

Cultural Influences on Group Learning in an ESL Classroom

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of learners' culture in their choice of learning preference. It took a closer look at how students' cultural norms influenced collaborative writing performance. A survey approach was employed via a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to triangulate the findings. Two institutions were involved in this study, Institution A comprised of Malay learners while Chinese learners represented Institution B. The findings suggest that students' learning is embedded in rich culture and attributes and as they interacted in their groups, they demonstrated positive values such as unity, tolerance, obedience and respectfulness. These values were more obvious among learners in Institution A. These learners revealed that since young they have been instilled to practice and appreciate their culture and customs and this was seen in the way they interacted in the classroom. The students were sharing ideas politely and practising their cultural values even in the academic context. A few self-centred learners also changed their social behaviour from a selfish attitude to a more sharing and accommodating behaviour by the end of the study. At Institution B, some learners demonstrated positive values like unity and sharing attitude but they did not practice them throughout their group work. They were more individualistic and preferred individual work. It was apparent that the students' cultural virtues transcended from the social to the academic setting and have become a part of their life. This paper concludes that cooperative group work is effective because of the students' embedded values and culture, and that culture is a dominant controlling factor that impacts one's way of learning and communicating in a formal ESL academic setting.

Keywords: cultural attributes, interaction, social learning, group learning

1. Introduction

The complexity of learning a second or third language is greatly influenced by culture and not merely the pedagogical practices (O'Neil, 2005; Fengyan, 2002). Importantly, one's culture has a humanising and a motivating effect on the language learner and their learning process, (O'Neil, 2005). Kramsch (2001) claimed that no man is independent of culture, culture and language go hand-in-hand. She also stated that,

People who identify themselves as members of a social group (family, neighbourhood, professional or ethnic affiliation, and nation) acquire common ways of viewing the world through their interactions with other members of the same group. ... Common attitudes, beliefs and values are reflected in the way members of the group use language—for example, what they choose to say or not to say and how they say it (p. 6).

Fengyan, (2002) on the other hand stressed two things to be taken into account when teaching the second language: the topic areas to be included in the curriculum and the learners' perspective. He observed both, curriculum and learners' perspectives to be crucial in the decision making. Therefore, language learning and culture traits learning take place simultaneously (Fengyan, 2002). McKay (2003) subscribes to this school of thought and suggested that learners' learning preference, style of interacting and manner of responding to their learning environment is broadly influenced by their cultural traits (Scott & Huntington, 2000; Reid, 1987). Gieve (1999) perceived that the closeness of the relationship between language and culture gives rise to the perception of language as a kind of acculturation. Fantini (1997) asserted that language reflects and affects culture, forming an intrinsic link between

language learning and one's culture. In relation to this, it is essential that in Malaysia too, the role of the learners' culture is looked at, especially in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom which consists of learners from diverse cultures such as Malay, Chinese, Indian and other Malaysians.

As language embodies the values and meanings of a culture and is the most visible and available expression of a particular culture, it signals people's cultural identity (Byram, 1989). Understanding learners' struggles in learning the English language involves not just his/her difficulties in the classroom but also an awareness of how sociocultural meanings are linked in complicated ways to sociocultural identities (Lee, 2003). Due to the fact that language reflects the cultural values of a society, it is important to know how one's culture affects his/her way of learning in an ESL classroom.

1.1 Malay Learners

Maesin, Mansor and Shafie (2010) highlighted that most Malay undergraduates preferred collaborative learning activities and their learning preferences are heavily influenced by their past learning experiences. Maesin (2006) conducted a study on a group of Malay students and revealed that students regardless of whether they are from urban or rural areas, generally preferred group learning. Reid (1987) conducted a study on six learning style preferences on students of ten groups of students from different language backgrounds; Malay, Korean, Chinese, Spanish, Japanese and English speakers. In the study, Reid found that 113 Malay students preferred group learning style as their favourite learning style while the English speakers chose group learning style as the least favourite learning style. This further establishes the findings by Maesin (2006) above which indicates that Malay learners preferred group learning.

1.2 Malay Tradition

Literature says that the Malay community in Malaysia regards custom (*adat*) as the spiritual backbone of Malay life and personality. Burhanudeen (2006) perceives that *Budi bahasa* (language of character) is the crux of the Malay custom and they are the embodiment of using refined language. *Gotong royong*, which brings about mutual assistance, is one of the important customs in the Malay community. *Gotong royong* creates *esprit de corps* (*kekitaan*) among them and in every village (*kampung*) there is a *penghulu*, (headman of village) to lead and protect the villagers. The village headman is well respected and village dwellers conform to his instructions. The Malay community is familiar with group work and is able to adapt and acclimatise with others (Burhanudeen, 2006; Kramsch, 2001). In this light of thought, it is believed that Malay students are largely influenced by their culture. Kamsah and Talib (2003) agreed that group work helped students to improve their class tasks. Haron et al. (2012) revealed that the participants worked in groups to develop their language skills especially speaking skills in the classroom.

1.3 Chinese Learners

In contrast, the Chinese students generally have their roots in Confucianism and they believe in the hierarchy of relationships and collectivism (Campbell & Li, 2006; Reid, 1987). They believe that an instructor is an authority figure in classrooms. Thus, they appear docile in the ESL class because of their concept of the roles of teachers who should be dominating and authoritative while students should be obedient and respectful of teachers who are at a higher level in the social hierarchy. They also do not express their emotions freely, especially in formal settings. At times, they only sit quietly or nod their heads when agreeing with something, even pretending to know something (Ku & Lohr, 2009). Xiao (2009) in his study highlighted that Chinese students like to be silent and just listen until they are certain. Chinese students do not want to disagree with others even though they think other members are wrong (Xiao, 2009).

Brick (1991) perceived that Chinese learners tend to emphasise more on group harmony rather than achievement of goals and efficiency which is more prominent in the western culture. However this finding contradicts with that of Reid (1987) who perceived Chinese learners to be more individualistic. Ku and Lohr (2009) also share similar thoughts as Reid and revealed that Chinese learners preferred to work individually on their projects rather than work in groups. Chinese learners appreciate individualism more than teamwork (Baker & Clark, 2009). Studies (Campbell & Li, 2006; Phuong, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2006) discovered that most Chinese students prefer a competitive classroom environment rather than a cooperative one.

Studies conducted to look for ways to improve English language learning in Malaysia have largely focused on the teaching and learning of English in the language classrooms and little attention has been given to the role of culture

in learning. It is important to look beyond the language classrooms in order to understand the English literacy level of learners as cultural background, family factors and relationship among family members (Effendi, 2005).

1.4 The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is based on the Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (1978) which states that knowledge is social interaction and it plays a fundamental role in the development of children's cognition. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that "education is realised through the student's own experience, which is wholly determined by the environment" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. xxiii). He views learning as a process that "must be based on the student's personal activity..." (Vygotsky, 1978, p. xxiii). Vygotsky advocates that humans do not act directly on the physical world without the intermediary of tools (Lantolf, 2000). Symbolic or signs, tools according to Vygotsky are artefacts created by humans under specific cultural (culture specific), and they carry with them the characteristics of the culture in question. Therefore, learners behaviour are subject to modification as they are passed from one generation to the next, and each generation reworks them in order to meet the needs and aspirations of its individuals and communities. The primary purpose of the present study is to discover how learners' culture influences their learning specifically group work in the ESL writing classroom.

2. Research Questions

1. How does group work contribute to ESL learners' writing performance?
2. How does learners' cultural beliefs affect their perception of group learning?

3. Methodology

A survey research approach was adopted in this study. The study involved two institutions, A and B. Institution A is an established public institution of higher learning in Malaysia comprising Malay learners. A total of 32 participants from semester three participated in this study. There were 20 female and 12 male undergraduates from the Diploma in Accounting (R1-R32). Institution B on the other hand, comprised of twenty-five (25) Chinese learners from Faculty of Engineering (R33-R57). All of them were male respondents. Each group is limited to 3-4 members to avoid the occurrence of free riders and to ensure uniformity in group size (Brown, 2008). The students had two contact hours per week over 14 weeks with each lesson lasting two hours. The intact class was instructed to carry out the writing tasks in their groups. The questionnaires were administered at both institutions in the final week of the semester. The questionnaire was adapted from Thayalan (2011) to elicit information on students' perception on group learning. The data derived from the questionnaire was used to correlate the results of the pre and post-test grades.

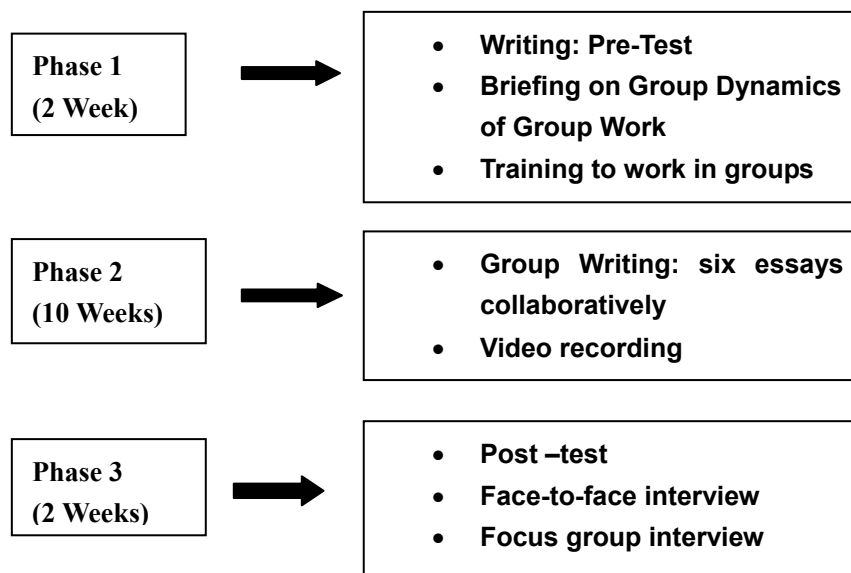


Figure 1. Processes involved in data collection

The learners were trained to work in groups to complete written class tasks. The study comprised of three phases; the first phase (2 weeks) consisted of a pre-test, briefing on the dynamics of group work highlighting the benefits

of group work and training on how to work in groups. The second phase (10 weeks) focused on classroom writing exercises and activities in groups. The students wrote a total of six essays collaboratively: descriptive (2), narrative (2) and argumentative (2). The students were given a choice of three categories, each comprising of three topics, out of these students were allowed to choose two topics from each category. The categories were descriptive, narratives and argumentative respectively. The six writing tasks were assessed to encourage students to be committed and to specifically enhance their language and writing skills. The third phase (2 Weeks) comprised of a post-test and a face-to-face interview with students to obtain information related to their cultural effects on their group work.

Subsequently in phase three, focus group interview was conducted. The interview was conducted to elicit qualitative data about the issues under study, i.e., the perceptions of group work, ability to work harmoniously with group members and to be fully engaged in all activities. The interviews were held in week-13 and each interview lasted between 15-30 minutes. In this study the researchers view the face-to-face focus group interview responses as a form of retrospective reflection. The recorded responses were transcribed and analysed verbatim.

4. Research Instruments

4.1 Pre and Post-test Paper

The primary data for this study came from the pre-test and post-test grades whereby students had to write an essay on a separate topic. The pre and post-test scripts were assessed by three independent raters. The pre and post-test grades were compared to study the effects of group learning on the participants' writing skills.

4.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was adapted from Thayalan, (2011) to elicit information from fifty-seven (Institution A- thirty-two and Institution B- twenty-five) learners. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions in three parts: Part A focused on demographic profile of the learners, Part B related to perceptions of group work in ESL class while Part C attempted to assess how their sense of community and beliefs affected their group work as perceived by learners.

5. Results and Discussions

Findings on Research Question 1

How does group work contribute to ESL learners' writing performance?

Writing performance of the Malay and Chinese learners was first analysed according to the overall test score comparing mean value of pre and post-test scores.

Table 1 shows the mean value pre and post-test of the learners in Institution A and B. The pre and post-test writing performance of the learners was first analysed according to their overall test scores using paired-samples t tests. The scores show statistically significant improvement in scores from pre-test ($M \geq 27.1579$) to post-test ($M \geq 39.3772$), $p = 0.0005$ at Institution A while ($M \geq 26.1200$) to post-test ($M \geq 28.4133$) $p = .0005$ at Institution B.

At Institution A, the low significance value for the t test $p = 0.000$, indicated that there was a significant difference between the two variables. Thus, it indicated that the learners engaged in group work in the ESL writing class performed well. In general, the results in Institution A showed that there was significant improvement among the learners between pre and post-test scores. The results in Institution B, on the other hand demonstrated an insignificant difference between the pre and the post-test mean value indicating marginal improvement. Thus, at Institution A there was a significant improvement while learners at Institution B experienced improvement to certain extent but it is not significant.

Table 1. Results of paired t-test between pre and post-test scores: institution A and B

	Mean	
	Institution A	Institution B
Pre-test	27.1579	26.1200
Post-test	39.3772	28.4133

The success of the group work in ESL classrooms was highlighted earlier by Rafik-Galea, Nalini and Geraldine (2012), Arumugam (2011), Brown (2008), Mariam (2004) and Reid (1987) as well. Both the groups at Institution A and B were taught by the same instructor using identical materials and similar pedagogy. However, the result is not identical as claimed by researchers (Arumugam, 2011; Brown, 2008; Mason, 2006; Mariam, 2004). The

contributing factor for this disparity probably could be the learners' learning preference and experience as suggested by Maesin, et al. (2010), Kramsch (2001) and Maesin, (2006). They also felt that people are ruled by their common beliefs and values and this brings about an impact on their learning. At this juncture, it could be assumed that learners' family background and beliefs affect classroom pedagogy to a certain extent in group work.

Findings on Research Question 2

How does learners' cultural beliefs affect their perception of group learning?

The next section will discuss the learners' perceptions about group work and how their perceptions are influenced by their family background. Table 2 shows the learners' perceptions of the Group work related to the sense of community while being engaged in group writing. The items in column two have been analysed based on the frequency of use of particular techniques associated with culture and customs. Only responses of agreement have been discussed in this study.

At Institution A, 62 and 60 percent of students respectively felt that they were comfortable working with members from different religious and ethnic backgrounds while 94 percent at Institution B agreeing to these statements. As the groups comprised the same ethnic members, the learners revealed that they were free in expressing their views and opinions to other members, 72 percent (Institution A) and 87 percent (Institution B). To the statement, 'I find it easier to work in groups as I live in an extended family', 72% agreed at Institution A but only 12% agreed to this statement at Institution B. This concurs with Burhanudeen (2006) who felt that the Malay community is comfortable working in groups because they are used to extended family, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Groups from Institution A and B perceived that they enjoyed meeting people in groups, (87 and 72 percent respectively). Learners from Institution A (94 percent) and B (72 percent) felt that they got to know the personality of other members while participating in group writing and this brought them closer to one another. This depicts that group work gave opportunities for socialising and understanding one another. A total of 87 percent agreed that fellow group members are polite to each other and 94 percent actively participated in group work (Institution A).

With regards to community and beliefs, 62 percent from Institution A agreed that they are used to participating in *gotong-royong* since young in their village. As for Institution B only 20 percent agreed to this statement. This could be due to their culture which is more of individualistic as claimed by Ku and Lohr (2009) and Reid (1987). 'I try not to offend the feelings of my fellow group members, 72 and 62 percent agreed respectively. 81 and 62 percent agreed that their group members respected each others' beliefs and opinions respectively. This shows that the respondents are more courteous and accommodative of other cultures and beliefs. 60 percent (Institution A) and 48 (Institution B) of the respondents agreed that they avoided the members who went against their views and criticised their group members. Surprisingly only 34 percent and 12 percent preferred to work with group members of the same gender. The rest of them preferred to work in a group of mixed genders.

However, it was discovered that both groups of learners differed in their preferences when it came to group members. Many of the learners in Institution A were from residential schools where the learners were predominantly Malay. When asked, the majority indicated that they were more comfortable working with members of their own ethnicity. In Institution B, the learners were predominantly Chinese. However, once English class was dismissed, they were out with their course-mates who came from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Thus, they were quite comfortable with people of other ethnic groups, and they preferred to have a mixed group, ethnically. Therefore, the learners' experience and exposure also played a vital role in their choice of learning preference.

In addition, group work teaches learners to respect the learning pace of other members in the group. However, this form of instruction could be effective only if all members participated actively. The group leader therefore, must be able to assert his or her authority positively in order for the task to be fulfilled in the time frame assigned (Greenfield, 2003). On the whole, group work was enhanced in a friendly environment, and many learners believed that a group discussion was invaluable in clarifying topics and ideas. As such, while the intricacies of the English language proved challenging many, they felt that working in groups made it easier for them to learn and improve their English language skills (Brown, 2008; Mason, 2006).

Table 2. ESL Learners' Perception about Group Work: Institution A and B

Item	Topic	Institution	Institution
		A	B
		Agree (%)	Agree (%)
Demographic Profile			
1	I am comfortable working with members from different religious backgrounds.	62	94
2	I am comfortable working with members from different ethnic backgrounds.	60	94
3	I feel comfortable expressing my opinion to other members.	72	87
4	I find it easy to work in groups as I live in an extended family	72	12
Perceptions of group Work			
5	I enjoy meeting people in groups.	87	72
6	Through my interaction during Group Work, I get to know the personality of other members.	94	62
7	I find it easy to make friends through Group Work.	87	72
8	My fellow group members are very polite to each other.	87	62
9	All members participate actively in the Group Writing.	94	62
10	I realise that Group Writing widens my circle of friends who come from different backgrounds.	100	87
Sense of Community & Beliefs			
11	I am used to <i>gotong-royong</i> since young in my village	62	20
12	I try very hard not to offend the feelings of my fellow group members.	72	62
13	Fellow group members have to respect each other's different cultures.	81	62
14	I avoid members who go against my views and criticising other members	60	48
15	I prefer to work with same gender	34	12

5.1 Focus Group Interviews

In the group interview, R1 (respondent 1) said, 'Though all of us are Malay students, it will not be a problem for us to work with other religious and ethnic students.' R 15 explained that while working in small groups all of them were always polite to one another and often brushed off petty issues. 'This environment made us work together without any misunderstanding,' added R 15. When the group members were asked about their opinion about sensitive issues that they prevented discussing in their group, many revealed that they avoided discussing issues such as racial, religion, culture and sexual connotation.

Although many respondents said that they were happy to work with any student, some felt otherwise. R 11 shared that, 'We have a few university-mates who are from Sarawak. They are not Muslims. Sometimes, we find it difficult to socialise with them, their culture is very different from ours.' R 31 shared individually that he is comfortable working with his own ethnic group members. He added,

I don't mind working with people of different cultures but I prefer to work with my own kind of students. Please don't think I am being a racist. I am from a residential school since 13 years old. In the residential school all students are Malays and I have been there for about 5 years. Then I came here and for the past 3 semesters I have been working with all Malay students. So I am very comfortable working with Malay students.

R 9 said, 'I came to know my group members better after working with them on a few assignments. I began to understand my group members more as we discussed on matters and started working on the same tasks.' Kamsah and Talib (2003) and Reid (1987) also shared similar thoughts about the Malay learners.

However, R 27 felt that some members did not put in their full effort and often kept aloof. She also said that it was not that they were weak in the language or ideas but it was just no commitment to the success of their group. R 18 said that her group members often made it a point to be polite to one another and even if they happened to differ in opinion, they disagreed politely. 'So we did not have many problems in our group,' she added.

R 39, a group leader, 'The group members were very helpful. When we made mistakes, they corrected us. We did not call the instructor to help us. We managed ourselves.' R 56 shared, said happily. 'Everyone contributed in our own way and picked each other up when needed. I feel that we did our part.' 'We have a plenty of common ground and also a wide variety of talents and expertise. I managed to split up the work pretty evenly,' added R 55.

The researchers noted the social talk among the learners in the groups but perceived it as an essential element to strengthen their rapport as well as to stimulate the learners to acquire new knowledge based on their prior experience which concurs with researchers Maesin, et al. (2010), Burhanudeen, (2006) and Kamsah and Talib (2003).

R 43 shared, 'I had a sleepless night. I was very annoyed with Chew (pseudonyms) because he was not serious and delayed all of us. I scolded him and after that I felt so bad. I think I would rather do individual work. Less problem and less head ache lah' R 54 said, 'oh, it was so difficult to get my group members to keep on track. They were playful and always engaged in their social talking. I really had to 'drag' them to do group work.'

It was noticeable that their cultural background played a crucial role in motivating them to work together to produce their writing assignments. It was also apparent that students learned to think together and shared ideas together in order to develop their English language proficiency. The results indicated that the Malay community is embedded in rich cultural values such as unity, tolerance, obedience, respect and many other attributes. As claimed by Burhanudeen (2006), the Malay community instils values in their children and guides them to practice and appreciate their culture and customs. Thus, the learners who belong to this community are the symbols of these values and practices. Therefore, they were able to work well in groups and their academic advancement was significant compared to learners from Institution B. At Institution B, some students enjoyed the benefits of group work and engaged actively. However, a few of them lamented because they were unable to get their team members to work. This could be due to their personality and background. The learners from Institution B did not have much exposure to group work other than school. They were more of individualistic learners. These results concur with Xiao (2009) and Ku and Lohr (2009). These learners do not mind having group work once a while but not frequently. To surmise, it is evident that one's culture and custom are the controlling and dominant factors that affect one's way of living and communicating.

6. Conclusion

This study has found that almost all the students engaged in group work showed improvement in their academic achievement though learners' at Institution A outperformed learners at Institution B. The perceptions of participants in Institution A towards group work also were more positive and adept compared to learners at Institution B. This could be due to their family background and beliefs. Learners from Institution A were familiar with extended family life, *gotong-royong* (collaborative work) since young and probably their rich cultural experiences enhanced their academic achievement in their post-test as claimed by Maesin, et al. (2010) Burhanudeen (2006), Kamsah and Talib (2003) and Reid (1987).

In short, the learners were cooperative, adaptable and very objective in their task. They listened and took up roles as their leaders instructed them. The cooperation among the learners was apparent and this was one reason for them to produce a reasonably good quality piece of written work. The learners in both institutions conformed to their culture but learners at Institution A seemed to be more adept than B. At Institution A the level of tolerance and politeness to one another were apparent. The group work had created a stress-free environment. The learners were very friendly to one another and such an environment had brought the members close and had a good rapport. Undoubtedly group work has helped the learners improve their mastery in the language. However, at Institution B the level of tolerance and value of team work appeared to be lower compared to learners at Institution A. This contributes to the less significant improvement in their academic achievement as recorded in the post-test.

It is also the educators' utmost concern to enhance students' learning. To fulfil students' interest to work collaboratively, language instructors can select or prepare language activities that will enable students to work collaboratively during English lessons. This will help them to feel at ease in using English. They can plan their lessons according to the students' preference by incorporating group work. Educators must also realise that no 'one' approach is effective in all settings or applicable to all learners. Therefore, obtaining information about students' learning preferences could be one of the ways to achieve better academic performance as well as other positive learning outcomes.

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