Working in a group or alone: 
The classroom strategies of adult immigrant learners of English

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ABSTRACT
This paper reports a study of the preferred classroom learning situation of 11 adult, immigrant learners of English in an Adult Migrant English Service (AMES) program in Melbourne. Qualitative data were gathered during individual interviews when learners were asked whether they preferred to use the strategy of working alone, or the strategy of working in a group when in an English language class. Analysis of the data using the computer software package, Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theory-building (QSR NUD*IST), revealed that although the age of the learner was pivotal, the choice of strategy was based on the learner's metacognitive knowledge. The choice by younger learners to work either in a group, or alone, depended on the task in hand, whereas the choice by older learners took into account their need to alleviate anxiety and to compensate for an inadequate memory.

Introduction
The use of group work in second language classrooms has been much recommended to teachers for a number of years because of its perceived benefits to language learners (Long and Porter 1985; Johnson and Johnson 1986). Group work is seen as an essential element of communicative language teaching (Brumfit 1984) in that it offers opportunities for cooperative learning and 'real' language practice (Hyland 1991), with consequent gains in language proficiency (Bejarano 1987). In addition, group work provides a less threatening situation to the individual learner, who can experience lower levels of anxiety in the classroom when practising language with sympathetic peers (Senior 1997; Bailey, Daley and Onwuegbuzie 1999). From the point of view of learners themselves, group work is seen as beneficial; more than one-third of learners surveyed in Adult Migrant Education settings rated learning in a group as their 'best' mode of learning, compared with only 3 per cent who studied 'best' alone (Willing 1988: 116–117).

However, despite a broad acceptance by teachers of the benefits of group work in the language classroom, little acknowledgement has been given to the reasons which learners themselves offer for their choice of learning situation.
The study

This paper reports the findings of a study which examined whether adult, immigrant learners preferred to work in a group or alone when in an English language classroom in an AMES program in Melbourne. The study was part of a larger project examining the language learning strategies of adult, immigrant learners of English in an AMES program in Victoria.

Participants

The 11 learners involved in this study were adult, immigrant learners of English who had been placed in the same AMES class on the basis of their English language proficiency, which had been rated using the Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating (ASLPR) (Ingram and Wylie 1982). All 17 members of that particular class had been rated at a level ranging from 1+ (survival proficiency) to 2 (minimum social proficiency) across most of the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Table 1 shows biographical details of the 11 learners, as provided by them in response to a questionnaire. Pseudonyms are used throughout. Columns 3 and 4 indicate the age and first language (L1) background; Column 5 shows the time in months that each had spent in learning English before arriving in Australia, while Columns 6 and 7 show the months spent living in and attending English classes in Australia, respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>preENG* (months)</th>
<th>Toz† (months)</th>
<th>Eoz‡ (months)</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

* preENG – number of months spent learning English before arrival in Australia
† Toz – number of months spent living in Australia
‡ Eoz – number of months spent attending English classes in Australia
Data collection and analysis

During several observations of the English language class in which these learners were taking part, it was noted that, although the teacher sometimes encouraged them to work in a particular way, the learners were always free to choose their situation. Some chose always to work with others, others sometimes worked alone, while one learner always worked alone. Later, during individual interviews, the learners were asked about aspects of their language learning strategies, which included their preference for the classroom working situation and the specific question: ‘When you are in class, do you prefer working in a group, or by yourself?’. The interviews were recorded on tape, transcribed, and subsequently coded and analysed using NUD*IST.

With NUD*IST, it was possible to search quickly and easily for relationships in the data. Several ways of searching are available in the software, but the three used most in this study were: ‘node’ searches, which retrieve all the data which have been coded in the same way; ‘pattern’ searches, which retrieve all data containing a specified word or phrase; and searches which used a ‘matrix’ operator which allowed investigation of relationships in the data. The matrices obtained in this way were copied to Excel so that data pertaining to the variables could be sorted more easily.

Findings

After the interviews with the learners, their responses to the question were coded, using NUD*IST, very broadly at first, as ‘ALONE’ or ‘GROUP’. From this coding, a matrix was constructed (Table 2) to show the preference which they had expressed.

Table 2: Preferences of participants: work alone or in a group

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Alone</th>
<th>Group</th>
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<td>Rita</td>
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</table>
Table 2 indicates that of the 11 participants,
• four (Mena, Nan, Thi and Wei) indicated that they varied in their preference: sometimes they liked to work with others in a group, at other times alone;
• six (Maria, Anna, Janetta, Peter, Hui and Leo) preferred working in a group only; and
• one (Rita) preferred working alone only.

In an attempt to find why the participants had expressed these preferences, the data were re-examined more closely.

Participants who worked either in a group or alone

REASONS FOR WORKING IN A GROUP

The four participants who sometimes preferred working in a group and sometimes individually, Mena, Nan, Thi and Wei, offered three reasons for working in a group:
• To improve their English
• To gain information
• To compare ideas.

To improve English

Mena preferred to work with others for oral activities because that situation gave her the opportunity to improve her English:

Int: What sort of things would you like to be with other people?
Mena: Oh, talking things.
Int: Yeah.
Mena: Like, in the morning when we have something to warm up…

To gain information

Similarly, when information could be gained, Wei preferred working with others to share ideas:

Wei: … I think if you need more information, resources, you like to talk with the other person. Depends what the topic is.
Int: All right, yeah. Can you give me an example?
Wei: Mm. For example if you write something about the goldmine [class excursion to old goldmine], then you would like to talk to somebody else because you only read a limit of information on that topic, so you want to know more about it.
To compare ideas

Nan liked to work in a group so that she could compare her ideas with those of others:

Nan: Oh, like sometimes we do something we have to put in order, like in the morning activity, like warm up … I like to do it in a group.

Int: Yeah. Why? Why is it better in a group?

Nan: Mm, maybe other students has different idea. Maybe I’m wrong, so we can compare which are wrong, which are right. You can, yeah.

Thi also saw the benefits of comparing her ideas with those of others, even though at the outset she preferred to work independently:

Int: When you’re in class do you prefer working by yourself or in a group?

Thi: By myself.

Int: Do you?

Thi: Yeah, but sometimes I think because everybody have a different idea you know. So maybe they not agree my idea or I not agree their idea.

Int: Right.

Thi: So I have to do by myself and after that we correct together.

REASONS FOR WORKING ALONE

On the other hand, when the task demanded concentration or was one in which they wanted to express their own views or feelings without being distracted by those of others, these four participants preferred to work alone and offered three reasons for their choice:

• To concentrate
• To maintain own ideas
• To express opinion.

To concentrate

As mentioned above, Mena’s first preference was to work with others, but when the task in hand called for concentration, she preferred to work alone:

Mena: Oh it depends on work you’re doing and it depends on people you around here

Int: Yeah,

Mena: around you, actually. I prefer to work as a team because then you can talk, no you can better improve your English, but sometimes if I need to concentrate really hard on something that I do, I can’t talk. So, it depends actually on work.
To maintain own ideas

Wei indicated that, when writing, she did not want her ideas influenced by others so preferred to work alone:

Wei: Um, if do the writing I prefer to do it myself. If talking I like to do it with somebody else.

Int: What about, well, when you’re writing why do you prefer to do it by yourself?

Wei: Because you give your own ideas and then you, after you can express your own feelings, yeah.

Int: Mm, mm. So how would working in a group prevent that? How would it stop that?

Wei: Mm, if you’re working with a group maybe you will, somebody else will persuade you to accept their ideas so you maybe will lose your own ideas.

To express opinion

Similarly, Nan clearly stated that she wanted to be able to express her opinion without the distraction of anyone else:

Int: … what sort of things do you like doing by yourself?

Nan: Like we write about Melbourne Gaol report. I like to write my way. And, yes something like that.

Int: Why is that? Why do you like, prefer for that to be by yourself?

Nan: Yeah, because maybe another student has different idea, but I like to put my idea. I don’t know my idea is right or wrong, but I like to put it.

Although these participants might really have preferred to work with others, they were prepared to forego that preference and to work alone when they felt it was necessary. They chose the strategy of working alone when they wanted to avoid the influence or distraction of others, particularly on tasks in which the expression of their own ideas and opinions was crucial. At other times, on tasks which demanded interaction with others, they were happy to choose the strategy of working co-operatively. Thus, basic to all the strategy choices regarding their work situation was the type of task in hand.

Participants who worked only alone

REASONS FOR WORKING ALONE

To avoid embarrassment

As seen in Table 2, Rita was the only participant who expressed the preference for always working alone. Unlike the participants mentioned above, Rita’s reason for wanting to work alone was not because of the demands of the task but, rather,
her embarrassment with what she perceived to be her lower level of English proficiency, or her lack of knowledge.

Rita: Yes, I like go with myself because for me it’s very embarrassing … Maybe when everybody is together maybe I can’t say I can’t say for I don’t know.

In other words, Rita chose the strategy of working alone because she felt less anxiety in that situation (Bailey et al 1999). In making this choice, Rita revealed that she had based her preference of learning situation on an affective, or emotional, need and not, as the other four learners had, on the demands of the task type.

A matrix (Table 3) was constructed, using NUD*IST, to summarise the reasons underlying the preferred choices which the learners had expressed so far, and to give a visual impression of where they occurred.

**Table 3: Reasons for preferring to work alone**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Alone</th>
<th>Concentrate</th>
<th>Express own ideas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Nan</td>
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<td>Hui</td>
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<td>Rita</td>
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</table>

|              | task based | affective-need based |

**Participants who worked only in a group**

Six participants, in addition to the four mentioned above who had indicated a willingness to work in a group at certain times, stated that they preferred working in a group. However, some of the six placed limits on the size of the group.

**SIZE OF GROUP**

Hui, Janetta and Peter, clearly stated that although they preferred working in a group, that group should be ‘a few’, ‘one [other]’ or not more than three or four.
With a large group there were too many ideas:

Int: Why do you like working in a small group?

Hui: I think a small group is good, because too many people is the ideas, complicated you know. Only a few is all right.

Janetta: Oh it’s, for me it’s easier if just one [other] people.

Int: Mm, mm. Why?

Janetta: Because if there are too many ideas,

Int: Oh right.

Janetta: And if speak two or three people together I can’t think clearly.

Or, there were too many voices, leading to confusion:

Int: Right, yeah. What about, how big a group? How many in the group would you like?

Peter: Three or four, not big.

Int: More than four?

Peter: No.

Int: Why not more?

Peter: I cannot explain. A big group is not good … I cannot explain …

Int: Yeah, … If the group is too big, what happens?

Peter: Every everybody blah, blah and nothing.

Thus, it seemed none of the participants wanted to be distracted by others. Unlike Mena, Wei and Nan though, who were prepared to work alone to avoid such distraction, Hui, Janetta and Peter limited the size of their group to achieve that end, preferring the support of another at all times. Only Rita preferred working alone, because of her lack of confidence in her ability to contribute to a group.

**REASONS FOR WORKING ONLY IN A GROUP**

The text of the participants’ responses in the interview data was closely re-examined in an attempt to find the reasons why these participants preferred working only in a group. Four reasons were identified:

- To share ideas
- To avoid talking
- It’s easier
- To receive help.
To share ideas
Both Hui and Maria liked to share with others. Maria found that sharing ideas was more exciting:

Int: What about when you're in the class, do you prefer to work by yourself or in a group?
Hui: In a group … So I can share.
Maria: Because it’s more exciting and … somebody, everybody can choice many things, and put together.

To avoid talking
Maria, though, gave another reason for preferring to work in a group: In the group situation she was not obliged to talk, and could opt out if she wanted to:

Int: You'd like a group?
Maria: Yes.
Int: Why?
Maria: Because I don’t have to talk all time. Sometimes I talk, sometimes I don’t.

Maria was similar to Rita in that both were trying to avoid the anxiety caused by having to perform in a group with others. Both were trying to achieve a situation of greater comfort. Both, therefore, were taking account of their affective needs when choosing a work situation in class. Yet, interestingly, the strategy which each chose to achieve her end was different: Rita chose to work alone; Maria chose to work in a group.

It’s easier
Peter’s reason for working in a group was that it was easier. Although he did not explicitly say so, he too may have felt reduced pressure to express an individual opinion in the group situation. In any case, he indicated that he felt more comfortable working in a group:

Peter: I think I prefer work in a group because there’s there is, there are a many opinions and for me it is easier.

To receive help
Leo also found it more comfortable to work in a group because he could rely to some extent on the help which others could give him.

Leo: … when I growing older I think it is I can maybe some other work worker is better because, yeah I can think some something I can’t understand or mistaking maybe the other workers can help me, help me.
Although they expressed their choice of work situation in somewhat different ways, the choices of Hui, Maria, Peter and Leo were similar in that all were trying to achieve a comfortable learning situation. In other words, all were basing their strategy choice on realising an underlying affective need.

These additional reasons which the six participants gave for working in a group were added to the coding of the interview data, and displayed as a matrix of all statements of preference for group work (Table 4). (Because the underlying explanation for ‘share ideas’ was not clear, that reason was not categorised as either ‘task based’ or ‘affective-need based’.)

### Table 4: Reasons for preferring to work in a group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Improve</th>
<th>Gain</th>
<th>Compare</th>
<th>Share</th>
<th>Avoid</th>
<th>Easier Receive</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

- **task based**
- **affective-need based**

### Examination of patterns in the data

In order to examine whether there were any obvious patterns in the data, the two matrices (Tables 3 and 4) were combined (Table 5) and examined for any relationships between preferences for classroom work situation and variables such as L1, time spent learning English before arrival in Australia (preEng), time spent living in Australia (Toz), time spent attending English classes in Australia (Eoz), English language proficiency or age.

**L1**

The 11 participants included in this section of the study were drawn from nine different L1 backgrounds. It was therefore impossible to find any relationship
Table 5: Age of subjects and combined matrices: Reasons expressed for preferring to work alone or in a group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Alone</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Concentrate</th>
<th>Express own ideas</th>
<th>Embarrassed</th>
<th>Improve English</th>
<th>Info</th>
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<th>Share ideas</th>
<th>Avoid talking</th>
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<td>Leo</td>
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- Task based
- Affective-need based
between L1 and choice of strategy of working alone or in a group.

**TIME SPENT LIVING IN AUSTRALIA**

In an earlier study of adult immigrant learners Willing (1988) found that working in a group was very strongly favoured by people who had lived in Australia for between one and two years. Perhaps because of the small numbers here, no similar relationship was found in this study, nor did examination of the matrices reveal any apparent relationship with the variables: time spent learning English before arrival in Australia or time spent attending English classes in Australia.

**PROFICIENCY**

No specific data were available on the proficiency of each learner but, as all of the 11 had been placed in the same class on the basis of proficiency, it could be assumed that all of the participants were within a broadly similar proficiency level. However, the two who had indicated a preference to work alone sometimes, Mena and Wei, had been noted during class observations to be the most proficient of the 11 participants, which suggests the possibility of a relationship between proficiency and preference for working alone or in groups.

**AGE**

Leo’s comment, above, ‘When I growing older … maybe other workers can help me …’, suggested a belief that his age (54) was influential on his learning and consequent strategy choice. Indeed, effects have been found for age on strategy use. White (1993), for example, found that university foreign language learners over 30 years of age made greater use of a metacognitive self-management strategy than did those who were younger.

Thus, a ‘pattern’ search was made, using NUD*IST, of all interview data for any age-related words, for example, *age, old, older, young, younger*, which learners might have uttered. It was found that Leo had made another reference to his age and its negative effect on his ability to remember.

Leo: Some not easy to remember because age (laughs) is too old.

In addition, Peter (43) and Hui (48) were found to have mentioned their age as a barrier to their learning, particularly on their ability to remember:

Int: Is there anything that is very difficult for you?

Peter: Not very difficult, but a little bit yes. Because my age is not very good for learning … I think after forty … I no remember something. (aged 43)

Hui: Very hard to help me remember. I think I getting old. The brain's not
It seemed a logical step then, to investigate further whether the age of the learner had influenced the choice of strategy to work alone or in a group. On closer examination of Table 5, it seemed that the variable of age did have an effect and, moreover, that the age of 35 was pivotal in the types of responses given by participants. For the four youngest (Mena, Wei, Nan and Thi) the reasons for their preferences for working in a group or alone were, broadly:

• Concentration
• Expressing or comparing their own ideas
• Gaining information
• Improving English.

In other words, the reasons for their strategy choice were based on the task in hand; they were, as discussed earlier, task-oriented reasons. None of the reasons was concerned with affective needs.

For the learners over the age of 35 the reasons given for their preferences were:

• Embarrassment
• Avoiding talking
• Easier
• Receiving help.

That is, the preferences of the older learners were held with a view to bringing about a more comfortable learning situation, one in which they could ‘avoid anxiety’. In all but one case, this meant choosing to work with others.

The differences between younger and older learners suggest that there may have been some maturational factor at work here. On the basis of the results reported above, I tentatively suggest the following:

• The younger learners seem to have had a stronger desire to express their own opinions than did older learners;
• The younger learners seem to have felt a stronger need to assert their individuality in completing a task;
• The younger learners did not report feeling the stress which older learners did and so did not seem to need to take comfort in learning into account.

However, the comments reported above by Leo, Peter and Hui suggest that the desire for comfort was a consequence of their belief that their memory
was inadequate. Whether their memories had indeed become less effective with increasing age is open to speculation. Nevertheless, learners believed that they could overcome any perceived ‘individual’ memory shortcomings and achieve a ‘collective’ memory by organising themselves to work with others.

Whatever their preference, it seems that in expressing it, the learners were demonstrating some metacognitive knowledge. Metacognitive knowledge can be classified according to whether it focuses on the learner [person knowledge], the learning task [task knowledge] or the process of learning [strategic knowledge] (Wenden 1998: 518) (parentheses not in the original).

Clearly, both the younger learners and older learners possessed one of the facets of task knowledge, that is,

information about a task’s demands, that is, how to learn in general, how to go about doing a particular task and the knowledge and skills needed to do so. (Wenden 1998: 518)

However, the ‘knowledge and skills’ necessary for each age group to complete a task were different. Younger learners did not have to overcome a failing memory so, for them, task knowledge was paramount when a particular task needed to be undertaken, and person knowledge was a lesser issue. In contrast, the task knowledge of the older learners first demanded a consideration of person knowledge. That is, the ‘knowledge and skills’ needed to carry out a task required the older learners to consider the ‘human factors that facilitate or inhibit learning’ (Wenden 1998: 518), in this case, an inadequate memory. Thus, they chose to work with others, but in doing so they demonstrated that their task knowledge and person knowledge were shaping their knowledge of process of their learning, their strategic knowledge.

The analysis of the data suggests that task fulfilment was the ultimate goal for all learners, whatever their choice of work situation: The younger learners did not necessarily consider affective needs, whereas only when such needs were realised could the older learners achieve task fulfilment. Regardless of the different choices of strategy made, both groups of learners were planning and organising their learning situations for their individual best effect. Thus, the choices of all were underpinned by their metacognitive knowledge (Wenden 1998). The reasons for those choices were not straightforward and simple, but multifaceted and interrelated.

Further, the choice to work with others exemplifies the close interrelationship of some language learning strategies and the consequent difficulty faced by researchers when trying to consign such strategies to membership of one particular subscale or another, ‘their identification often requiring considerable interpretation on the part of the researcher’ (Ellis 1994: 540). For example, the manifestation of the learners’ metacognitive knowledge here was, for those who chose to take account of their affective needs, to choose a social strategy, that is, to work with others.
Conclusion

The findings of this study should be interpreted cautiously as the number of participants was small. Nevertheless, the study suggests the need for classroom language teachers to be alert to possible reasons underlying the strategy choice that learners make to work in a group or alone. When organising the classroom and planning activities, teachers need to take account of the age of the learner and the possible effects of age on memory and anxiety. While learners should be encouraged to extend their range of classroom roles they should, nevertheless, be credited with a degree of self-awareness to select the type of classroom working arrangement in which they feel confident and secure.

In addition, the findings of this study suggest that further research is needed to provide detailed insights into the complex interrelationships of the learner’s metacognitive knowledge, age, anxiety, memory and strategy choice as revealed in the language learning classroom.

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