How do Chinese students collaborate in EFL group work?

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ABSTRACT

Despite its origins in Western educational settings, communicative methodology, including the use of groups, has been largely accepted in both English-speaking and non-English-speaking English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts across the world. However, students who approach learning from a highly collectivist orientation may experience discomfort in Western-style group work situations that require a combination of both cooperative and individualist behaviour from participants.

This study examines the collaborative behaviour of Chinese university students when they work in groups in English language lessons. The study shows that while Chinese students can collaborate successfully in groups, there are aspects of Chinese culture that may limit the effectiveness of group work in the language classroom in China.

Introduction

Small group work in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms has become almost an essential core of the communicative approach, whether teachers employ the ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ version (Holliday 1994). The initial impetus for the use of group work stemmed from demonstrations of what could be achieved in situations where English was a first language and informal talk between students was shown to be a means of students developing their understandings collaboratively (Barnes and Todd 1977; Barnes 1992; Mercer 1995). Recent studies of how group work can function with English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in the Australian setting have highlighted a range of variables that can influence the effectiveness of student learning in groups. For example, Dufficy (2005) has classified group tasks according to the kind of interaction they can generate, while Storch (2002) has identified the nature of the learners themselves as a significant factor in what happens when students work together on tasks. Also, Hammond (2001) has stressed the importance of learners building on their earlier experiences...
of learning ‘scaffolding’, usually provided by teachers, when working with peers in group work. Thus teachers’ assistance and guidance before students are able to accomplish a task alone can also be a variable that can influence the effectiveness of student group work.

Despite a scarcity of research about the effects of group work in real classrooms in non-Western contexts, the use of group work has been increasingly advocated for EFL settings. As Foster (1998: 4) points out, however, there has been unwillingness on the part of researchers to ‘move into the environment of an undisturbed, intact classroom’, so that much of the research dealing with group work relates to ‘narrowly controlled conditions, especially conditions that would be very unusual in a classroom’ (Foster 1998: 19). No doubt the preference shown by researchers for the laboratory situation rather than for the authentic classroom can be at least partly attributed to the complexity of what happens in the real classroom and the inherent difficulties for research presented by this complexity. It is equally clear, however, that we need careful investigation of what happens when students work in groups as part of their normal English lessons before we can be sure of the benefits of group work in an EFL classroom.

A further factor that needs to be considered is the significance of exporting Western communicative pedagogy and techniques into a cultural setting for which they were not originally designed. The difficulties associated with this transfer have been highlighted for some time. For example, Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) emphasise the need for a judicious appropriation of the pedagogy to suit particular conditions, and Ellis (1996: 213) argues for mediation in filtering ‘the method to make it appropriate to the local cultural norms’.

Despite these reservations, there has been growing endorsement of group work for use in a range of EFL contexts. Jacobs and Ratmanida (1996: 105) suggest that many students from South-East Asia come from societies which have been regarded as tending towards low individualism, which means that they tend towards a collectivist outlook and would ‘be more inclined to help one another’ and therefore ‘more likely to speak in small groups rather than in whole class settings’. Such students may be more willing to share ideas with one another than those from high individualism societies, who may prefer to work alone.

Miller and Aldred (2000), Littlewood (2000) and Tang (1996) all see group work as being admirably suited to the Chinese way of learning. Flowerdew (1998: 323), too, believes ‘group work is an appropriate methodological tool for such learners, given that it is sensitive to the three key Confucian values: cooperation, the concept of “face”, and self-effacement’.
The research reported in this study attempts to answer some of the questions surrounding the application of group work to the Chinese-speaking EFL context with the aim of providing insights into what actually happens when Chinese EFL students work in groups in their English lessons.

The study

The study described here was part of a larger project examining several aspects of the behaviour of Chinese students when they worked in groups as part of their normal English language lessons. The project was completed as part of a Master of Applied Linguistics degree program at an Australian university. The purpose of the project was to determine how group work in Chinese EFL lessons could contribute to students’ English learning. The students’ own perceptions of their behaviours were also analysed.

The participants were members of one class of 36 female non-English major students in a ‘normal university’ in southern China. Most of the class had been learning English previously at high school for approximately seven years. The teacher of the class was a Chinese native speaker and had taught the class for one year. For their English lessons, the class had been organised into four groups of eight and one group of four students. Discussions from three of these groups are used in this paper. Group 1 discussions were not included due to recording problems; also, although examples of students’ collaborative behaviour are found in the discussion data of all the four groups in the original project, because of constraints of space of this article, illustrative excerpts of data from groups 3, 4 and 5 only are used in this analysis.

The participants were recorded during two 20-minute group discussions dealing with two topics covered in their English lessons. The time interval between the two discussions was six months. The topic of the first discussion was ‘Do you hold an optimistic or pessimistic view of the future in the next 30 years?’, and the topic of the second discussion was ‘How do you deal with stress in your life?’. Both topics were taken from the students’ textbooks. No specific instructions were given regarding participation in group discussions because students were expected to engage in their groups as they usually did. Eight discussions from four groups, numbered from 1 to 8, were included in the original project but, due to the constraints of space of this article, only four excerpts of discussion data from Group 3, 4 and 5, plus one excerpt of interview data from Group 3, are included in the present article.

Some participants volunteered to participate in the conversations with the researcher after the recordings. Those who were available at their dormitories on campus after class were interviewed in Mandarin within two days.
of the second recording and were asked questions about how they perceived their behaviour during the discussions.

Discussion

In examining the transcripts of these discussions, a key feature that emerges is the significant degree to which collaboration occurs between members of the groups. Examples of different kinds of collaboration from the discussions of Groups 3, 4 and 5 are presented in the extracts that follow. The collaborations identified are of three types, each showing increased complexity in the nature of the student processes. First, we will present evidence of a narrow form of cooperation, in which a group member suggests to the speaker a particular item of vocabulary. Then we will examine evidence of more extensive sharing between group members in which there is the development and modification of an idea. Finally, the contribution that challenges and disagreement between group members can make to a fuller exploration of an underdeveloped idea will be considered.

In Excerpt 1, Group 5 is concluding its discussion about the future and Student (S) 25 supplies the lexical item ‘outweigh’ as a summary of S26’s point that ‘the advantages will be much more than the disadvantages’. Although in this case there has been no difficulty in communication, the collaboration by S25 in suggesting ‘outweigh’ has allowed S26 to practise the use of a newly learned vocabulary item from their textbook in a different context. Application of recently learned vocabulary to a new and communicative situation is not a skill that is easily mastered by Chinese EFL students and the collaboration between students has facilitated this process.

EXCERPT 1 (DISCUSSION 7 OF GROUP 5)

S25: We’ll stop our topic here now. In a word, er, we believe that we’ll be better, er. In the future, the water will be clearer, the air fresher and the sky bluer, our life better.

S26: Hm. And (ahya) after all, er, I, er, I think the advantages will be much more than the disadvantages.

S25: Will outweigh the disadvantages [with a smile].

S26: Oh, outweigh [with a smile]. Yeah. And our future will very beautiful.

In Excerpt 1, the contributions from the other group member fit neatly into the original speakers’ intended meanings and are indicative of close collaborative attention to the detail of the idea being developed in the discussions.
In the following two examples, a quite different type of collaboration occurred as a result of a string of turns from different students who all contributed in each case towards the development of a single idea. The initial speaker’s idea in each case was far less formed than was that of S26 in the previous example, and the contributions by the group members in Excerpt 2 were far more instrumental in the construction and shaping of the thought. In Excerpt 2, S25 and S26 in Group 5 help S28 clarify her ideas about the improvement in the food supply in China that could be expected in the future as a result of increased trade with other countries. Initially, S28 is seeing the improvement in terms of the volume and quantity of food available, but S26 challenges her by saying, ‘but it is no mean that more and more food’. S28 responds by referring to the WTO (World Trade Organisation), whereby S26 follows up by mentioning that WTO arrangements will allow the price to be reduced, to which S25 contributes, ‘cheaper?’. This exchange concludes with S28 stating that ‘people will have a lot of thing to choose, then’. She has now incorporated choice into her idea about food, which at the beginning of the interchange referred only to amount (‘more and more food’).

The group members have collaboratively modified S28’s original idea to include both variety as well as quantity. The questioning by S25 and S26 has succeeded in S28 extending her thoughts about food.

**EXCERPT 2 (DISCUSSION 7 OF GROUP 5)**

S28: I think everything has two sides. They have, er, some advantage or disadvantage. But I think I would think the future will be, be better than today now [with a smile].


S28: Because, er, er, we can eat more and more food that from the, the, er, America and the other countries that, er, er, that [with a smile] [interruption].

S25: Now you said the countries or the nations of the world will, er, will be linked?

S28: Linked up. Yeah.

S26: Er, but it is no mean that more and more food.

S25: That is er, er.

S26: Yeah.
S28: That, er, for example, that way our country enter the WTO.

S26: Yeah. And the price of the food or the other things or machines or radios or the other thing or, and the price will be reduced.

S25: Cheaper?

S28: Yes, it is cheaper, er, er. So I think, er, er, people will, er, have a lot of thing to choose, then. And so, er, there are a lot of thing to choose, I think and so there are a lot of things to eat [with a smile].

S26: And the, and because of the transportation,

S28: Yes, transportation.

In Excerpt 3, six Group 4 students collaboratively list different ways of coping with stress. There has been support given by other group members for particular suggestions; for example, S19’s adequate sleep and food draws an acknowledgment from S20, ‘I think this is a good way’, and S20’s ‘crying’ suggestion brings S23’s response, ‘That’s ok to cry’. The result is a range of solutions. Interestingly, S17 raises the additional point that stress can actually become a positive part of one’s life.

In Excerpt 3, there has been a diversity of ideas presented by different students in a sequential and cohesive order, and the discussion has proceeded in a cumulatively developmental manner. The result shows clear evidence of collaboration between students.

EXCERPT 3 (DISCUSSION 6 OF GROUP 4)

S23: Er, the tension. And any other ways to relax yourself?

S19: Opinion? I think take good care yourself is a good way to, er, to release our stress, er, because you are special. Get enough rest and eat well. If you are irritable and tense from lack of sleep or if you can't eat properly, you will have less ability to deal with stressful situations. Er, so, er, you must get enough sleep and eat well, er, and you will have a good mood to, er, to deal with the stress.

S23: What do you think?

S20: I think this is a good way but, er, I think I would cried when I, when I was unhappy because after crying, I will think much better.

S23: That's ok to cry. What do you think? [S20 asked to restart in Mandarin and one student said 'Ouch'.]

S21: First we must be confident of ourselves, er, play while we work do, er, phi … , physical exercises as much possible and, and then, er, keep
good commu ... , communication, communication with people around you can help them or get, or get help from them. Then, er, I think you should relax yourself.

S17: It seems that most of you think stress is unpleasant. But I think it is necessary for our life [laugh] because [laugh] without [laugh], without [laugh] in our life, without it [interruption]. If you could have a reasonable understanding of act of relaxation you can make stress work for you rather than against you. Of course, er, this must be based on that you, you can't get it be out of hand.

S18: I want to take it, er, try physical activities is also ok, er, right, er, I am happy, er, I'll, er, take table, er, play table tennis and play and play the unhappy things all to the book [laugh]. I'll relax myself.

The examples presented so far indicate a consistent pattern of harmonious collaboration in the group discussions. It would be unrealistic to expect that this pattern of group behaviour was the only kind that occurred in the data analysed. Indeed, it has been traditionally accepted that the work of successful groups typically does not proceed in a linear movement without setbacks and interruptions en route to an agreed outcome. Ironically, successful collaboration in groups requires at some time disagreement, even conflict and contradiction. Ideas need to be challenged and disputed before they can be fully explored and subsequently accepted. Indeed, it has been claimed that without a stage of disagreement between group members, the work of a group remains at an immature level. Tuckerman (1965), many years ago, included this phase in the growth cycle of groups when he proposed four stages: forming–storming–norming–performing. Using this model of the developmental sequence in groups, Handy and Aitken (1986: 67–68) went on to define the storming stage as ‘a period of conflict, sometimes about the aims of the group, sometimes about the aims of individuals, in which the first easy but false consensus is challenged’.

The discussions of the students in this study revealed clear evidence of disagreements and challenges to each other’s thinking on occasions where there was some low level conflict in ideas. In Excerpt 4, four members of Group 3 engaged in behaviour that challenged each other’s ideas when discussing the view of the future. They were able to disagree with each other and to offer alternative ideas within the group. S13’s original positive idea, that in the future people will live longer due to the migration to other planets, undergoes a series of challenges until S11 brings the discussion of this point back to almost a complete rejection of S13’s initial idea that migration to other pollution-free planets will allow people to live out an extended life span. S11 suggests that, even if the future involves people leaving a diseased
(Earth) planet and moving to ‘cleaner’ planets, the effects of pollution will, in time, inevitably cause the newer locations also to become diseased.

EXCERPT 4 (DISCUSSION 3 OF GROUP 3)

S13: Er, I think, er, the, the travel land will be enlarged for, er, we can go to some planet like the moon or the Venus, er, and there we can, hm, we can live for some time. Also we can explore the planet. But I think, er, but I am worried about the, the environment of the Chinese. The people maybe pollute the environment of the planet.

S9: I don’t agree with [S13], er, because with the situation, with the situation of living change, er, maybe some very terrible disease will occur and people may also become more and more short life.

S14: Ah, I don’t agree with the [S9]. I think with the development of science many incurable diseases will be, er, such as AIDS, cancer, will be controlled. People will not suffer from pain of these diseases.

S9: Yes. The old disease will become under control but some new disease will occur [with laugh] in the future.

S11: But we can’t forget that, er, many disease is caused by the pollution, pollution.

The data presented in Excerpt 4 have indicated that Chinese students are quite capable of expressing disagreement openly in their group discussions. Similarly, some of the data in Excerpt 3, specifically the contribution of S17, also illustrate this feature of student behaviour when working in a group. Thus, what is demonstrated is that, along with evidence that the group discussions (Excerpt 2, Excerpt 3) proceeded with the harmony and collaboration that might be expected of a collectivist approach to group work, there is also evidence that some group members (Excerpt 4) have exhibited the more individualistic traits of being able to disagree and challenge each other’s ideas. This is not a surprising finding given that national social characteristics are not inevitably shared by all individuals in a particular national group.

The presence of individualist behaviour in group discussions might be seen as an effect of Western influence on the young generation of Chinese students, especially given the level of openness that has now become typical of some cities in southern China.

Individualistic traits of behaviour in Chinese EFL students’ group discussions can also be seen in the students’ own views of their group behaviour. In their interviews with the researcher (R), one student (see S15 in Excerpt 5) stated directly that she would feel free to disagree and challenge the ideas
of others, not only in her own learning group, but also on other occasions where she may communicate with strangers in English. However, the other two students (see S13 and S16 in Excerpt 5) provided examples of another aspect of Chinese culture that is relevant to the use of group work in the EFL setting in China. The Western Assumption involved in Handy and Aitken’s (1986) model of the developmental sequence in groups, that effective group work is likely to include elements of disagreement in an exchange of diverse views, may cause discomfort for some Chinese students. Some Chinese students may hesitate to express different ideas and challenge others directly in order to protect the ‘face’ and feelings of others. Therefore, the extent to which group members are familiar with each other may influence the effectiveness of Chinese students’ group work.

In Excerpt 5, S13 expressed caution in the way she would negotiate disagreement in her discussions. When S13 participated in the English Corner (where students and people from outside the university gather every Friday evening in front of the teaching building to have informal ‘chats’ in English in order to improve their English), she reported that she would be reluctant to challenge those with whom she was not familiar, although she felt confident to challenge her peers in her group. S13’s position seems to be influenced by the Chinese preoccupation with face, that is to avoid confronting an interlocutor directly in order to ‘protect the other’s self-image and feelings’ (Chang and Holt 1994: 115). Similarly, Ting-Toomey (1999: 216) found that people from low collectivism societies ‘tend to use direct, face-threatening conflict behaviours, whereas collectivists tend to use more indirect, mutual face-saving behaviours’.

**EXCERPT 5 (INTERVIEW DATA OF GROUP 3)**

**R:** Why did you prefer to have your roommates as your group members in the discussions? And what are the advantages?

**S16:** First of all, we can communicate with each other very easily. While preparing, we have time to discuss together. And it is easy to select some topics.

**R:** Do you mean that you can communicate with your group members anytime and anywhere?

**S16:** Right. We can have many opportunities to communicate.

**R:** Any more ideas about it?

**S13:** We can feel free to express our different opinions and don’t need to care others’ opinions about it. So we can feel free to say, ‘I don’t agree with you’.
R: But you won't do that to a stranger, will you?

S13: No. They may wonder why we oppose to their ideas since their ideas are so good [they laugh together].

R: Do you think you would hesitate to say, ‘I don’t agree with you’ to a stranger [laugh]?

S13: At least I would not express it so directly.

R: What’s your idea?

S15: I won’t do that. Perhaps I often go to the English Corner, I would like to express my disagreement directly [laugh].

R: So it doesn’t make any difference to you, does it?

S15: Right.

R: You just feel free to express your disagreement. Right?

S15: Yes.

R: You won’t care about that. I think you all must go to the English Corner [they laugh together] and experience it.

As the discussion excerpts have shown and S15 indicates in Excerpt 5, Chinese students can cope with disagreements and conflict in their group discussions, especially if they are working with peers with whom they are familiar. Although this open disagreement may not be a natural and integral aspect of classroom group work in a low individualism society such as China, this study demonstrates that it can and does occur in group discussions in real EFL lessons in China.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine what students actually do when they work in discussion groups in an EFL classroom as part of their normal ELT lessons. Despite group work being an imported Western technique of communicative ELT, this study has shown that it is possible to use group work effectively in the EFL classroom in China, even though it is difficult to generalise from a study of this size. The analyses of the transcripts revealed a range of collaborative behaviour by the students, including assisting each other with lexis, accumulating and modifying ideas, showing agreement and disagreement, and reflecting on how disagreements were expressed in English with different audiences. Thus the question raised in the title of this article may be answered: ‘Chinese students collaborate in EFL group work in a variety of ways.’
However, even though there are close connections between collectivist characteristics found in Chinese culture and the cooperation inherent in group work, there is still a basic caveat associated with the use of groups in the EFL setting in China. For groups to work effectively in Chinese settings, students need to be comfortable with the dual roles that group work entails. That is, alongside team-oriented, collaborative behaviour, productive group work also entails dissenting and challenging behaviour from individuals.

While this should not deter a teacher from using groups in EFL lessons, the application of group work to the EFL context in China should be considered with due caution.

REFERENCES


