives students an opportunity to learn freely and to achieve a goal but also, more importantly, encourages students to become critical thinkers. Teaching becomes more effective because teachers have the chance to get to know their students. They can get feedback directly from students in order to reflect upon and enhance their ways of teaching.

One of the disadvantages of CL was perceived to be that participants carry some students when group working. Johnson and Johnson (2000) suggest that in the absence of group structure by capable teachers, the weaker students can easily free-ride. Chung and Chow’s (2004) study, however, suggests that students achieved significantly better results when their work was completed in groups rather than when done individually. Teachers, therefore, need to be conscious of the positive and negative aspects of CL. On the one hand, a well-prepared small group activity may contribute to a good result for students; however, if there are big gaps between stronger students and weaker students in a group, free-riding is likely in the classroom.

Cultural differences and expression of opinions can cause misconceptions amongst group members. This supports Elisha’s (2007) point that when students come from different parts of the world and different educational backgrounds, there is a gap between the students’ ways of thinking and speaking. Cross and Hitchcock (2007) for instance, researching Asian international students learning styles, imply that Chinese students’ thinking and speaking style is more conceptual, so that they are not used to thinking in concrete terms. However, students from other cultural backgrounds might use different ways of thinking and speaking.
8. Conclusions and Recommendations

This research was aimed at a deeper understanding of the values and challenges of CL as experienced by both Asian international students and teachers within the context of higher education in the UK. The study shows that while international students gain a lot from the experience of studying in England, differences in learning style present challenges for them. The study also indicates that international students are adapting to studying in the UK higher education system, although there remain some learning difficulties to be overcome. A majority of international students claimed that they prefer the use of CL in the UK to the methods used in their own countries because they benefited from this new way of learning.

This study indicates some of the key difficulties in CL from participants’ perspectives as well as possible ways to improve some of the teaching and learning practices so as to enhance the learning of international students. It provides insight for lecturers to better meet the needs of their increasingly diverse classrooms. These include the need for cultural awareness and for taking into account the influences of cultural differences on learning. It also indicates the need for more research into international students’ learning experiences. The expectation of international students is that they attempt to adapt to the different approaches of teaching and learning in UK higher education. In turn, university lecturers need to be prepared to improve the ways in which they meet the learning needs of their international students, by coming to understand the different approaches to knowledge acquisition in different cultures. Such an understanding is vital to the identification of new ways of teaching and learning. It is important that universities advance internationalised understanding in order for students to be able to have the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to operate successfully in an increasingly globalised world.

In accordance with the findings, several recommendations for implementing methods of CL are made. Firstly, as some participants, especially undergraduate students, claim that assessment of group work is unfairly advantageous to some and disadvantageous to others, the final group task assessment should include both group and individual performances. Secondly, the teacher’s role is that of a facilitator, so they should always gather information and/or task sources for students, and the purpose of a task should be explained before students carry it out. To get groups to work productively, teachers should assign different roles to students in accordance with their abilities.

On a more practical, hands-on basis teachers need to get opportunities to attend courses that develop their awareness regarding cultural diversity and its impact on students’ learning abilities and styles. There is also a case for developing teachers’ skills and abilities in practically mentoring and guiding students coming from culturally and linguisti-
cally diverse backgrounds. International students should also get opportunities in the form of workshops, especially in the initial phases of their studies abroad, to enable them to work and learn together in classrooms with a multi-cultural set up. Overall, there is a case for a more deliberate and conscious effort to make the learning experience of international students more productive in a focused and planned collaborative learning environment.

References


Biographies:

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