# Group dynamics in the intercultural classroom: - integration or disintegration?

Edward Bressan

Oxford Brookes University, UK

**Abstract**

This paper reports on a study of intercultural communication patterns amongst groups of mixed nationality adult students studying a foundation course in Dublin. Comments in student evaluations combined with uncooperative classroom behaviour suggested that some of the teaching techniques were not appreciated by everybody. As a result, some teachers made significant changes in their teaching approaches to accommodate dissident voices.

The study sought to ascertain what style of teaching and learning each of the groups of students preferred and if they really did not like to interact with students from other nationalities. It tests some of the teachers' beliefs against the views of the students and discovers that the majority of students appreciate the benefits of interactive groupwork, although a significant number still need to be convinced.

It is argued that, even if they indicate otherwise, students need to be assimilated into the culture of the tertiary environment in which they intend to operate. Extra efforts may need to be made to persuade everybody, but teachers need to be reassured that intercultural learning is here to stay.

One of the guiding principles of EFL teaching and something that teachers are encouraged to promote is classroom interaction between learners of different nationalities. Interactive learning is encouraged to help students to practise their L2 with other students in a near-authentic setting. It is also used to facilitate cultural sharing, one of the pleasures of the language learning experience.

The evolution of teaching methodologies and practices has led to a situation where it is common practice to design classroom activities and homework using groupwork, teamwork and pairwork.

Concerns have been raised about the wisdom of using uncontrolled group activity, especially when students are not appropriately inducted into western teaching practices. Further, it is true that effective learner autonomy does not come naturally to Asian learners, for example,

and interactive groupwork needs to be monitored, checked and supervised. Cross-cultural communication breakdowns and groupwork can be ineffective when an uneven distribution of responsibilities within groups occurs, when the focus strays from the original activity, and when insufficient expertise within the group prevents an activity from taking shape.

However, traditional remedies such as teaching group strategies or cross-cultural communications skills and issuing clearer guidelines have tended to reinforce the validity of groupwork rather than question its usefulness. Research confirming the popular appeal of groupwork across language and cultural divides has encouraged practitioners to persevere with methodological strategies (Littlewood, 1999, Garett and Shorthall, 2002) which foster collaborative learning. The success of problem-based learning, for example, has bolstered the case for student-centred learning.

At the same time, articles have appeared which do question many of the assumptions underlying the teaching principles which have emerged from the "communicative revolution". Western teaching methods that were exported to Asia did not always work abroad (Ellis, 1996), culturally-specific interaction patterns have been more successful (Flowerdew, 1998), the concept of learner autonomy has been reformulated to cater for less intuitively autonomous learners and the tendency to focus on the "learner" has led researchers to advocate an eclectic teaching approach, responsive to the local environment in which the learning takes place (Kumaravadivelu, 2001).

While much previous research has focussed on either the views of learning and teaching strategies relevant to a single ethnic group, the aim of this paper is to report on a survey of a large group of mixed nationality students enrolled in Foundation English courses at two tertiary level colleges in Dublin (The Dublin Business School, and Dublin International Foundation College). The purpose of the study was to find out from the students how they felt not just about the teaching styles but also about the classroom dynamics and interaction patterns. Specifically, the study attempted to find out what they *really thought* about interacting with the other members of the language classroom: students from their own country, from other countries and the teachers who endeavoured to bring them together.

# Background to Survey

The paper explores some of the common myths and truths relating to each of the groups of learners (Chinese and Indian Subcontinental students), reports on a difficult learning environment in which the students were expected to interact across unfamiliar cultural boundaries, and analyses and evaluates a survey which all students undertook.

Reference is made in the paper to the teachers who took part in informal surveys throughout the year. There were twelve in total, most of whom had three-four years' experience of teaching Asian students.

The students were all approximately at an upper-intermediate level taking a foundation course in academic English, after which they intended to enrol in a diploma or degree course at a tertiary college or university. Many had already completed university studies at home and the majority were working up to 20 hours per week in part-time service jobs. Group sizes varied from 10-24. The student profile is as follows:

|  | Chinese | Bangladeshi | Pakistani | Indian | Other Nationalities | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Population Size | 148 | 32 | 22 | 12 | 8 | 222 |
| Males | 67 | 32 | 22 | 12 | 4 | 137 |
| Females | 81 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 85 |
| Median Age | 24 | 27 | 27 | 22 | 21 | 25 |

Table One: *Student Profile*

# Chinese Students

There has been an explosion of interest in the concept of "the Chinese learner" in recent years, chiefly as a result of the infusion of large numbers of Chinese students into English-speaking countries. The EFL classroom looks somewhat different to how it was even five years ago. In addition, more and more teachers based in Asia are conducting research into their own

students and teaching methodologies. They are publishing research in Europe's top ranking academic journals, shaping the direction of the debate.

While other EFL markets such as Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent are growing, the Chinese market has grown the fastest since it opened in the late 1990's. Many marketing agents don't need to go to China to sell their courses as there is a constant and reliable supply of customers. The only difficulty has been in ensuring that visas are processed in a timely fashion.

Conferences, books, workshops and many staffroom discussions have been dedicated to the topic of Chinese students and the issue has been problematised.

One reason is that teachers have often experienced difficulties adapting methodologies which have worked well with students from European backgrounds to their Chinese students. Similarly, as Ballard and Clanchy (1991) point out students cannot change their learning styles overnight. Consequently, students' reactions to a teaching style they find unfamiliar is often viewed as negative, unengaging, hostile or unresponsive.  A number of written evaluations of coursework that were handed in by these students indicated that teachers were felt to be not strict enough, that the students preferred the didactic teaching style of Chinese teachers and that many activities have been a waste of time.

## Non-Chinese Students

Although each of the non-Chinese nationalities used in the survey represent a rich diversity of religious, cultural and historical traditions, they are all grouped together for this study. The reason for this is that the students tended to cluster together in nationality groups while in class and occupy the rear section of seats. Socially they would mix with other non-Chinese students and would be more likely to exhibit similar disciplinary and behavioural patterns, listed below. More importantly, staff would classify the students as "The Chinese" and "Non-Chinese".

In their communication styles, Indians, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are more impulsive, less inhibited and more direct. In many ways they represent a threat to Chinese students because

of their dominant presence in the classroom. Their "respect" for authority and teachers is manifested in a  "clientele attitude". Thus the teacher is a malleable and influential friend who can help the student.  Levels of motivation for study vary considerably amongst these students and attendance rates at classes are uneven.

Their classroom manner is at odds with that of the Chinese students and this major conflict in cultures, combined with little cross-cultural sensitivity are the causes of a large number of problems for the teaching staff and the students.

## Communicating with Strangers

From the outset the students arrive in class and automatically cluster together within their own nationality groups. This is no doubt a natural response to the uncertainty and anxiety which arise in the face of strangers (Gudykunst and Kim, 1992). One of the first tasks of the EFL teacher is to divide the class into groups to create a suitable learning atmosphere.

Teachers take care to mix the groups in such a way that there is a balanced and inclusive representation of ages, nationalities and genders. The rationale for this practice is that balance promotes harmony and cohesion. The more mixed the group, the more likely students will need to use English, take the task seriously and derive more pleasure from the learning experience.

The course that these students were taking involves a lot of group work. Preparation for university study and all it entails means that the students were exposed to simulations of near-authentic university tasks drawing on the principles of problem-based learning.

It is imperative that the students communicate effectively in groups when performing these tasks. Unfortunately, with few exceptions, this cohort of students  - in both colleges- did not work productively in groups together. When they were divided into groups in the classroom they usually ended up insisting on working with their compatriots, speaking their own language, doing homework, writing letters to their friends or disrupting the group. Often students would use the activity as an opportunity to exit the classroom on personal errands.

The teacher would feel that little work was being done and they would complain at workshops that such exercises did not fulfil their purpose. Similarly, students felt that the exercises were a waste of time, or a perfect opportunity to relax and catch up on the old gossip in their L1, depending on their attitude.

Some illustrative examples of feedback given by students in relation to the learning atmosphere support the notion that students have difficulties with the teaching and learning styles expected of them in the new environment.

*Chinese*

"I don't practise my English in groups. I don't want to learn Indian English"

"I don't understand what other students say…they don't help me with learning English"

*Indian*

" We (have learned) all of this before. It is not useful"

*Bangladeshi*

"Learning in groups is boring. I want to listen to  (the) teacher."

## Teachers' Views

At departmental meetings and workshops the teachers often voiced the opinion that groupwork was not a particularly effective teaching method for this combination of students. They would point to negative student evaluations, most of which were written by Chinese students.

When discussed, there was a widespread view that although the overall English proficiency level of the entire group of students was comparable, the micro-linguistic needs of each national group showed wide variations, as did the behavioural and cultural disparities.

## Teacher-Student Interactions

In a normal  "traditional" teacher-student interaction, the teacher will typically ask each member of the class to answer one of several exercises in a grammar section of a textbook. In

these controlled activities, students may calculate in advance which answer they will be expected to provide, and prepare it before the teacher comes to them. For example, the teacher will go through a grammar correction activity and ask students one by one to take one sentence each and attempt an answer. Usually each of the students actually works on his or her own answer and may copy down, without processing, the answers to each of the other questions. This activity does not create any controversy with this mix of learners.

However, when it comes to prolonged individual contributions in tutorials where a teacher is trying to involve the "whole class" in a discussion, student interest levels can plummet. Furthermore, Chinese students seem to have little interest in listening to students from other countries and vice versa. Teachers have reported that a hostile wave of disapproval is communicated to the teacher and other classmates when some students have to endure an extended turn by a member of a different nationality group. This can make it difficult to run seminars or indeed to design activities in which students are asked to talk about their own experience, country or opinions. This experience was attested by each of the teachers who taught the cohort of students.

However, it must be stressed that discernible differences in communication styles were noticed for each of the nationalities. Chinese students are generally supportive of their compatriots and help them out with their answers. They also show respect for their compatriots when taking a turn. Indians, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis often talk over each other and do not show the same level of solidarity towards their compatriots as far as their work is concerned.

## Different Expectations of Course by Nationality Group

Each of the nationality groups have different reasons for taking the course and different ideas of how they intend to progress. For example, Chinese students are very exam-orientated and have a unique learning style which guides them through class. They typically arrive well equipped with electronic dictionaries, writing implements and any textbook on the reading list. Indians, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, by contrast, are less disciplined and may come to class without writing paper or pens.

However, it has been observed that when different cultures interact in similar ways, a status hierarchy emerges in which one group asserts itself over another (Lustig M & J Koester 1999, 161).   In these classes the Chinese students asserted themselves over all others. This is manifested in their seating arrangements, discipline, relationship with the teacher and manipulation of the class representatives committees. It also dictated the teachers' loyalties when cross-cultural difficulties took place.

## Possible Explanations for Different Behaviour Patterns

Confucian learning principles with a penchant for harmony, face-saving behaviour, indirectness, hierarchism and group cooperation are frequently invoked as the chief characteristic of Chinese (and indeed many South East Asian) students (Flowerdew, 1998). It is said to influence their attitudes towards interaction in the classroom. Frequently contrasted with more " individualistic" learning cultures, the explanation for the approaches to learning witnessed in the EFL classroom in China and Japan are justified with reference to Confucianism.

For example, in the classroom Chinese learners are described as "silent". The silent classroom behaviour is often said to be respectful or face-saving and that it is therefore viewed as a positive form of behaviour by Chinese students but negative by many other nationalities (Liu, 2002). This silence and many other current learning habits are thought to emanate from Confucian traditions with which Chinese students are said to be endowed.

Clearly, the supportive environment which Confucianism engenders does not extend beyond national groupings and any "mutual interdependence" stops when conflicting interests emerge. In one of the many studies comparing cultures, Bond ranks countries according to how close they are influenced by the Philosopher and he ascribes a "Confucian value" these countries. While China, closely followed by Japan unsurprisingly receives the highest points, Pakistan is at the opposite end of the scale, therefore the most "unConfucian" country. Bangladesh and India fall roughly midway, India being considered marginally more Confucian than Bangladesh (Lustig and Koester, 1997, p. 129).

Indian Subcontinentals have much stronger oral skills than writing skills and their classroom behaviour patterns are influenced by these aptitudes. Unaccustomed to organising their workload realistically, these students have difficulties adapting themselves to the norms of the Irish education system. The Irish tertiary system suits the more disciplined Chinese student better and this explains their higher success rate at Irish universities.

Another consideration is the role that the English language plays within the students' own societies. India and Pakistan, as post-colonial nations still using English as an official language, are radically different from China, where the desire to learn English is widespread. It is seen mainly as a key to economic success and there are no axes to grind towards England as far as previous contact with speakers of the language is concerned.

Furthermore, Many Indian Subcontinentals feel aggrieved that they have to take compulsory English classes before enrolling in a degree-bearing course. Motivation levels are consequently low.

## Problematising Chinese Students

Chinese students may experience cross-cultural difficulties that spring from the extremely competitive society in which they are raised. It is worth bearing in mind that China, unlike India, is an undemocratic totalitarian state. The students were brought up and only know how to function under a totalitarian regime. For example, corruption has infiltrated the education system as much as wider society. And yet the students work extremely hard within the system to achieve their results, often against all odds. The linguistic difficulties that they encounter compound other difficulties such as hardship, and lack of trust. This has led one commentator to write that " China is now a society in which everyone seems to be engaged in deceiving and cheating one another" (Becker, 2000: 374).

The one-child-policy was imposed on the people from above, something many Chinese deeply resent. Privileged Students from the generation are under pressure to dutifully fulfil their parents' aspirations. Driven by filial piety, lack of trust and a competitive urge, it is no wonder that Chinese students are seemingly impatient and self-centred in the classroom.

Pakistan and Bangladesh are not democracies either. Indeed, both countries are said to suffer from endemic "corruption", arguably on a wider scale than in China. (Transparency International, 2002). However, the societies have different legacies, religions, family values and endowments. It could even be said that the students who come to Ireland are too relaxed as the majority of them show little interest in their work.

(*In one of the discussion activities, students are asked to share insights into levels of corruption in their societies. It is interesting to observe Chinese students being far more tight-lipped and "secretive" or non-committal when asked to comment specifically on corruption within their society. The Bangladeshis, by contrast, are very open about how their country functions. )

Students' attitudes towards learning are probably shaped by these societal factors as much as by anything else.   The challenge for the teacher is to engender an interest in collaborative learning, by bridging the cultural, learning, and religious gaps. It is worth remembering that the majority of students intend to study at tertiary level with Irish students; whatever difficulties they have working together will be compounded when faced with Irish students.

And yet this is why students come to these islands to learn English, to interact with non-Chinese and to acquire a western education. Reports from newspapers or current affairs magazines (e.g., *The Economist*, 2003) and studies indicate that the Chinese education system is in the throes of change, i.e., becoming more westernised, and that this change is not only supported by the government but also by populations across East Asia (Littlewood, 1999:74).

## Solutions to Interaction Problems

1. After much deliberation and lack of consensus, some teachers tried running single-nationality speaking and writing classes. The rationale for doing this was two-fold: take pressure off Chinese students and address culture-specific linguistic needs of students. For example, it was rationalised that Indian Subcontinental students needed writing and note-taking practice whereas Chinese students needed speaking practice. The arguments against separating students according to perceived linguistic needs were that it was admission of defeat ("caving in" to students) and sending the wrong signal to students. The trial proved to

be unsuccessful as students did not magically change their behaviour patterns even within their groups and it did not reportedly enhance learning.

2. Within class, teachers tried to give preferential treatment to passive, i.e. Chinese students when they took turns. The Subcontinentals would be silenced for being too loud or verbose, even when the quality and relevance of their contribution to the classroom discourse was of a superior level.

3. At other times teachers would abandon activities which could expose and potentially upstage Chinese students. They would also control teaching activities to ensure that Chinese students would not be embarrassed.

4. It has also been fashionable to consider writing special coursebooks and materials exclusively for Chinese students. This would suggest that the students are incapable of following existing courses. This is not to mitigate the importance of cross-linguistic interference when considering grammatical input. However, if we were to determine our curricula and classrooms along nationality lines, the corollary would be that each nationality has its own syllabus and textbook. The whole purpose of studying in a foreign setting would be questioned.

When questioned about alleged favouritism engendered by the use of the above methods, all teachers agreed that it did occur; they felt it was justified on the grounds that the Chinese students were obedient, punctual, disciplined hardworking and motivated to learn. The attitudes and performance of the others was of such a variable standard that their comfort within the classroom was of secondary importance.

## Methodology

The study involved surveying the students first by distributing a questionnaire. The questionnaire was followed up with an interview of each of the students to clarify certain points.

**Main Findings from Questionnaire**

In order to try to see the problem from the students' point of view, a comprehensive questionnaire surveying large numbers of students from both nationality groups was devised. The questions were written in such a way that the students would reflect on their current and previous class experience as well as the expectations of the future learning experience they harboured before coming to Ireland to study.

**Motivation for Coming to Ireland**

Students were asked why they came to Ireland to study. Selecting from a long list of options listed in the appendix (Question one), and summarised in Table Two, students were allowed to tick as many as possible. More than two-thirds of each category of student indicated that the European qualification which they would obtain at the end of the experience was a key factor. The second most frequently selected response was that students did not like the education system in their home countries. This was followed in third place by a desire to learn English.

| Category | Chinese | Others |
|---|---|---|
| Irish university qualifications are highly regarded in my country | 35% | 32.5 |
| European university qualifications are highly regarded in my country | 62% | 62% |
| I couldn't get a place in university at home | 8% | 8% |
| I don't like education system in my own Country | 45% | 30% |
| I want to work in Europe and education is the only way of getting a visa | 13.5% | 3% |
| I want to go to the UK and it is easy to get there from here | 17.5% | 2% |
| I want to escape the political situation in my home country | 9.5% | 16% |
| My parents told me to go to Ireland | 13.5% | 16% |
| I want to learn English | 40% | 30% |
| Cost of education in Ireland is cheap | 9% | 7% |
| Meet people from different countries | 13% | 13% |
| Other | 13% | 15% |

Table Two: *Motivations for Coming to Ireland*

The most substantive categories selected in the table above pertain to the quality of the education system. Further, each of the above categories that were selected by the students of

all nationalities represent a clear and decisive endorsement of the quality of the education system in Ireland.

# Preference for Study

Students were then asked whether they preferred to study with students from their home country or with students from other countries. Interestingly, more than four-fifths of all students stated that they preferred studying with students from other countries (cf Table Four) and seventy percent indicated that they preferred not to study with students from their own countries (cf Table Three). There is no significant difference in the results of any given nationality (cf Table Four).

| I prefer to study with students from my country | China | Bangladesh | Pakistan | India | Other Nationalities | TOTAL ALL GROUPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 12.86% | 18.75% | 55% | 16.67% | 0% | 17.75% |
| Disagree | 71.43% | 75.00% | 45% | 83.33% | 100.00% | 71.03% |
| Not Sure | 15.71% | 6.25% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 11.22% |

Table Three: *Prefer to Study with Students from own Country*

| I prefer to study with students from other countries | China | Bangladesh | Pakistan | India | Other Nationalities | TOTAL ALL GROUPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 79.73% | 93.75% | 81.82% | 83.33% | 100.00% | 82.88% |
| Disagree | 6.76% | 0% | 9.09% | 16.67% | 0.00% | 6.31% |
| Not Sure | 13.51% | 6.25% | 9.19% | 0% | 0% | 10.81% |

Table Four: *Prefer to Study with Students from other Countries*

Students were asked to focus on their current learning experience rather than any previous one for the purpose of the survey. The results should therefore reflect how they feel about their present learning context. The fact that little camaraderie exists between the Chinese students and the non-Chinese would suggest that the students would prefer to be apart. And yet they do seem to enjoy studying with students from other nationalities.

| There are too many students from my country in my course | China | Bangladesh | Pakistan | India | Other Nationalities | TOTAL ALL GROUPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 77.03% | 37.50% | 33.33% | 0.00% | 0% | 60.55% |
| Disagree | 14.86% | 50.00% | 66.67% | 50.00% | 100% | 29.36% |
| Not Sure | 8.11% | 12.5% | 0% | 50% | 0% | 10.09% |

Table Five: *Too Many Students from My Country*

| It doesn't matter where the students come from as long as they work hard | China | Bangladesh | Pakistan | India | Other Nationalities | TOTAL ALL GROUPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 61% | 64% | 100% | 67% | 75% | 66% |
| Disagree | 12.5% | 14% | 0% | 14% | 0% | 12% |
| Not Sure | 28.5% | 22% | 0% | 19% | 25% | 22% |

Table Six: *It doesn't matter where the Students come from as Long as They Work Hard*

Moreover, as Table 5 shows, the majority of Chinese students (77%) indicated that they felt there were too many Chinese students in their class. This contrasts with an average of twenty-five percent for all other groups with a more accentuated rejection of the statement by the smaller language groups. However, in an effort to probe further, students were asked whether they agreed that it doesn't matter where students come from as long as they work hard (Table Six). Sixty percent of all students responded positively to this question. This would suggest that the situation in which they found themselves is not particularly devastating if managed well. It also soothes many teachers' concerns that a large concentration of one nationality in the classroom militates against effective learning.

| I learn a lot from students from other countries when they speak in class | China | Bangladesh | Pakistan | India | Other Nationalities | TOTAL ALL GROUPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 41.89% | 81.25% | 54.55% | 16.67% | 100.00% | 49.55% |
| Disagree | 25.68% | 18.75% | 27.27% | 50.00% | 0% | 25.23% |
| Not Sure | 32.43% | 0% | 18.18% | 33.33% | 0% | 25.22% |

Table Seven: *I learn a lot from students from other Countries when they speak*

The next section of the questionnaire was designed to try to explore the situation in which students did not seem interested in listening to classmates from other nationalities. Significantly, only forty-one percent of the Chinese students feel that they learn from other students when they speak in class with more than twenty-five percent indicating that they don't learn from them. This compares with sixty-five percent of all other groups expressing a positive learning experience (the main exception being the Indian group, at 16.67%). Overall just under half of all students agreed that they learn by interacting with students from other cultures (cf. Table Seven).

| I learn a lot from students from my country when they speak in class | China | Bangladesh | Pakistan | India | Other Nationalities | TOTAL ALL GROUPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 35.14% | 26.67% | 20.00% | 16.67% | 0.00% | 30.28% |
| Disagree | 35.14% | 33.33% | 70.00% | 50.00% | 75.00% | 40.37% |
| Not Sure | 29.72% | 40% | 10% | 33.33% | 25% | 29.35% |

Table Eight: *I learn a lot from Students from my country when they speak in class*

The next hypothesis which was tested in the questionnaire (Table 8) was whether students felt that they learned from members of their own nationality group. As stated, in class they seemed to work most harmoniously with students from their own countries and were usually reluctant to sit in groups with students from other countries. Teachers had to be very persistent but often had to abandon activities which involved an injudicious mix of nationality groups. More than half of all students disagreed that they learned a lot from students from other nationality groups while only thirty percent agreed. More Chinese than all other nationalities combined (thirty-five percent to twenty percent) agreed that they learned a lot from students from their country but the figure is no higher than those who disagreed (thirty-five percent). This would suggest that the idea of organising clusters of learning in which students were working in mixed-nationality groups is appreciated by students and that separating students according to nationality is not a popular methodological strategy.

| I like groupwork because I can meet and work with students from other countries | China | Bangladesh | Pakistan | India | Other Nationalities | TOTAL ALL GROUPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 70.27% | 85.71% | 81.82% | 83.33% | 100.00% | 75.23% |
| Disagree | 13.51% | 7.14% | 0.00% | 16.67% | 0.00% | 11.01% |
| Not Sure | 16.22% | 7.15% | 18.18% | 0% | 0% | 13.76% |

Table Nine: *Attitudes to Groupwork*

This was unambiguously confirmed by the students when asked why they liked groupwork. More than seventy percent of Chinese students said that they did like groupwork because they can meet and work with students from other nationalities. Nearly eighty-four percent of all other students subscribe to that view. Although this positive endorsement has been attested elsewhere in the research literature (Littlewood 1999, 2001), it is particularly striking to witness it in an uncooperative learning environment and with such a mix of nationalities.

It is also interesting that some of the negative experiences that students have undergone with classmates from such different cultural backgrounds do not seem to colour their desire to work in a multicultural setting, or may only be confined to the minority who disagree with the statement.

The last section of the questionnaire dealt with the relationship that the students had with their teachers in Ireland. They were asked to compare them with their teachers at home, not only from the point of view of teaching styles but also as classroom managers. Finally, students were asked whether they felt that Irish teachers showed favouritism towards students from certain nationalities.

| | China | Bangladesh | Pakistan | India | Other Nationalities | TOTAL ALL GROUPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prefer Irish Teaching Style | 70% | 69% | 82% | 100% | 50% | 72% |
| Prefer My country's Teaching Style | 4% | 9% | 18% | 0% | 0% | 6% |
| Not Sure | 26% | 32% | 0% | 0% | 50% | 22% |

Table Ten: *Teaching Style*

As far as teaching style is concerned (Table Ten), the good news for Irish teachers is they are favoured by seventy-two percent of respondents with only six preferring the style of their own country. Chinese students were more likely to equivocate on this question with nearly thirty percent of respondents indicating that they were unsure.

| Irish teachers are too strict with students | China | Bangladesh | Pakistan | India | Other Nationalities | TOTAL ALL GROUPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 9.46% | 62.50% | 27.27% | 16.67% | 0.00% | 18.92% |
| Disagree | 55.41% | 6.25% | 54.55% | 50.00% | 75.00% | 48.65% |
| Not Sure | 35.13% | 31.25 | 18.18% | 33.33% | 25% | 32.43% |

Table Eleven: *Irish Teachers are too strict with Students*

The vast majority of students do not believe that Irish teachers are too strict with students (Table Eleven); in fact, it is one of the positive features of the learning experience listed by many students in their comments. This figure does hide some extremes: Chinese students, in particular, feel that Irish teachers are not strict while over sixty percent of Bangladeshis feel that they are too strict.

| Irish teachers show favouritism to students from certain nationalities | China | Bangladesh | Pakistan | India | Other Nationalities | TOTAL ALL GROUPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 29.73% | 73.33% | 36.36% | 16.67% | 0.00% | 35.85% |
| Disagree | 28.38% | 20.00% | 36.36% | 83.33% | 75.00% | 31.13% |
| Not Sure | 41.89% | 6.67% | 27.28% | 100% | 25% | 33.02% |

Table Twelve: *Irish Teachers Show Favouritism towards Some Nationalities*

Similar divergences are recorded when the question of favouritism towards certain nationalities was posed (cf. Table Twelve). While fewer than thirty percent of Chinese students agreed that Irish teachers show favouritism to other nationalities, seventy-three percent of Bangladeshis and fifty percent of all non-Chinese agreed with the statement.

Comments made by students supported the above view with a number of non-Chinese indicating that the Chinese students were accorded more favourable treatment in the

classroom. This consideration needs to be addressed when teachers are trying to balance competing demands of the nationality groups.

The main Area in which non-Chinese viewed Irish teachers as too strict was in attendance keeping rather than specific classroom management issues. It is quite likely that the rowdiness that they are accustomed to in the classroom has been tamed by teachers in their own countries in a similar fashion. Large class sizes and a teacher-fronted classroom can only work when strict discipline is kept. Students do not feel that teachers from their own countries are too strict either.

## Conclusion

Overall, the results of the survey would suggest that most students do like to work together but a significant minority, particularly of Chinese students, are not favourably disposed towards such methods. However, students reportedly like the education system in Ireland along with its teaching strategies and methods. It is clear that the teachers should not be put off by classroom behaviour which may suggest otherwise. Rather, teachers need to be emboldened with a vision that their methods work and that it is their duty to convince the sceptical minority of students of this reality.

Possible reasons for the mismatch between the data in the questionnaires and some of the observations made by teachers are that the vocal minority of dissatisfied students are shouting loudest. They may be rigid and not open-minded and, as a result, the teacher is rattled by negativity. Moreover, a negative evaluation of a teacher has the power to demoralise him or her deeply.

The high tuition fees that students are required to pay puts extra pressure on teachers to give the "customers" what they (think they) want. It is easy to see how a teacher can buckle under this pressure.

Teachers may need to make extra efforts to assimilate their students into the western style of teaching but this should not be done by trying to reach a compromise between using

discredited methods that they believe students are familiar with and persevering with principled methods.

Shyness, lack of reflection and often inexperience mixing with other cultures may account for a lot of students' apprehension and seeming unwillingness to engage in groupwork with students from different backgrounds. If necessary, cross-cultural communication skills can be embedded into the curriculum as long as the activities are relevant and motivational to students.

The teacher needs to bring together such disparate cultures by fostering a sense of common purpose. The educational environment is constantly seeking to strengthen the collective nature of learning. Therefore, it is counterproductive to give students the wrong impression by using outmoded teaching styles in an effort to quell dissent. After all, the majority of students do prefer to work collaboratively with members of different cultures.

Students need to explore topics of interest, topics that they can get their teeth into. Problem solving activities promote groupwork. Students may need to be trained, but like all good learning, the rate of success increases rapidly and exponentially.

Finally there is evidence that the education systems across the world are changing, not least that of China. The last thing we ought to do is go in the other direction.

## About the Author

Edward Bressan is a Senior Lecturer in the International Centre for English Language Studies at Oxford Brookes University, where his main responsibility is managing an EAP course. His teaching and research interests are in the areas of critical English for academic purposes and the use of language in the workplace.

Email:   ebressan@brookes.ac.uk

# References

Baily K. and D. Nunan (Eds.) (1996) *Voices from the language classroom* Cambridge University Press

Ballard B. and J. Clanchy (1991) *Teaching students from overseas* Longman Cheshire Melbourne

Becker J. (2000) *The Chinese* John Murray Paperbacks London

*The Economist* (2003) Roll over, Confucius, Jan 23

Bennett Jones O. (2002) *Pakistan* Yale University Press New York

Ellis G (1996) How Culturally Appropriate is the Communicative Approach *ELT Journal* 50/3 pp. 213-219

Cortazzi, M. & Jin, L. (1996). Cultures of learning: Language classrooms in China. In H. Coleman (Ed.), Society and the Language Classroom (pp. 169—206). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Flowerdew L. (1998) A Cultural perspective on group work in *ELT Journal* 52/4 pp. 323-329

Garrett P. and T. Shorthall (2002) Learners' evaluations of teacher-fronted and students-centred classroom activities in *Language teaching research* 6,1 pp. 25-57

Gudykunst W.B. & Y.Y. Kim (1992) *Communicating with strangers: an approach to intercultural communication* New York: McGraw Hill

Harvey P. (1985) "A lesson to be learned: Chinese approaches to language learning" in *ELT Journal* Vol. 39/3 pp.183-186

Hosfstede G 1986 'Cultural differences in teaching and learning' *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10: 301-20

Kumaravadivelu B. (2001) "Toward a postmethod pedagogy" *TESOL Quarterly* 35 (4) pp. 537-560

Kramsch C 1993 Context and Culture in Language Teaching. Oxford

Littlewood W. (1999) "Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts" in *Applied Linguistics* 20/1 pp.71-94

Littlewood W. (2000) "Do Asian students really want to listen and obey?" in *ELT Journal* 54/1    pp.31-36

Littlewood W. (2001) "Students' attitudes to classroom English learning; A cross-cultural study in *Language teaching research* 5/1, pp. 3-28Liu J. (2002) Negotiating silence in

American classrooms: three Chinese cases in *Language and Intercultural Communication*, Vol. 2, No 1 pp. 37-54

Lustig M & J Koester (1999) *Intercultural competence* Longman

Reid J (ed) 1995 Learning Styles in the ESL/EFL Classroom Boston Heinle and Heinle

Stapleton P. (2002) "Critical thinking in Japanese L2 writing: rethinking tired constructs" *ELT Journal* 56 (3) pp. 250-257

*Transparency International* (2002) Corruption perceptions index. Website Accessed 31/07/03. http://www.transparency.org/cpi/

Woodward, T (1995) Pair and groupwork - confessions of ignorance. The Teacher Trainer 9/1.

# Appendix One: Questionnaire

**Survey on Learning Styles**

1) What are the main reasons for coming to Ireland? Tick as many as you like

Because Irish university qualifications are highly regarded in my country

Because European university qualifications are highly regarded in my country

Because I couldn't get a place in university at home

Because I don't like the education system in my own country

Because I want to work in Europe and education is the only way of getting a visa

Because I want to go to the UK and it is easy to get there from here

Because I want to escape the political situation in my home country

Because my parents told me to go to Ireland

Because the cost of education in Ireland is relatively cheap

Because I want to learn English

Because I want to meet people from different countries

Other (Please State)_____

2) Comparing the Irish education system to your own, which of the following statements best approximates your point of view?

I prefer the teaching style in Ireland

I prefer the teaching style in my own country

Not sure

Please give reasons to support your answer:

3) Interactions

Which of the following statements do you agree with? Rank each of the statements below according to the following:

**1) Agree 2) Disagree 3) Not sure**

I prefer to study only with students from my country_____

I prefer to study with students from other countries_____

There are too many students from my country in my course_____

It doesn't matter where the students come from as long as they work hard_____

I learn a lot from students from other countries when they speak in class_____

I learn a lot from students from my country when they speak in class_____

Students should not be allowed to speak their own language in the classroom at any time_____

I like groupwork because I can meet students from other countries_____

Irish teachers are too strict with students_____

Irish teachers show favouritism to students from some nationalities_____


Comments on any of the above questions: