Adult South Sudanese students in Australia: The significance of congruence between student and teacher expectations

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ABSTRACT

In a study of South Sudanese adult student participation in Australian learning environments, it was found that student expectations in the areas of classroom behaviours, teacher monitoring of learning and student competition in a formal learning context were consistent across contexts, despite entry level of education. However, teacher expectations varied according to the learning environment, and this gave rise to differences in student participation. The qualitative study relied on data from an Adult Migrant English Program group, a university group and a women’s community group. Using Volet’s (1999) four types of learning transfer, this paper discusses the interdependence of student and teacher expectations and subsequent differences in student participation related to learning context.

Introduction

In recent years there has been a substantial increase in the number of South Sudanese former refugees in Australian educational contexts. Steadily growing since 1999, the number of Sudanese refugees accepted through Australia’s offshore humanitarian program reached its peak in 2005 and, by 2007, the Sudanese population in Australia had risen to more than 9000 (DIAC 2007). Although a proportion of these Sudanese refugees came from Darfur, it is the South Sudanese who are the focus of this study. This South Sudanese group is in the process of adjusting to life in a new country, and the practitioners and service providers involved in the resettlement of the group are still learning how to respond to specific difficulties (Brown, Miller and Mitchell 2006).

This paper reports on one aspect of research conducted in a wider ethnographic study on major influences on South Sudanese adult student participation in three Australian learning environments: an Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) conducted in a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college, a university and a women’s community group. A major theme to emerge from this wider study was the significance of the degree of congruence between student and teacher expectations on student participation. The theme was analysed using Volet’s (1999) ‘person-in-context’ work on the sociocultural appropriateness of learning transfer for international students from a Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) at an Australian university. Volet’s work was useful due to its grounding in situated cognition research (eg Brown, Collins and Duguid 1989; Rogoff 1990; Greeno 1997, 1998) and the importance this theoretical perspective places on the interaction between the individual and the social environment. In the current research it was the interdependency of expectations that was found to be a major influence on student participation.

The degree of congruence between student and teacher expectations is discussed in terms of Volet’s (1999) types of learning transfer. Volet extrapolates four different types of learning transfer based on expectations: appropriate, ambivalent, difficult and inappropriate. For Volet, if learning transfer is appropriate, then there is a high degree of congruence between the past and present learning environments. For example, in her study, CHC students were found to associate failure with not making an effort, and this fitted well with the expectations of the academic staff in the Australian university. If learning transfer is ambivalent, there is some variation in opinion in the new environment as to whether an expectation is constructive for learning. In the case of the CHC students, an example of this was memorising academic content or following instructions very closely. If learning transfer is difficult, there is a lack of congruence between teacher and student expectations, and an example was the non-participation of CHC students in university tutorials. Finally, inappropriate learning transfer refers to expectations that are unacceptable
These different types of learning transfer help to explore the degree of congruence between student and teacher expectations and its significance in the learning contexts presented in this paper. The findings are discussed according to the three areas where student expectations were found to be consistent across the three learning environments, independent of the entry level of education: classroom behaviours, teacher monitoring of learning and student competition. However, teacher expectations appeared to depend on the learning environment in which they worked. This led to different types of learning transfer and different forms of student participation. The three types of expectations are discussed for the two formal learning environments of the study – the AMEP context and the university context – because the expectations were only found to apply to these environments. Data from the women’s community group are used when the women chose to talk about their experiences at the technical college, given that some of the women concentrated on these experiences in interviews. They appeared to identify the more formal learning environment of the technical college as the place where they were taught, and the women’s community group as the place where they were helped with their English.

Methodology

The study was designed to explore the everyday classroom participation of three groups of South Sudanese adult students in Western Australia. Qualitative methods of ethnographic participant observation, semi-structured interviews and a focus group were employed. These methods emphasise the contextualisation of experience and action (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005) and generate thick or detailed description, which tends to be more suited to situations where observations are not transformed into numbers, and more attention is paid to fewer people (Geertz 1973). Also, the interaction between researcher and researched is acknowledged in qualitative methodology (eg Marshall and Rossman 1989; Van Maanen 1995; Markus 1998). The research was begun as a direct result of the researcher’s experiences as a teacher at a technical college where she had the opportunity to participate in and observe different learning environments. Finally, owing to systemic differences in the learning environments, it was problematic to compare data across learning environments statistically. Qualitative methodology was assumed to allow an analysis of patterns arising from detailed description. This relates to Geertz’s (1973) idea that detailed description is possible in an ethnographic study.

The study was conducted over six to nine months, and 36 students and 10 teachers were observed across three groups and learning environments. Eleven students were interviewed in a university focus group, and 25 students and 11 teachers were interviewed in semi-structured interviews. The learning environments were an all-male first-year university group accessing English support, a mixed-gender technical college group studying English language and literacy in the AMEP, and a women’s community group set up to assist with perceived socialisation and acculturation needs. The researcher acted as a participant observer and tutor for the university group, as a substitute teacher and observer in the technical college group, and as a participant observer in the women’s community group. Interview questions were generated from observations, and student and teacher discourse during interviews often served to clarify and explain observed behaviour.

The theme guiding the beginning stages of the study was the main influences on South Sudanese student participation across the three learning environments and specific research questions were formulated through repeated observations, through issues raised in the university focus group (which took place early in the fieldwork) and through existing theory, which assisted in the development of ideas. Three interrelated sources of influence on student participation were eventually identified to be cross-cultural, cultural and social. The following research questions, relevant to this paper, refer to the cross-cultural source of influence.

- What are the expectations of South Sudanese students in Australia regarding how teaching and learning should take place, and how do they compare and contrast with the expectations of their teachers?
- How does the degree of congruence between student and teacher expectations influence student participation in their learning environment?
Findings on classroom behaviours

The first area in which student expectations were found to be consistent across the three learning environments was classroom behaviours in a formal learning environment. Students reported a strong focus on obedience in classes they had attended in Africa, including physical punishment for misdemeanours. The average class size for primary school was reported to be between 40 and 50 children per class, and for secondary school around 70, with nearly 200 students in one class. King (1990) contends that obedience is extremely important in many cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa given large class sizes. However, neither the AMEP nor university learning environments required the teachers to firmly monitor student behaviour and, as a result, the degree of congruence between teacher and student expectations of correct classroom behaviours in formal classrooms was found to be low. Nevertheless, this low degree of congruence appeared to influence student participation in different ways, depending on the learning environment.Volet’s (1999) ambivalent learning transfer appeared to be occurring in the AMEP group, while inappropriate learning transfer was found to be occurring in the university group.

In the AMEP learning context, both students and teachers seemed to accept a dynamic where student behaviour was not closely monitored and this can be linked to Volet’s ambivalent learning transfer. Although opinion on student behaviour, as constructive for learning, may not have been unanimous, teachers appeared to view much of the students’ more relaxed behaviour in terms of active participation. The three teachers observed and the four teachers interviewed did not appear to expect to monitor student behaviour closely, but neither were they found to expect adult behaviour from their students. The students were observed to call out the answers to teacher questions even if they were not chosen to do so, and the teachers usually tolerated this behaviour, rather than demonstrating annoyance. If one student was laughing at another student, or if students had not completed work they should have completed, they were scolded in a manner usually reserved for children. This telling off was done in a light-hearted way and, in the classes observed, the students did not react negatively. Other nationalities in the classes were observed to be treated in the same way. The teachers did not refer to this in interview at all, and the fact that it was done without annoyance suggested that they expected to treat students in this way as part of their job.

Even though students observed in the AMEP classes were found to participate actively, two women interviewed in the women’s community group demonstrated surprise at the lack of close monitoring of student behaviour in the AMEP. They spoke about student misbehaviour and blamed it on classroom management, as these students explain:

[Misbehaviour] depends on the management. [Ivy]

Do you think it depends on the management? [Interviewer]

Sometimes yeah. [Sally]

These women reported that, in AMEP classes, students did not always do what the teacher told them to do or they confronted the teacher in class. For example, Sally spoke of an Italian woman who had not accepted the teacher’s decision in a listening assessment:

Like today we [did] an exam yesterday and then the teacher recorded it... today... [the teacher] brings the letters back... and then she corrects the letters and then the other lady from the class she doesn’t pass and then disturbs, shouting with the teacher, she doesn’t agree with the teacher, she says this teacher she doesn’t know how to teach every class... [The teacher’s] the one who teaches you to know... don’t don’t don’t shout... with her. [Sally]

Sally displayed surprise, as well as indignation, when she was relating this story, and the surprise could have stemmed from the fact that the woman could actually get away with that kind of behaviour.

Many of the students in the women’s community group, including Sally, had left their education during primary school, and identification of themselves as obedient learners may have remained from this childhood experience of a formal classroom, as Sally commented:
Even though she was talking of her childhood experiences in this case, she also used the word *misbehaviour* while talking about the technical college class, and her focus on disobedience may have been linked to her childhood understanding of misbehaviour.

In light of these comments, it seemed that the teachers were guiding the relaxed behaviour of the students through their tolerance. Indeed, the teachers in the AMEP were not found to react strongly to *misbehaviour* in spite of seeing the behaviour as somewhat childish. This may have been partially formed by some of the teachers’ primary training. One teacher in particular likened the students to primary school children when speaking of students who were upset that they had not progressed to the next class:

*You know like when we’re in primary school, our friends go up and we stay down and we don’t like it either.*

[Cameron]

This teacher expectation, with regard to managing behaviour, was found to apply to teachers outside the study. In an interview, one of the students in the university group alluded to being treated as a child when he was commenting on his experiences at technical college:

*How they see us [in TAFE] … we come from a different country and they consider us like small children … I like [that] because … my mind is very small.* [Morgan]

It therefore appeared that students did not necessarily mind being treated like children in their new learning environment. It also appeared from Morgan’s comment that some teachers teach students within this same *child* paradigm in more advanced English classes, since Morgan’s level of English was considered to be sufficient for university entry.

In the university group, there was also a low degree of congruence between teacher and student expectations of teacher monitoring of student behaviour, but this time the type of learning transfer appeared to be inappropriate. The theme of classroom behaviour received a significant degree of attention in both the teacher and student interviews, and the participants’ desire to discuss the issue at some length indicated that unmet expectations might be affecting student participation. Indeed, unmet expectations were often observed to result in student non-participation or in their efforts either to control or take advantage of *unmonitored* situations.

The interviews were semi-structured in order to allow the participants to concentrate on issues they felt were of particular concern. Students were found to focus on the theme of turn-taking in relation to the lack of *adequate* monitoring, while two of the four teachers interviewed focused on what they viewed as bad behaviour. The other two teachers interviewed chose to concentrate on the academic needs of the students.

Two of the university teachers viewed their students as adults who were responsible for their own in-class behaviour, and spoke of the actual behaviour as inappropriate. One teacher in particular reported that her students acted like children and demonstrated her annoyance at this:

*They’d want a break, they’d go and it was really hard to get them back in [to the tutorial] and I used to say to them, you’re grown men […] you know when ten minutes is up, how about behaving.* [Marilyn]

*I felt it was like teaching … when I was teaching about eight year old boys, and the young boys in the class were always very keen, you know, I know the answer, I know the answer … that’s what it felt like to me, attention-seeking behaviour.* [Marilyn]

The other teacher did not draw this parallel with children, but commented that she did not think that many of the South Sudanese students should have been at university. This opinion appeared to have been formed by the behaviour of the students and became apparent when she was speaking of a diligent student:

*I think [Steve] got quite irritated with the others for being late, for missing tutes, for making pathetic excuses like the soccer was on, and so on.* [Libby]

These two teachers in particular made it clear that they were annoyed at being confronted with *childish* behaviour. The transition from secondary school to university is acknowledged to be difficult for students partly because behaviour is not monitored at university (Kantanis 2000), but it appeared significant that
Marilyn’s focus was on what she considered to be primary rather than secondary school behaviour. A possible contributing factor with regards to childish behaviour may have been the lack of firm monitoring, especially in the more relaxed, discursive atmosphere of tutorials. All of the six university students interviewed stressed their expectation of highly structured turn-taking in the university learning environment, and may have taken the tutorials less seriously due to this expectation being unmet. In the tutorials it was observed that the students preferred to talk in blocks of time, and generally allowed others to speak in this way. The students appeared to be reluctant to take advantage of short pauses, if they thought that speakers had not concluded their contributions.

Two of the older university participants spoke of this issue at length, showing dissatisfaction that tutors were not controlling turn-taking in tutorials. Three other students also reported structured turn-taking during past learning experiences. Morgan’s comment below is a reflection of this dissatisfaction:

*If you want to say something you have to raise your hand up in Africa […] but in Australia there is no space. [A] person talk[s], another person jump[s in] even [if] they know when that person is going to finish. When you finish, even [before] seconds people rush in, another person rush[es] in, like that. [Morgan]*

The perceived lack of space to talk influenced Morgan’s participation in tutorials, since he found himself unable to participate: *I decided to talk but I don’t get a chance.*

This may be compared with Mangubhai’s (2000) finding in his study of turn-taking among Athubascan Indians and Americans, where the Americans spoke to fill silences, and the Athubascan Indians felt that they were not being given an opportunity to speak.

When behaviour was not monitored sufficiently by teachers, students participated differently. Some assertively attempted to take control, especially with other African students, while others relied solely on the tutor to monitor other students. Individual differences in students monitoring the behaviour of other students may have been due to the fact that the more assertive students had been in positions of authority in either Sudan or Kenya. One of the more assertive students explained that he had been class monitor in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, a position of responsibility elected by classmates. Two more of the assertive students also reported that they had been leaders in the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and were accustomed to positions of command. The more reserved students did not appear to disapprove of their colleagues monitoring the behaviour of classmates. For example, Peter commented on a former SPLA leader’s refusal to give ground to a Congolese student before he had finished his point:

*There was one time [the Congolese student] interrupted but [Sam] kept on talking. That’s because [Sam] feels as if he has not completed his statement, so you […] shouldn’t talk and leave it hanging, you have to conclude whatever you are saying. [Peter]*

Peter’s comment indicated solidarity with the student who attempted to take control of turn-taking, even though Peter himself was more reticent when it came to asserting himself. Inappropriate learning transfer therefore appeared to lead either to non-participation or undesirable forms of participation for the university group.

**Findings on monitoring learning**

The degree of congruence between teacher and student expectations of close monitoring of student learning was found to vary across the learning environments. Student expectations were consistent, perhaps due to a teacher-fronted transmission model of teaching found in Sub-Saharan and other cultures (Lin 2001; Arthur and Martin 2006). In this transmission model, exchanges between teachers and students have been observed to follow an information – response – feedback format, and each of these three stages is closely guided by the teacher (Lin 2001; Arthur and Martin 2006). However, teacher expectations varied. Teachers in the AMEP learning environment appeared to share student expectations that their job was to closely monitor learning, thereby indicating an appropriate learning transfer. Teachers in the university learning environment expected a degree of self-direction on the part of the students, which indicated an inappropriate learning transfer.

The AMEP classes were studying at the pre-literacy, beginner and post-beginner levels of the *Certificates in Spoken and Written English* curriculum framework (NSW AMES 2008). Teachers were found to monitor the students closely, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of how to complete exercises. These
teachers did not seem to expect that students would be able to learn independently, which became clear through classroom observation. The three observed teachers told their students, with a lot of repetition, exactly what they had to do and how they were to do it. All three teachers gave feedback to the students during class by praising them if they gave the correct answer, telling them the answer, and giving them practice not only with the content of the assessment tasks that they would be required to complete, but also the format.

The appropriateness of the learning transfer was reflected in the reported satisfaction with the guidance that students were receiving from their teachers, and their observed active participation in class. One student explicitly praised his teacher, Cameron, for monitoring him:

I like [Cameron] because [he] show[s] you [what] you don't know […] he is […] around [for] the student[s].

[Clive]

This apparent satisfaction may have been related to the teacher-transmission model, since the model was frequently observed to be used in the AMEP classes and, on the whole, forms of participation were not observed to change.

In contrast, in the university group, the degree of congruence between teacher and student expectations was low and learning transfer was found to be inappropriate. The teachers expected a greater degree of self-direction in learning, and students reported past experiences where they had been completely dependent on their teachers. In particular, the students were found to want the teachers to give them more explicit guidance on how they were expected to complete assignments. Many students explained that it had been clear in past learning experiences that they were to memorise information for examinations, but in the context of the Australian university it was not clear what they had to do. Some student expectations were changing, and one teacher in particular was trying to find ways to offer support. However, inappropriate learning transfer may have been a significant factor in non-participation or failure on the part of some students.

The university teachers’ expectation of student independence was mainly indicated by the surprise, annoyance or frustration on the part of the four teachers at the kind of guidance that the South Sudanese students required. For example, two of the teachers spoke of how much help they had attempted to give their South Sudanese students to pass the supplementary examination:

There was so much scaffolding in that question, you know what I mean by scaffolding in […] Vygotskian terms, right? Really, if you followed the instructions … you could hardly fail. [Anne]

And I hammered my [tutorial] groups, you can bet your boots ‘responsible government’ and ‘executive dominance’.

[Craig]

If you take the study guide in, you’re allowed to take the study guide in … if you copied out the bloody study guide you could pass the exam, but don’t tell them that. [Anne]

It was evident, with these two teachers in particular, that they normally expected students to be self-directed learners, and the South Sudanese students were not fulfilling those expectations.

The critical reflection necessary for self-directed learning can be considered culturally specific (Collins 1996; Hanson 1996), and could explain the difficulty the South Sudanese students encountered with the scaffolded examination questions. Anne, the coordinator of a unit that was very popular among the South Sudanese students, demonstrated an understanding of this issue, and her own expectations, by giving the South Sudanese students extra tutorials, and by allowing more supplementary exams than she would have done ordinarily. The scaffolding, to which she refers in the earlier quotation, was specifically aimed at giving extra guidance to her South Sudanese students.

It appeared that learning transfer was inappropriate as a result of past learning experiences in which teachers had been the only source of information, as one student explained:

Back home in Sudan the system is different because there the teacher is the central meaning, [the] central key point of learning. Everything is through the teacher … the teacher has to make everything … to bring to you … then you cram the whole thing, you come to the examination without paper, like the whole year, you have to put the whole thing in your head. [Daniel]

Even so, some student expectations, in the university context, were starting to change. For example, when...
asked what he expected from a teacher, another student commented:

In my past years at school … our teacher just used to give information, then yours is just to come and read this and you don’t do a lot of research … but here now it’s different … like lectures they don’t … give you all what you expect … I’m expecting teachers to give me more information. [Matthew]

Matthew did not appear happy with this aspect of learning in the new context, even though he was observed beginning to seek information independently. Other students were reacting to change in a positive way, as seen in Mike’s response:

With that school back home [in Africa] we [did] not have to do research … the whole thing [was] prepared by teachers, notes were prepared by teachers and handed [out] or maybe written on the blackboard and then you [could] copy it … The only thing the student [could] do is revise that and maybe get yourself [ready] for the exam … It was good [at] that time … but here it is good to … be independent. Really. I like it. [Mike]

Mike’s participation was also observed to be changing in that he was gradually taking more and more initiative in his own research, asking teachers for help outside class and accessing the university library. This was also true of Daniel and Peter, two of the interviewed participants, as well as three South Sudanese students observed in the university group but not interviewed.

All the students were especially focused on receiving feedback on culturally appropriate ways of meeting the academic requirements of university. This suggested a desire for greater teacher monitoring and student comments corresponded with research findings that non-native students are aware of secret rules of language (Bardovi-Harlig 2001; Yates 2004). The students pointed out at length, in informal exchanges with the researcher, that they believed themselves to be disadvantaged in relation to other students, not having grown up in Australia. They saw this disadvantage reflected in their low grades or failure.

Findings on competition

The final area where student expectations were found to be consistent across the learning environments was that of competition, and a low degree of congruence was found between student and teacher expectations in this area. Teacher focus appeared to be on getting each student to the required standard rather than on ranking students. In past formal learning environments, the students were told where they were placed in the class to encourage competition and prepare them for examinations. This competitive behaviour may have also been related to the historical importance of selection in many Sub-Saharan African cultures. King (1990), in his discussion on Sub-Saharan African education, highlights this when he speaks of two distinct labour markets – the rural and modern. Students and families of students strive to be a part of the modern sector and to be paid a salary, but it is extremely difficult to work in this labour market due to the lack of jobs. This has made examinations the bridge between the two labour markets (King 1990). The students expected to compete with other students in order to do well in their education in Australia but teacher reactions to competitive forms of participation in the AMEP and university groups differed. In the AMEP group, aspects of competitive behaviour appeared to indicate ambivalent learning transfer when related to active in-class participation, while aspects more directly connected to ranking indicated inappropriate learning transfer. In the university group, the type of competitive behaviour exhibited was again found to be inappropriate.

In the AMEP learning environment the teachers generally appeared to be tolerant of competitive behaviour. This was evident both in relation to students competing with each other orally to show off their knowledge, and the students being streamed so that they were in classes appropriate to their levels. Accordingly, competitive forms of participation were not found to change, even when learning transfer appeared to be inappropriate.

It was observed that students usually participated in order to show off their knowledge to the teacher. Rather than participate by asking questions, for example, students were often quick to give answers even when the teacher had called upon another student to respond. In these cases, teachers were rarely observed to stop the class from calling out the answers, perhaps because they did not want to discourage participation. Five of the six student participants in the AMEP group were present in observed classes
and participated by calling out to show that they had understood, even before the teacher had asked a question. In the AMEP multicultural classroom it was not only the South Sudanese students who participated in this way, and the teachers appeared to be accustomed to the behaviour. They did not highlight this form of student participation as a cause for concern in interviews. A tendency for the students to participate in this manner in class may have been related to the class culture that they had entered. It also may have been related to the highly oral nature of many Sub-Saharan African cultures (Nicholas and Williams 2003). The display of knowledge was seen to be ambivalent learning transfer because the teachers appeared to view it in terms of willingness to participate, which relates to classroom behaviours discussed in the first section of the Findings.

On the other hand, the AMEP teachers seemed to expect students to reach a certain standard rather than compete against each other and student expectations therefore indicated inappropriate learning transfer. For example, one of the teachers related an experience with two South Sudanese students in her class:

Two Sudanese … we had to do a rating for reallocation of the classes, and I had the ranking as weak, so they weren’t put into the next class, and at the beginning of term these two Sudanese were almost ropable, you know … I thought it would be OK but it was not OK … so we shuffled and I actually let them go through. [Abbie]

Teachers may have had the expectation that students were there to learn first and progress through the classes as a secondary objective because the outcomes-based approach implemented in the AMEP was set up to be learner driven: ‘[L]earners proceed at their own time and pace through the learning pathway which is facilitated by arrangements of re-entry, reassessment and credit transfer and accumulation’ (Muller 1998: 180). Muller (1998: 181) also points out that outcomes-based education is based on ‘an acquisition-competence model’ that is ‘a low-selectivity, criterion-referenced, feedback-incentive framework’. This could also be said of the pedagogic approach of this learning context. The fact that the teachers were expected to keep assessing students on the same modules if they were unable to pass may have given the teachers the expectation that the students would feel less pressure and would be more focused on increasing their knowledge. However, Abbie’s comment demonstrated a certain degree of tolerance on the part of the teacher when confronted with student expectations of competitive selection.

Nevertheless, the practice of shuffling students so they were in a class tailored to their demonstrated literacy or English level may have given the students the impression that they were in competition against their peers, even though learning transfer in this area could be viewed as inappropriate. One of the very active students in the AMEP group made a direct reference in interview to the negative feelings attached to not being selected to move classes:

[When] another student has gone and me I’m [in] the same class I’m a little sick. [Clive]

Another student also stated in interview that he was encouraged by knowing where he ranked within the class:

[Knowing where you are placed in class] gives you morale, it gears you to know more things.
[Daniel interpreting for Nigel]

Even though Nigel changed his mind when another student disagreed with him, his actions in class were competitive. He demonstrated his knowledge to the teacher by constantly calling out answers and quickly volunteering to write on the board.

In the university group, learning transfer was found to be inappropriate both in terms of showing off knowledge and ranking. There appeared to be less teacher tolerance of competitive behaviour than in the AMEP, and some students showed evidence of change in the new learning environment. This change may have been related both to the participation in a learning environment that de-emphasised competitive selection, and also to their professed dislike of competition. The expectation that ranking was beneficial appeared to be dependent on the individual student. However, even though some student expectations were found to be changing, the competitive forms of participation in class of these students were observed to remain the same.

It appeared in interview that the four university teachers expected the kind of participation where students would assist in the construction of knowledge rather than compete with their peers to show...
what they knew. As the English support unit’s coordinator commented in interview:

[The South Sudanese students] were disruptive … I know the answer, I know the answer … attention-seeking behaviour, and I don’t think on that social scale they’re ready, they need more work in that area if they’re going to fit comfortably in with the whole range of students that we have here. [Marilyn]

The notion of constructing knowledge with the teacher may be related to the concept of social constructivism, which ‘argues that the process of knowledge construction inevitably takes place in a sociocultural context, and that therefore knowledge is in fact socially constructed’ (Reagan 2000: 8). This concept of social constructionism appeared to be prevalent in the humanities tutorials. Social constructionism may also be understood as allowing other students to participate, given the social emphasis. Not allowing other students the opportunity to participate may have been what Marilyn was referring to when she stated that the students were not socially ready for university. Another university teacher spoke of having to force many of her South Sudanese students to participate in exercises where she was trying to encourage student reflection on tutorial topics:

If we were doing like a writing exercise or something … I would say to them ‘I don’t see you writing, everybody else is writing, have you finished?’ ‘No I haven’t got any paper’, ‘fine, have some paper’, whatever, so yeah I get them writing. [Libby]

This could also be related to the ‘knowledge construction’ type of participation that the students were resisting and that Libby was attempting to facilitate.

The inappropriate learning transfer appeared to be linked to the student expectation that they were to present themselves favourably to the teacher by showing how much they knew. Being liked by the teacher was also considered to be important, and the importance of portraying oneself in a favourable light was succinctly summed up by one student in the university group when he was speaking of his confusion in filling out a tutor evaluation sheet:

In one of my tutorials here in university we were given papers and we were told to write anything that was not going well or anything that we get from the tutors and I think if I put in [a] bad thing about [the] teacher that will be [a] problem … if I write … all the good things in this paper then … the one who is looking at this paper will maybe think this is a stupid guy … he said everything is just good and the reason of coming to school is because you don’t know something … so I have put about 75% good things about teacher and then I put 25% the bad things. [Mike]

Through this comment Mike shows that he considered the tutor evaluation sheet to be a way of finding favour with the teacher rather than an opportunity to reflect on the tutorial.

Similarly to the AMEP group, ranking was found to be an example of inappropriate learning transfer. In the university English support tutorials, in which all the students were African, the students wanted to know their marks in relation to the other students. They had a lot of trouble filling out evaluation forms for each other during an oral presentation exercise in one of these tutorials, as one student commented:

That [evaluation form] … put people in fear because we have a culture that … is different in Africa … there … everybody is competing … when we are in class [we] have to compete … [we] have to be number one. [Morgan]

However, some student expectations appeared to be changing in the new learning environment. For example, Morgan went on to say that he believed the system to be different in Australia:

In Australia … you have to learn by your own way [with] no sense of competition. If you fail it is up to you. [Morgan]

The opinions of the six university students interviewed were divided as to whether or not they had been motivated by competition but, despite these differences, all of them reported prior experiences of classroom ranking in interviews.

It was evident from student comments in the focus group that tutors had not been explicitly ranking their students in the class. When one student was asked how the university’s alternative entry program, through which he had studied, could have been improved, he commented:

My suggestion [is] if possible during the tutorial groups the students [could] be given [the] choice that ‘right, right, who do you think is best in the class?’ in terms of writing or thinking so that at least we students we know ourselves better than others because we know … who participates very well in the class … who is better in writing or spelling or certain construction … I think it would be helpful because some of us who come from different backgrounds or level of
This quote suggests that Steve wanted the class ranked so that he could have a benchmark with which to work, but teachers may have seen this as demoralising for students who were not doing well.

**Discussion**

As the findings indicate, the degree of congruence between teacher and student expectations was found to be a significant influence on the participation of South Sudanese students in more formal Australian learning environments. In order to explore the significance of this degree of congruence, it was useful to relate student and teacher expectations to Volet’s (1999) four different types of learning transfer. A low degree of congruence was not found to be detrimental to student participation, if learning transfer was ambivalent. Even when learning transfer was inappropriate, active participation was not affected if teachers accommodated student expectations, as in the case of ranking in the AMEP group. In the university context, inappropriate learning transfer in terms of close monitoring of student learning was found to be beneficial in specific instances because it gave some students the incentive they needed to take steps towards learning more independently.

However, inappropriate learning transfer was mostly found to be detrimental in the university learning environment. Even though some students were making efforts to learn more independently, their expectation that they were completely dependent on the teacher was not observed to be changing rapidly enough for them to do well in their assignments. One teacher in particular showed her awareness of this issue, and attempted to develop scaffolding strategies to assist her South Sudanese cohort but, as demonstrated by her comments, the students did not understand how to use the scaffolding. Furthermore, the student perception that the teachers were not controlling the class adequately resulted in teacher–student friction, non-participation and undesirable forms of participation on the part of the students. The student expectation that they were competing against their peers, especially their African peers, added to this friction. Even though some student expectations appeared to be changing, all of the students still participated competitively, perhaps because they understood the stakes to be high if they stopped participating in this way prematurely. A more longitudinal study may have shown changes in student participation, since two of the students demonstrated an awareness that, in this new learning environment, there was not such a strong focus on ranking. Also, the fact that three of the six interviewed students expressed a dislike of ranking practices indicates a possibility that their competitive behaviour may have changed in the long-term.

In recognition of the additional challenges faced by students from diverse backgrounds, the university offered various kinds of assistance – from academic support to counselling services. Nevertheless, many of the South Sudanese students were not taking full advantage of the support on offer. This may have itself been a result of the low degree of congruence between teacher and student expectations, considering their previous experience of complete dependence on the classroom teacher. Support from teachers, other than the teacher who was giving grades, may have been viewed as superfluous by the students. It is admittedly difficult to address issues related to student expectations once the students are actually studying in the Australian university context, given the focus on independent learning (eg Knapper 1990; Biggs 1999). However, the finding of inappropriate learning transfer with regards to teacher monitoring of behaviour and learning and competitive selection may be relevant for any support offered by the university and also for preparation courses.

University support and preparation courses could potentially provide a middle ground between the accommodation of student expectations in an AMEP context and the lack of tolerance for these same expectations in the university context. Middle ground may involve offering students less classes and an open-door policy, so that the students have to seek out the teacher for information or for advice on how to locate the information required. The extra hours of the open-door policy could be considered the same as normal class hours, which the students are expected (and allocated marks) to attend, only they work by themselves or in groups. In this case, the teacher’s job would be a delicate one of acting as a bridge, explicitly telling students how they needed to complete their assignments, but gradually giving them more and more space to develop their skills as independent learners. In terms of student expectations of classroom behaviours, a grade for behaviour may be included as part of a general grade for participation,
with the teacher stating explicitly the kind of behaviour that will be graded and the reasons behind the grading. In terms of student expectations of competition, middle ground may simply involve in-depth discussion of university practices in Australia, and less tolerance for students who want to compete with other students in order to display their knowledge.

**Conclusion**

Student expectations in terms of classroom behaviours, teacher monitoring of learning and competition were not found to affect students adversely in an AMEP context, but appeared to put students at a disadvantage in the university context. In the AMEP learning environment, teacher and student expectations were found to be congruent in terms of monitoring learning, and teachers were more willing to accommodate differences in classroom behaviours and competition. In the university context, there was found to be a low degree of congruence between teacher and student expectations across the board, and teachers were less willing to accommodate these differences. South Sudanese adult student participation, in both learning environments, whether positive, disruptive or withdrawn, appeared to be substantially influenced by the interdependency between student and teacher expectations.

Given the findings, it may be useful for teachers to view student expectations in light of their own expectations. In particular, teacher expectations regarding students as adult and autonomous learners in a university context can be made very clear. Candy (2000) points out that self-direction is ‘one of the hallmarks of the lifelong learner’, but skills related to self-direction need to be developed. If ‘staged withdrawal’ of teacher support is not agreed and explicit, students accustomed to strong teacher direction may believe that their teachers are shunning responsibility (Candy 2000). By teaching to the dynamic between sets of expectations, it may be easier to guide students towards adopting expectations more congruent with a particular learning environment, and also towards respecting more self-directed approaches to learning.

**References**


