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Object in View: Understanding International Students' Participation in Group Work

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ABSTRACT

The literature on international student participation in Anglo-Western universities is predicated on an assumption of underachievement. Reductive understandings prevail with English language competence and cultural background highlighted. Drawing from a case study of group work in a first-year module in a management course at an internationalizing university in the United Kingdom, this article explores students' perceptions of the impact of English language competence on participation. The case study, which aimed at a holistic understanding, adopted an activity theoretical framework for modeling participation and for analyzing focus group data. Four educational objects were identified with the construct "object in view" employed in recognition of the plurality of the object. The in-depth analysis focused on the object. Although the focus groups traversed a range of topics, English language competence was widely discussed. However, the analysis suggests that the extent English language was perceived as an issue was relative to the object in view.

Keywords: activity theory, English for Academic Purposes, international students, object in view, United Kingdom

The scholarly literature in the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has focused on the linguistic features of academic genres and their associated pedagogies (Hamp-Lyons, 2015). This literature informs the practice of EAP teachers, including those providing language support for international students engaged in university study. However, familiarity with the genres they need to command is not in itself sufficient; international students' success will ultimately depend on how successfully they participate in their academic programs, and it follows that to better help their

students, EAP practitioners need to understand what the students experience in the mainstream. The advice we give them, and how we engage them in discussions about the challenges they face, requires an understanding of "the contexts they come from and go back to while taking our courses" (Hamp-Lyons, 2015, p. A2).

This article draws from a case study (Straker, 2014) that sought to better understand one such context: a first-year undergraduate module in management in a U.K. business school. The module was taught primarily through tutorial classes with group work as the principal mode of pedagogy. The study adopted a holistic approach using an activity-theoretical framework that enabled a broad range of factors to be seen as impacting participation. This article concentrates on one aspect, students' perceptions of the impact of language use and competence in English on participation in group work. It uses the construct "object in view" (Hiruma et al., 2007) to argue that students' understandings, experiences, and responses to group work can be better understood in the light of their varying perceptions of the object of activity. Focus groups were used as the research instrument, providing data on both international and home students' experiences of working together in diverse work groups.

Following some introductory comments on the focus of previous research, my position, and the theoretical framework, the article proceeds with a brief review of the literature on the impact of international students' English language competence on participation in university classes, followed by a critique of how participation has been understood. The research design of the larger study and the presentation of findings germane to this article are then presented. In the discussion, the case will be made that alongside our preoccupation with the impact of English language competence on international student participation, we should concern ourselves with the contexts in which such competence is perceived as an issue.

The Focus of Previous Research

What facilitates or impedes international student participation in Anglo-Western universities (Carroll, 2015) has been a topic of research since the 1990s and reported in a variety of journals. The debate has been most active in Australia, with the primary driver that the classroom participation of students from countries that share a Confucian heritage fall short of the ideal. Although participation is the matter at issue, the focus has been on international students themselves—on what makes them different—rather than their participation per se. The relative impact of English language competence, on the one hand, and culture of origin, on the other, has been central. While a number of contributors have argued that linguistic, sociolinguistic, or psycholinguistic factors have been paramount (e.g., Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Lee, 2007), others remind us that competence in language includes competences shaped by culture (Jones, 1999), or of the indivisibility of second language acquisition and students' intercultural journeys (Gu, 2009). Regarding culture of origin, the literature has moved from the polarized early positions, which elevated the impact of culture (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991) or vigorously challenged it (Biggs, 1987, 1996), to more nuanced understandings (Louie, 2005; Ryan & Louie, 2007). In the postmillennial period, the move has been toward interculturalism (Brown & Jones, 2007; De Vita, 2007). While responsive to the concerns of reification, stereotyping, and cultural

hegemony raised by the earlier literature (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), these concerns have not been entirely swept away.
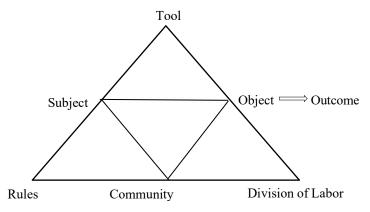
My Position

For educators involved in the teaching of international students, the debate has not always been helpful as it fosters a deterministic mindset in which the challenges international students face in Anglo-Western higher education are too readily seen as rooted in competence in English or cultural difference, with both often construed in deficit terms (Straker, 2016). This is not to deny the importance of these factors; indeed, this article focuses on the language issue. Rather, it is to call for an approach that is holistic and contextual: one that appreciates that many of the challenges international students face are generic to all students; that their participation will also be shaped by what others bring to the interaction; and that what participants in learning encounters hope to achieve will influence their experiences and behaviors. The case study that informs this article attempts such an approach.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study used activity theory as a framework for conceptualizing group work and for analyzing the focus group data. As a further benefit, activity theory offers a theorized understanding of the relationship between participation and learning.

Activity theory takes Vygotsky's triangular conception of mediation as its starting point, with the "subject" seen to use "tools" to achieve their "object" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 40). In its classic representation, second generation activity theory, Engeström (1987, p. 78) following Leontiev (1978), elaborated the Vygotskian triangle to include the social elements of "rules," "community," and "division of labor" (Figure 1). It is through the interaction of these six elements that what facilitates or impedes the pursuit of the object can be explored. In the study, group work was understood as a collective activity operating as a single activity system with learning its object, and Engeström's (1987) second generation model was adopted as the theoretical framework, complemented by Hedegaard's (2001) construct of "institutional practice," which serves as a bridging element helping to locate activity in an institutional context.

Figure 1: Second Generation Activity Theory

Note. From *Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research* by Y. Engeström, 1987, Orienta-Konsultit, p.78. Copyright 1987 by Orienta-Konsultit .

For Stage 1 of the analysis, the framework was reworked as a coding frame. In Stage 2, given its centrality in activity theory, the analysis focused on the object, understood as both the object to which the activity was directed and the motive for engaging in activity (Leontiev, 1978). While Engeström's understanding of activity assumed a unitary object, recognizing object ambiguity—and its explanatory potential—has been a feature of some activity theoretical research in education studies. Fisher (2007), for instance, in her study of oracy in the primary classroom, noted that understandings of the object of activity differed, as the subject consisted of multiple actors (teacher and students) who did not see eye to eye, resulting in mismatched expectations regarding what was desirable in classroom speaking. The key argument of this study is that participants' varying interpretations of the object, evidenced in Stage 1, influenced their assessment of their own and each other's participation and of their behaviors in their work groups. While Fisher (2007) used the term "object in mind" to describe those immediate objects that shaped actions, in this study I use the term "object in view" (Hiruma et al., 2007) in preference, as it better captures the real-world nature of the object.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Impact of English Language Competence on Participation

The internationalizing of Anglo-Western higher education has meant that English as the medium of instruction is a second language for many students (Carroll, 2015). The main issues concern students' competence in English at entry, the language entry policy of universities, and competence in academic English appropriate to the context. Carroll (2005a) considered it unsurprising that the English

language competence of international students was often viewed as the main cause of their difficulties, given the probability that most were nonnative English speakers who may not have studied previously through the medium of English. Marginson and Sawir (2011) noted that the competition among universities for international students in many Western countries resulted in English language entry levels being set too low for students to manage without English language support. Mclean and Ransom (2005) suggested that the linguistic challenges to international students went beyond the obvious; citing the literature on contrastive rhetoric, they noted that even the structure of academic texts was language dependent. In the EAP literature, the specificity of disciplinary discourses, and the challenges they present to international students, have been repeatedly emphasized (e.g., Hyland, 2006; Swales, 1990).

Several studies that have considered the experiences and understandings of international and home students working together in multilingual, multicultural higher education settings have emphasized language. Barron's (2006) survey of Australian university students concluded that for both home and international students, the language level of international students created problems, including communication breakdown, pressure on home students to edit international students' work, and language fatigue. Harrison and Peacock's (2010) U.K. study into the anxieties home and international students experienced in studying together concluded that language was perceived as a barrier to interaction and learning. In Osmond and Roed (2010), language was also seen as an issue for both international and home students.

International students are often critical of their own English language level and of home students and lecturers for not accommodating them. Morita (2004), in an ethnographic study of six Japanese postgraduates, noted that Rie, one of her subjects, ascribed her feelings that both her classmates and the instructor were ignoring her, to her language level. Ramsay et al. (1999), in a study of first-year undergraduates, noted that international students related their difficulties in understanding lecture content to their language level, and lecturers' speed of delivery and choice of vocabulary. Language and academic ability were sometimes conflated. Harrison and Peacock (2010) noted that home students were repeatedly characterized as experts, while Osmond and Roed (2010) reported international students' experiences of rejection by home students, noting one student's admission to feeling "very stupid" when working with British classmates (p.115). While the literature has emphasized competence, confidence has also been a consideration. Martirosyan et al. (2015), for instance, evidenced that students' self-perception of English proficiency impacted academic performance.

For home students, the issue gave rise to both positive and negative responses. Students reported a willingness to edit international students' work (Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Osmond & Roed, 2010) and to sit with international students to help them undertake tasks (Harrison & Peacock, 2010). These altruistic behaviors were juxtaposed to the increase in workload home students reported, perceptions that language level made it difficult to assess international students' other skills, and the undermining of home students' confidence that international students understood subject content (Osmond & Roed, 2010). Home students noted that ensuring meaning was shared led them to moderate their speech to accommodate international students,

making group work slower and more fraught (Harrison & Peacock, 2010). Some feared a negative impact on the academic outcome of group work (Jackson & Huddart, 2010). Home students' frequent expressions of discomfort working with international students was characterized by one as "walking on eggshells" (Osmond & Roed, 2010, p. 118). Zhu and Bresnahan (2018) captured U.S. home students' experiences of their relationships with Chinese international students in terms of the conflicting emotions of frustration with their unequal contributions and the feelings that they should befriend them.

It is clear in these studies of working together that the English language competence of some international students, or perceptions of their competence by themselves and others, present challenges to participation. Insufficient attention, however, has been paid to why students interact, or experience interactions, in the way their interactions were reported, or why they reported them in the way they did. In sum, little insight has been offered into the underlying motives of participants.

Use and Understanding of Participation

While concern with international student participation as the rationale for this research field is evident, understandings informed by what makes international students different have been central, with participation often sidelined or overlooked and the term largely undertheorized.

Where participation is in the frame, it is commonly understood in terms of language, specifically spoken language; for instance, all items in Lee's (2007) 8-point questionnaire, which sought a quantifiable measure of participation, related to speaking. Other writers emphasized listening (Thom, 2010; Trahar, 2010). However, perhaps most discussion has surrounded the question of silence, which is commonly seen to characterize nonparticipation (Hsieh, 2007; Ramsay et al., 1999). Jones (1999) exhorted lecturers to help international students "out of silence into talk" (p. 248), a concern prevalent even in recent literature (Freeman & Li, 2019), with the importance of lecturers and classmates creating an inclusive learning environment reiterated (Hsu & Huang, 2017). There is also a critical dimension. Morita (2004) and Hsieh (2007) referred to international students as being silenced by more dominant (domestic) participants, while Chanock (2010) saw students who chose to remain silent as exercising their "right to reticence." Others have argued that silence can be participatory; Mclean and Ransom (2005) noted that silence may mean "engagement in thought, not lack of ideas" (p. 50), while Carroll (2015) criticized lecturers for misinterpreting the fixed expressions on students' faces as indicative of passiveness and disengagement.

Broader understandings of participation are also present. Marlina (2009) noted that the students in her study considered the reading and thinking they did in preparation for classes a form of participation, whereas Carroll (2005b) identified the ability "to crunch the data" and generate PowerPoint slides as nonverbal participation (p. 90). Mclean and Ransom (2005) saw the unorthodox behavior of some local students (putting their feet on the table) as a form of participation.

The relationship between participation and learning is more commonly assumed than articulated (Marlina, 2009). Ryan and Hellmundt (2005, p. 15), for instance,

spoke of international students' "right" to participate so that they could learn effectively. Morita (2004) was unusual in employing the terms "peripheral" and "full participation," making reference to Lave and Wenger (1991). It is my view that studies into participation in educative contexts should have a theorized understanding of the relationship between participation and learning as their starting point.

From a Vygotskyan, sociocultural perspective, participation is more than taking part as it embodies personal development. In educative contexts, through their participation, students acquire new competencies while building on what they know. In activity theory, the modeling of activity as a complex system supposes the modeling of participation, as it enables inquiry to focus on how participation may be facilitated or impeded, and how this participation facilitates or impedes the pursuit of the object. Given the motivational aspect of the object (Leontiev, 1978, p. 62), it is understandings of the object that have the most potent impact on what is learned.

METHOD

Undertaking the Research

The rationale for selecting a U.K. university business school as the research site lay in the popularity of business disciplines among students in EAP classes in my practice context. I adopted a case study methodology given its appropriacy for context-specific research in the social sciences where preserving some distance between researcher and participants is both necessary and desirable. It takes as a given an interpretive approach (Yin, 2003). The case itself was not predetermined but arose through contact with the business school in question and familiarization with the school's pedagogies. The research procedure observed British Educational Research Association ethical research guidelines (2011), and was certified as ethical by my affiliated institution. Following exploratory observations of undergraduate classes, group work in a first-year undergraduate module, Theory and Practice of Management (hereafter TPM), emerged as an appropriate case for study. International students were well represented in the module while group work, as the dominant pedagogy, offered a ready way to explore international student participation. In contrast, in other of the business school's subject areas (e.g., accountancy, economics), lectures were the principal mode of delivery and students focused on individual study.

TPM was large in the institutional context (>250 students) and was taught in several tutorial classes, averaging 16–25 students per class. The course was mandatory for all management students. A lecture series and weekly drop-in sessions complement the tutorials, which form the core of the module. To enable group work, tutorial groups were divided into work groups, consisting of four to seven members and "engineered" to be as diverse as possible. In the first tutorial, course tutors used an ice-breaking activity to encourage students to engage with others different from themselves with whom they might not normally speak. This activity led to the formation of work groups. In these groups, students prepared a group report (written) and a group presentation, both assessed components. As a first-year module, the module grade was not included in their final degree assessment; the requirement was

only to pass. Work groups met regularly both in and out of class. Several tutorials in the second half of the term were dedicated to giving presentations, which included a question-and-answer (Q&A) session, with each work group presenting to the tutorial group. Each work group received written feedback from another work group on both their presentation and report, a peer review process.

The Term "International Student"

Some clarity was sought for this study regarding the term "international student" and its operational definition, given the distinction between the institutional use in the United Kingdom, where it refers to a fee category, and use in the literature on international student participation, where its value lies in identifying a group of students for whom coming from abroad generally signifies being nonnative English speakers and lacking experience of Anglo-Western education (Carroll, 2005a). In its U.K. institutional use, the term includes students from English-speaking countries who would not normally be included in the understanding of the term in the literature cited in this article. Likewise, it cannot be assumed that "home student" refers to a homogenous group who have English as their native language and familiarity with the U.K. academic culture. In this study, however, there was a close match between how the participants identified as native/nonnative English speakers and how they were classified in the institution's admission data, with all nonnative English speakers recorded as either international or non-U.K. European Union students. This classification allowed students' identifications as native or nonnative English speakers to be used as proxies for home/international students. In the write-up of findings, nonnative English speakers were assumed to be international students and native English speakers, home students, unless otherwise stated. Of the native English speakers, all bar one, were home students.

Data Collection

I derived a broad understanding of the teaching context through observation of tutorials and lectures over two terms (two iterations of the module), and through ongoing informal catch-ups with TPM tutors. However, the data set consisted of recorded focus group interviews with students. A particular advantage of the focus group as a research instrument lay in facilitating the reenactment of the type of discussions students had had in their work groups, hence its appropriacy to a study seeking a holistic understanding of participation in group work. After working with two focus groups as a pilot, I revised the interview prompt. The final data set comprised the focus groups undertaken with students from the second module cohort: eight focus groups, FG03–FG10 (Table 1). These focus groups were scheduled in the final week of the term with all students taking the module invited to attend. The sample size ($N = 51$) comprised those students who volunteered to take part, with the distribution across focus groups determined by the students' availability around end-of-term activities. Although the length of the interviews was nominally 45 minutes, I allowed them to reach their natural end.

Table 1: Focus Groups Included in the Data Set

Focus group	Nonnative English speakers	Native English speakers	Length of focus groups (min)
FG03	4	—	51
FG04	3	—	45
FG05	6	—	54
FG06	5	6	62
FG07	7	2	49
FG08	5	2	58
FG09	2	1	42
FG10	6	2	61
Total	38	13	

     As part of the focus group procedure, the research subjects completed a brief survey of their language background (Table 2). Of the 51 subjects, 38 were nonnative English speakers and 13 were native English speakers. Three groups consisted solely of nonnative English speakers. Among nonnative English speakers, multilingualism was the norm, while native English speakers reported low levels of competence in languages other than English. Summers and Volet (2008) reported similar findings.

Table 2: The Language Background of Participants

Tag	M/F	FG	First language	Near native	Fluent	Functional	Basic	Level not specified
Charlie	M	3	Vietnamese		English			
Chloe	F	3	Spanish		English		French	
Gabriella	F	3	Italian		English, French			
Katie	F	3	Cantonese		English	Putonghua		
Amelia	F	4	Thai		English			
Grace	F	4	Farsi	Turkish	English			
Jessica	F	4	Thai		English	Dutch		
Charlotte	F	5	Kazakh					Russian, Turkish, English
Eleanor	F	5	Russian		English			
James	M	5	Malay		English		Arabic	
Joshua	M	5	Russian			English		
Rebecca	F	5	Malay		English		French, Arabic	
Sarah	F	5	Japanese					
Alfie	M	6	English				French, Spanish	

Tag	M/F	FG	First language	Near native	Fluent	Functional	Basic	Level not specified
Emma	F	6	English			Spanish		
Ethan	M	6	Czech		English		German	
Freya	F	6	English			Spanish, French		
Hannah	F	6	Japanese			English		
Holly	F	6	Bulgarian	Czech	English	French	Spanish	
Jacob	M	6	English					
Lucy	F	6	English				French	
Nicole	F	6	German	English, Creole		French	Italian	
Nicole	F	6	German	English, Creole		French	Italian	
Thomas	M	6	Russian					English
Abigail	F	7	Bulgarian		English		German	
Daisy	F	7	German	Danish	English		French	
Erin	F	7	English			French		
Imogen	F	7	Chinese				French, English	
Jasmine	F	7	Chinese	Two Chinese dialects			English	
Matilda	F	7	Bulgarian		English	Russian, Spanish		
Megan	F	7	English					
Patrick	M	7	German		English			
Poppy	F	7	French		English		German	
Alexander	M	8	English	French, Spanish				
Daniel	M	8	Russian		English			
George	M	8	Gujarati		English, Kiswahili, Hindi		French, Spanish	
Layla	F	8	English					
Maisie	F	8	Russian		English, German	Italian		
Samuel	M	8	Russian		English		Chinese	
William	M	8	Italian		English			
Lucas	M	9	French		English		Italian	
Oscar	M	9	English				French, Spanish	

Tag	M/F	FG	First language	Near native	Fluent	Functional	Basic	Level not specified
Phoebe	F	9	French					Spanish, Norwegian, English
Anna	F	10	Swedish		English		Spanish	
Benjamin	M	10	German		English		Spanish, French	
Dylan	M	10	Russian					Armenian, English
Henry	M	10	Romanian	English		German	Spanish	
Max	M	10	Italian	English		Spanish	Mandarin	
Maya	F	10	English			French	Spanish	
Molly	F	10	English				French	
Scarlett	F	10	French	English		Spanish		

The focus group prompt asked students to discuss their experiences of participation in their module work groups. The wording derived in part from the TPM module description, which specified positive collaboration in group work in the course learning outcomes. The prompt reminded participants that groups were diverse, with participants coming from different countries and regions. Subprompts, which were more narrowly focused, were occasionally used when discussion faltered. Prompts were projected on a screen with this the only interaction between me and the subjects during the interviews, other than conducting the survey and the formalities of opening and closing. The focus groups were recorded using video and audio devices. The raw interview data was fully transcribed, following standard conventions for transcribing classroom talk (Stubbs et al., 1979), providing a verbatim transcription rendered in written form. No attempt was made to correct nonnative English language errors. Additional signaling of some paralinguistic features (e.g., laughter) was added.

Data Analysis

The first stage of the analysis served to sift the data, coding to the predetermined categories of subject, object, tools, rules, community, division of labor (Engeström, 1987), and institutional practice (Hedegaard, 2001). The insight deriving from Stage 1 that the abstract object "learning" was perceived by focus group participants as multiple objects in view, shaped the second stage of analysis. The second stage focused on the single category of object, seen simultaneously as the focus of the analysis and the lens through which activity could be viewed. The objects in view, identified as collaborating in work groups, fulfilling a task, academic study, and gaining professional experience, were used as Level 1 categories, and in coding it was useful to keep in mind the question, "What object does the speaker have in view?" Coding at Stage 2 proceeded through a total of eight levels, with the number of excerpts coded to categories falling to single digits. It provided a layered and

multithemed analysis; however, language or language-related items repeatedly emerged as coding categories. A simplified representation of the analysis of object, insofar as it relates to participants' experiences and understandings of language or language-related items, is provided in Table 3.

Table 3: Analysis of the Educational Objects in View

Level 1	Level 2	Levels 3–8
Collaboration	Dealing with linguistic diversity	Degrees of competence and confidence in English—impact on collaboration
		Using English to exclude
		Speaking languages other than English
		Assumptions about and expectations of native/expert English speakers
Task	Language level as an issue	English language level at entry
		English language competence as an obstacle to task accomplishment
Academic study	Developing skills and skill use	English language skills
		Study skills
		IT skills
Professional practice		

I used NVivo software for coding at both stages, with each excerpt tagged with a unique reference identifying the speaker by focus group, gender, and whether they identified as native English speakers (NS) or nonnative English speakers (NNS). Subsequently, proxy male and female names, taken from a web-based list of popular U.K. first names, were randomly assigned as individualized gendered markers and to humanize the write up.

RESULTS

The findings reported in this section focus on how participants in the focus groups spoke about language when collaboration, task, and academic study were the objects in view. No categories relating to language were identified when professional practice was the object.

Collaboration

Data excerpts were coded to collaboration when participants discussed their experiences of group work in terms of the object of working together collaboratively. While it was uncommon for this object to be explicitly articulated, Henry (FG10NNS) did so when he questioned the understanding of the object as getting "the highest grade possible" (task accomplishment), arguing "the most important thing [was] working in the group" (collaboration).

Dealing with Linguistic Diversity

Data coded to this Level 2 category included discussion of the impact on collaboration of degrees of competence in English, using English to exclude, the use of languages other than English, and expectations of expert English speakers (Levels 3–8).

Linguistic diversity was commonly reduced to the native/nonnative English speaker binary, terms carrying assumptions of disadvantage or advantage. Imogen (FG07NNS) put her difficulty in the presentation down to her first language not being English, while Alfie (FG06NS) presupposed that expertise in English brought academic benefits and vice versa:

> [W]hen you've got foreign students in your group, you presume that you're going to be able to the work at a higher level. … It's not saying that they can't do it, it's just, if they do have a language barrier…

The belief that competence in English could obstruct group work was frequently expressed. Molly (FG10NS) noted, "It's very difficult for people whose English is very good to work with people whose English isn't so good …" Deeper sensitivities were also evidenced. Rebecca (FG05NNS) characterized home students' construction of international students as weak linguistically as a way to rationalize her perception of their reluctance to accept international students as full participants:

> The home students … have this assumption that international students cannot speak English… . [T]hey will always say … the big part we'll give to the UK students.

Phoebe (FG09NNS) likewise supposed ulterior motives, arguing that the whispering of home students in her group could not be justified as a reasonable response to the presence of nonnative English speakers who might not understand, but rather a deliberate intention to exclude international students.

References to the use of languages other than English further highlighted how language use might exclude. Lucy (FG06NS) reported how two members of her group "often speak together in their own language," noting how this made "collaboration within the group harder" by setting up a "language barrier." There were no mentions of benefits that might arise from language plurality.

Many international students had high expectations of expert English speakers. Katie (FG04NNS), identifying the advantages of British groupmates, observed, "I can ask them to help me to proofread my composition." Some saw help from native

English speakers as indispensable; Jasmine (FG07NNS) described her group's dismay when their native English-speaking groupmate fell sick the day before the presentation:

> [Y]ou became really stressed when the only guy who can speak this language properly, he was ill. … [F]or international students it was so hopeless.

Expert speakers were divided in their responses. Many met expectations; Layla (FG08NS), for instance, detailed how her group supported an international student by slowing the conversation, explaining things, and "happily" correcting language errors. But there were also tensions around being cast as an English expert. Molly (FG10NS) acknowledged the value of language help to international students while emphasizing the extra work involved and her discomfort in being cast as a teacher:

> They are benefiting … but you have to work so much harder to drag them up … go over their work, check it like you're the teacher.

Others showed frustration when their efforts to help seemed taken for granted. Scarlett (FG10NNS) described correcting another student's work during a meeting, observing "the girl who had actually written that part wasn't even, like, paying that much attention." However, there were also expressions of gratitude for help received. Speaking of the British students in her group, Matilda (FG07NNS) noted, "They really tried to help the international students."

From the activity theoretical perspective, when the object collaboration was in view, the instrumental character of language was evident, with individuals' varying competence in English seen to facilitate or impede collaboration. While expert speakers commonly accommodated to less competent speakers and the less competent assumed the support of experts would be forthcoming, the findings also indicated that facilitating communication coexisted with tensions around the social elements: community (feelings of being otherized); rules (which language might be used and when, delimitations of roles); and division of labor (how tasks should be distributed). There was also a recognition of language as "constitutive" (Turner, 2004) in the understanding of the reluctance to communicate as embodying reluctance to collaborate, and in this sense language ceased to be seen as purely instrumental but rather as a dimension of the object. There were occasions when mismatched expectations suggested participants had different objects in view. As Scarlett's frustration with her groupmate instances, those prioritizing collaboration were unlikely to see eye to eye with groupmates who saw the part they played solely in terms of its contribution to accomplishing the task.

Task

The written report and the group presentation were the main tasks students were set in their work groups. These deliverables incorporated reflective tasks, principally peer review. Data was coded to "task" when speakers' utterances indicated they were mindful of the module tasks and the purposeful nature of the work to accomplish them.

Language Level as an Issue

At this Level 2 category, focus group participants expressed concern about the language level at entry and the linguistic challenges associated with the module tasks (Levels 3–8). Samuel (FG08NNS) saw the former as the root cause of difficulties, noting, "It's so strange how all these people get an offer to University because it's ... a pretty high standard for IELTS." Discussion followed concerning what language exams test, coaching, and speculation regarding the university's softening of language entry levels.

For many, language level was perceived as an obstacle to task accomplishment. Jessica (FG03NNS) observed, "There are a couple of people who are finding it really difficult to actually *do* things in English" (her emphasis). For native and expert English speakers, concern about English seemed most in evidence in editing written tasks. Surprise was commonly expressed at the work involved; Phoebe (FG09NNS) commented:

I thought it would be really easy, I mean I would do it in 20 minutes, but when you have to turn around all the sentences and try to find a bit more diverse vocabulary … it does take some time. To note, she does not question the necessity for rigorous editing. The peer review process, poorly understood and often delayed, was a focus of tension, with the expert English users who consistently led, doing so with less grace. Alexander (FG08NS) expressed his frustration at the lack of involvement of his groupmates and how this colored his view of group work:

[N]obody was doing it … and in the end it just involved me and [an]other girl … . And that … affected the way that I perceived my group.

This comment prompted George (FG08NNS) to relate his experience, framing it in terms of home and international students. He noted how the home students went ahead with the peer review without consultation, expressing with bitterness his belief that this was to be expected:

George: The two English guys in our group did the peer review … [T]hey just came and said they had done the peer review.

Alexander (NS): They didn't even ask you … to check it?

George: Oh, why would they ask us to? … [I]n our group they're two English students and the rest of them are international students. I doubt if they'd had said, "Do you want to check it?"

Much of the discussion of the presentation concerned the challenges that answering questions posed for nonnative English speakers. As Jasmine (FG07NNS) noted, her panic when the native English speaker in her group fell ill related to the Q&A session. Regarding comprehension, participants mentioned accents (Charlotte, FG05NNS; Eleanor, FG05NNS); speed of delivery (William, FG05NNS), and the coherence of utterances, particularly when the speaker was also an international student (Eleanor, FG05NNS). In formulating responses, Jessica (FG04NNS) identified the demands of "think[ing] on the spot" as compounding the difficulty in understanding, highlighting the impact on her participation:

I can't really interpret the question well and I can't really think on the spot, so I think that … makes it quite difficult for me to … participate in that discussion group.

Some believed that in order to impress the tutor or reduce others' chances of doing well, students acted competitively (Eva, FG07NNS; Rebecca, FG05NNS), asking "killer questions" (Rebecca). In a focus group consisting only of international students (FG05), the participants discussed a strategy for dealing pragmatically with Q&A sessions, involving the exchange of prescripted questions. James (FG05NNS) explained:

[T]he group … who is going to present distribute a set of questions to the other groups … . [T]hey already know the answers, so they won't look stupid in front of everyone … like a mutual agreement.

In the ensuing discussion, Sarah (FG05NNS) defended this practice noting, "I think it is good to collaborate."

In activity theoretical terms, the instrumentality of language was uppermost when task completion was prioritized, with some international students' competence in English perceived as an obstacle to task accomplishment. The efforts to overcome this barrier were evident in the division of labor within groups, with English experts spending time on editing and being relied on to take the lead in presentations. This dependence could lead to tensions when group members were not seen to be pulling their weight (rules) or when other objects were present, as was evident in Alexander (FG08NS) and George's (FG08NNS) contrasting recollections of the peer review. While Alexander prioritized task accomplishment, George saw the home students as overlooking the object of collaboration. When the challenges to task accomplishment appeared insurmountable, as in the Q&A sessions, there was evident flouting of rules, albeit artfully justified by Sarah through invoking an alternative object (collaboration). At points, language seemed to merge with the object; not questioning the necessity of correct written English supposed that this was perceived as an aspect of the object, part of the defining criteria, rather than an instrument for achieving it.

Academic Study

Academic study as an object was always implicit but rarely explicit, with reminders that this was the raison d'être for attending university provided circuitously. Anna (FG10NNS) ventriloquized the geography students she rooms with ("Why are you in the library all the time? Do you even have to study?"), making the point that while geography students might have an easy time, as a management student she needed no reminder of the purpose of university. When academic study was the object in view, participants distinguished between subject knowledge and skills, recognizing the necessity of language and study skills, including computer skills, to acquire and articulate subject knowledge.

Developing Skills and Skill Use

Despite the many references to language level, explicit recognition by international students of the need to improve English, how to do so, and the outcomes of any actions were less evident. Max's (FG10NNS) work group was unusual in conducting a skills audit. In a frank discussion, group members informed others in the group of the need to improve their English. Max recognized this topic as a sensitive issue, describing the initial reticence of group members to participate. Maya (FG10NS), herself an international student, took this issue further, implying that stigma was attached to admitting one's language level was inadequate. Even to enter the Language Centre, which provided classes in EAP, was to lose face:

> If you're coming … from Russia, from China, you don't want to admit that you're falling behind … . If you walk through these doors you're always already showing you're weaker than someone else who's English.

Focus group participants identified shortcomings in their language skills more readily than how they might address them. Rebecca (FG05NNS) noted her need to work on her listening skills, Jessica (FG04NNS) her lack of fluency. William (FG08NNS), an exchange student, stated that his main purpose in coming to the United Kingdom was to improve his English "of course," the tag affirming his belief in the generality of this view. The language learning strategy with which participants seemed most at ease was informal peer communication. Maisie (FG08NNS) spoke of living with native English speakers, Ethan (FG06NNS) of socializing with British friends, while William (FG08NNS) observed, "I can just cover my English classes talking with people." Max (FG10NNS) criticized what he saw as the reluctance to attend EAP classes. Indeed, George (FG08NNS) was in a minority in stating that he did so, taking at face value a request to explain what this entailed. It is unclear whether focus group participants knew as little as they appeared to about the availability of language support.

Participants also reported on their progress; George (FG08NNS), for example, spoke of the language teacher helping him with his grammar. However, progress also came through gains in confidence, with students pushed from their comfort zones realizing they could manage. Reflecting on her panic about the Q&A session, Jasmine (FG07NNS) observed how her native-speaking groupmate's absence "really pushed you to work," resulting in an unexpectedly favorable outcome.

International students seemed to find it less hard to accept the role of formal learning for developing study skills, where they were also seen to lag behind home students. Max's (FG10NNS) pragmatic approach to improving his study skills ("It's not a matter of how smart you are; it's a matter of how much time you give to it") is not contested or seen as stigmatic. In contrast to both these areas, focus group participants appeared comfortable with the need to acquire computer skills. While being an international student was not considered disadvantageous in this context, cultural background did have a place, with students' nationalities commonly referenced. Anna (FG10NNS) mentioned learning to use spreadsheets from an Indian student, while Lucas (FG09NNS), referring to Google Docs, noted "the American guy showed us how it worked."

From the activity theoretical perspective, while the acquisition of skills was broadly viewed as mediating the learning and presentation of subject knowledge (tool), developing these competencies was perceived as a dimension of the object "academic study." A variety of English language skills and subskills were deemed necessary and in need of improvement. However, while international students recognized this need, they showed reluctance to engage in formal language learning. Despite the availability of EAP classes (institutional practice), the majority clearly favored informal learning. The discomfort around this area, arising from the values brought to or inherent in the interaction (community) and captured in the encultured notion of stigma, impeded the pursuit of the object. Stigma was less evident with study skills, while work groups seemed to develop effective and uncomplicated divisions of labor for developing computer know-how. William's single-minded preoccupation with improving his English illustrates the bidirectional instrumentality between skill acquisition and subject knowledge familiar to language teachers, and incorporated into some language teaching methodologies.

DISCUSSION

The study from which this article draws sought to contribute to the literature on international student participation in Anglo-Western higher education. Like this literature, it assumed as valid the juxtaposition of international and home students. While the distinction facilitates understanding of the needs of a particular group of students, readers will not need reminding that these terms are problematic; they resist definition and incline debate toward what divides them. Notwithstanding, the following points should be kept in mind:

- The study participants readily used these terms and it was clear that the distinction was meaningful for them.

- Conflating 'home student' with 'native English speaker' and 'international student' with 'non-native English speaker' worked in this study and concurred with the students' use and understandings of these terms.

- Moving the focus from international students themselves to their participation meant that the ways in which international students might be distinguished from other students was not the main concern.

- The identification in the findings of some non-native English speakers as English experts diminished the imperative of the native speaker/non-native speaker binary.

In particular, the study sought to contribute to those studies that recognize that international students' experiences of learning encounters are shaped as much by their interactions with home students as by what they themselves bring to the learning environment.

The reductivist approach prominent in the literature was considered important to challenge. For educators working with international students, reductivist thinking,

while providing ready answers, has reinforced preconceptions and oversimplified. This is not to deny the relevance of English language competence or culture of origin; indeed, this paper addresses the former, but rather to highlight the virtue of developing approaches to inquiry that are holistic in nature and contextual. In the study, Activity Theory, primarily Engeström's Second Generation model (1987), was adopted as the theoretical underpinning, as it offered a framework that comprises a diverse range of elements related to doing and the social constraints on collective human activity. As such, it accommodates factors unrelated to being international students and the recognition that learning cultures conducive to participation are co-constructed. As a post-Vygotskian approach, Activity Theory has the further virtue of furnishing a theorized understanding of the relationship of participation to learning. The focus group as the research instrument had particular resonance given that the unit of analysis was group work.

The findings of the study reported in this article relate to students' understandings and experiences of the impact of English language competence and language use on participation in their work groups. International students often mentioned the benefits of working with native English speakers. Although some were fulsome in their gratitude, others seemed to take for granted the help they received. While some English experts met these expectations, demonstrating altruistic behavior, others expressed their frustration in working with students whose English language competence did not always seem adequate. With identities readily built around being international or home students, there was a tendency to otherize (Said, 1978), inclining towards misrepresentation and misunderstanding. Notwithstanding, as noted, being an expert English user in this study was not synonymous with being a home student or native English speaker, and expert English users who were international students often seemed to share more in common on the language issue with native English speakers than with other international students. In terms of the relationship between international and home students—on the one hand, the reaching out, on the other, the frustrations and tensions—these findings echo other post-millennial UK studies into multilingual, multicultural group work in higher education contexts (Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Osmond & Roed, 2010), although the heightened emotions reported in some literature, including aggressive behavior (Osmond & Roed, 2010), were not in evidence.

The theoretical framework furnished by Activity Theory offered a way to understand participation in terms of the core components of the Vygotskian triangle and the social elements introduced by activity theorists. Given the primacy of the object in Activity Theory, and the insight of the first stage of the analysis that focus group participants had multiple understandings of the educational object of group work, the in-depth analysis was restricted to the category of the object. Accepting that the object might have multiple interpretations, although a departure from the standard position in Second Generation Activity Theory, has precedent in education studies. While Engeström explored this possibility in Third Generation Theory, which considers the interactions of adjacent activity systems (1999, 2001), in this study the integrity of the activity system was not at issue, only the plurality of the object. The meaningful relationship between the expectations and behaviors of subjects and their different understandings of the object observed by Fisher (2007) was also evident in

this study. As such, the construct 'object in view' (Hiruma et al., 2007), which the study adopted, offers explanatory potential. In the in-depth analysis of the object, the 'objects in view' were employed as first level categories.

Using the descriptive language of Activity Theory, understandings facilitated by the different objects in view, in so far as they related to the language issue, were presented above (Findings). The distinct contribution of the construct 'object in view' can be summarized as follows:

> When 'collaboration' was the object in view, focus group participants expressed frustration at the ways language might impede collaboration, while actively seeking ways of improving communication in their groups. The good intentions, however, were sometimes marred by misunderstandings including second-guessing the motives of others. (Language was a challenge.)

> When 'task' was the object in view, the language issue tended to be viewed as an obstacle to task accomplishment. Pragmatic responses by either the institution or participants, were seen as necessary, but these were deemed to come at a cost. (Language was a barrier that needed to be overcome.)

> When 'academic study' was the object in view, awareness of the English language as a set of skills requiring enhancement was juxtaposed to the stigma associated with this need. Participants sometimes found it hard to divorce language from ability in general, leading to questions of identity and self-worth, and in this sense language as a set of skills was viewed differently from other skill areas. (Students were reluctant to address the language issue.)

Recognition that understandings of the object of activity impact on students' perceptions of English language competence is of value to EAP teachers and others involved in the education of international students in Anglo-western higher education. It invites us to go beyond a concern with the nature or degree of the linguistic challenge international students face, to ask questions of the contexts in which English language competence is perceived as an issue. In encouraging educators to qualify deficit perceptions of language (or for that matter culture) it reminds us that the urge to 'fix' international students language should not be divorced from concerns to re-model the learning environments in which language is perceived as needing 'fixing'. A premise of this paper has been that Activity Theory, as a dynamic framework that perceives activity as both social and developmental, may help to move away from the reductivist discourse that has prevailed in the literature. In particular, it has been argued that the more nuanced understanding of the object furnished by the construct 'object in view' facilitates understanding of why participants in activity act in the way they act, express the views they do, differ in their views, or hold views perceived as contradictory. A particular 'take-away' for EAP practitioners is that accenting the deficit in support, is unlikely to curry favor among students.

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