

Using Anonymity in Online Interactive EFL Learning: International Students' Perceptions and Practices

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ABSTRACT

This case study aims at exploring international English as a foreign language (EFL) students' perceptions and employment of anonymity in online interactive learning. The study also investigates the impacts of the use of anonymity in EFL learning on students' learning performances. Participants of the study were 154 international EFL students enrolled in an Australian university, who came from different Asian countries. Multiple methods of data collection were administrated, including an online questionnaire with a five-point Likert Scale and open-ended questions, participants' reflective reports, and documents. Descriptive statistics were used to process the quantitative data. The qualitative evidence was categorized by themes and research questions. It was found that students' perceptions and employment of anonymity were different in two types of interaction. In peer interaction, participants were positive to anonymity and had active engagement in learning by using pseudonyms. In teacher-involved interaction, anonymity was less used, and was less influential on students' participation and production in EFL learning. It was also noted that participants exaggerated the positive effect of anonymity on their engagement in interaction. Recommendations for future studies are provided based on the findings.

Keywords: *anonymity; cultural factors; EFL learning; interactive learning; online learning.*

INTRODUCTION

The number of international students pursuing higher education overseas has expanded at a rapid pace since 2010, globally. As part of this trend, Australia is ranked as the fourth most popular destination for attracting international students (UNESCO, 2014). To date, more than 3.9 million international students are enrolled in Australian higher education institutions (Department of Education and Training, 2018). Notably, Asia contributes the largest share of enrolments. China, India, Thailand, Nepal and Malaysia are some of the largest sources of international students in the Australian higher education sector (Department of Education and Training, 2018).

Learning in Australia, an English-speaking country with different host cultures and social traditions, Asian international students have made some achievements in academic adaptation, while they are also facing challenges in terms of foreign language proficiency raised as a key issue (Yu & Wright, 2016). International students are struggling to obtain more engaging opportunities for interactive EFL learning to better their language skills (Yates & Wahid, 2013). Existing studies have also consistently identified a lack of English as a foreign language (EFL) skills and knowledge as a major barrier to international students' social interaction and academic success (Son & Park, 2014; Yu, 2009). It is possible that improving their interactive learning environment could play an important role for international students to support their English language learning, as well as their academic development in Australian higher education.

To cope with the new trend of online EFL learning and teaching, anonymity, in which learners' real identities are kept unknown to others by using pseudonyms or not using names at all, is widely employed by host institutions as one of the strategies to facilitate international students' interactive EFL learning (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011). It is widely believed that using anonymity can induce

EFL students' higher participation and production in interaction, and lower their anxiety in the process, which hopefully leads to international students' academic success and satisfaction in universities and colleges (Hosack, 2004; Chester & Gwynne, 1998).

Teacher involvement allows for two types of interaction in EFL learning, the teacher-involved interaction and the peer-peer one (Chou, 2003). To date, there have been a number of studies that investigated the influence of anonymity on students' engagement, including both their participation and production in interaction for EFL learning (Abrar, 2018; Guardado & Shi, 2007). However, previous studies have not distinguished the two types of interaction in terms of the employment of anonymity (Lu & Bol, 2007; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011). Less research focus have been put on Asian international students' EFL learning in an Australian context (Yu & Wright, 2016). To fill this research gap, Asian international EFL students' perceptions and employment of anonymity in interaction are investigated in this study. Two research questions are addressed in the current study:

- 1) How do international students perceive and use anonymity in online interaction for EFL learning?
- 2) What are the impacts of anonymity on international students' participation and production in online interaction for EFL learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

From an individual learner's perspective, anonymity in interaction is often associated with the concept of deindividuation in language learning (Lu & Han, 2014). The concept is used to describe the employment of anonymity, in which learners "stop thinking of other members as individuals and feel that they cannot be singled out by others" (Jessup, Connolly, & Tansik, 1990, p. 338). Deindividuation of anonymity reduces learners' inner restrains, and frees them from pressures that source from teacher and peer assessment, as it "detaches individuals from their contributions" (Lu & Bol, 2007, p. 102). For international students, who usually have different learning motivations, deindividuation can help improve their learning experience and performances by imposing less peer pressure (Melchor-Couto, 2018). To this end, the employment of anonymity can induce international students' higher participation and production in learning activities (Hosack, 2004).

Furthermore, anonymity protects interaction between participants by reducing the impacts of their social identities, including social status, academic achievement and language proficiency (Chester & Gwynne, 1998). Using anonymity in interaction helps individual participants keep a low key in the group, and avoid becoming the targets or examples of others that may limit their learning engagement (Au-Yeung, 2017). In an interaction circumstance, participants employ anonymity "as a shield from being on stage" (Bradley & Lomicka, 2000, p. 362) to foster a level of comfort in language learning. It enables learners to suffer less from the social constraints generated from their social norms, particularly for international students with diverse backgrounds and education experience (Flanagin, Tiyaamornwong, O'Connor, & Seibold, 2002). This promotes students achieving engagement in interactive activities in an equal environment (DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001).

For its effect on promoting interaction, anonymity has been accepted as a less threatening strategy for individual students to create a comfortable context for language learning (Arnold, 2007). Empirical studies have been conducted to investigate the outcomes of its uses in EFL learning, particularly for international EFL students: Abrar (2018) found that employing anonymity could ease students' self-condemnation of making mistakes in learning; Poza (2005) noted that anonymity could decrease students' anxiety in interaction, and increase their motivation for learning; Roed (2003) also indicated that anonymity could help students relax, and suffer less from their worries in EFL learning. These studies have focused on students' self-factors in terms of the employment of anonymity in interaction (Hosack, 2004), and shed light on the effectiveness of the strategy of

anonymity on facilitating students' language learning.

From an interpersonal perspective, anonymity is often used as a strategy to maintain positive interpersonal relationships among participants during interaction (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011). By employing anonymity, students are encouraged to take a bolder step to engage in learning with less social pressures of breaking relationships with others in public, since they are untraceable in this scene (Chen & Goh, 2011). Otherwise, for the fear of public disapproval and sanction, students may disengage from learning to avoid criticizing others, or being criticized by others in a non-anonymous context (Domalewska, 2014).

Interpersonal relationship is an important concept in interaction and communication, particularly for students with Asian backgrounds (Bian & Ang, 1997; Vanhonacker, 2004). International students from many Asian countries, like China and other Confucian heritage countries intend to make efforts to maintain friendly relationships with peer students (Ding et al., 2017). As scholars have suggested (Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2005), maintaining interpersonal relationships and group harmony are the ultimate goals of interaction for many Asian students. As international students, who are unfamiliar with local culture and social traditions, they usually try to avoid any confrontations or conflicts in interaction with others (Hofstede, 2003). To achieve these goals, students make use of anonymity and their comments on the work of others less aggressive. Anonymity is believed to be an effective strategy for international students to use without harm to their interpersonal relationships (Xu & Kou, 2018).

Empirical studies have noted the effectiveness of anonymity for good interpersonal relationships during interaction among participants, by reducing disclosure of identities in Asian contexts: Liu and Jackson (2008) found that using anonymity in interaction encouraged EFL students to give more straightforward and critical feedback to the work of their peers; while Kern (1998) found that anonymity created an atmosphere of critical receptivity in interaction, which contributed to students' active engagement in learning. Freeman, Blayney and Ginns (2006) also confirmed that the degree of anonymity had a positive correlation with students' engagement in interaction for foreign language learning. All these studies have investigated the interpersonal factors for EFL students' employment of anonymity in interaction. They indicated that using anonymity could induce students' more active engagement in interaction as well as positive learning outcomes in language learning.

Beside these benefits of anonymity, anonymity may reduce students' sense of learning obligation and responsibility in interaction, which may discourage their participation and result in unproductive learning outcomes. Empirical studies have noted the negative effects of anonymity on interaction in language learning: Beaudoin (2002) found that anonymous students might keep lurking in interaction, and escape from learning activities; Kavaliauskiene, Anusiene, and Kaminskiene (2007) concluded that anonymity did not play a significant role in interaction; Xu and Liu (2009) also indicated that students contributed less efforts to interaction in EFL learning when their real names were hidden. These studies have suggested that anonymity cannot always benefit interaction in foreign language learning. Its employment and influence on learners should be cautious and carefully examined.

THE STUDY

A total of 154 international students enrolled in an academic English learning program in an Australian university participated in this study. All students came from Asian countries, including China, India, Thailand, Nepal, and Malaysia. They were in their second semester of EFL learning in the program. They were supposed to be competent English language users as well as skillful computer users, who were able to use computers to complete online EFL learning. All participants were non-native speakers of English. Table 1 shows the demographic information of all participants in this study.

Table 1: Participants' demographic information

| Variables | Categories | Frequencies | Percent |
|-------------------------------|------------|-------------|---------|
| Gender | Male | 72 | 46.8% |
| | Female | 82 | 53.2% |
| Age | 18 – 20 | 64 | 41.6% |
| | 21 -- 23 | 49 | 31.8% |
| | 23 -- 25 | 29 | 18.8% |
| | Above 25 | 12 | 7.8% |
| Have been to Australia before | Yes | 67 | 43.5% |
| | No | 87 | 56.5% |
| Nationalities | China | 78 | 50.6% |
| | India | 32 | 20.8% |
| | Thailand | 24 | 15.6% |
| | Nepal | 16 | 10.4% |
| | Malaysia | 4 | 2.6% |

The entire case study research was conducted over the period March 2016 to June 2016. In order not to disturb students' learning routine in the university, the study was conducted after class. An Australian-oriented online English learning platform, which was part of the international EFL students' learning requirements and language competence, was employed to serve as the research context of this study. This highly recognized research-based platform was developed by an Australian Research Council Linkage project. Both asynchronous and synchronous interactions between students and teachers, and among peer students, are supported on the platform.

Three modules of interaction were employed in the study. Participants were required to use their real names in the first module, and pseudonyms in the second one. They could freely choose to use pseudonyms or not when they were working on the third module. Each learning module contained three types of interactive activities: teacher-student, peer-peer, and mixed with the involvement of both teachers and student participants. Evidence regarding participants' engagement in interaction on the platform was collected via different means. Both quantitative and qualitative data were categorized and analyzed through different themes to demonstrate Asian international students' interaction in anonymous EFL learning activities.

Three different methods were utilized to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from different sources in this study: an online questionnaire, participants' reflective reports, and online learning documents, for facilitating validation of the findings (Denscombe, 2014).

A total of 154 participants were invited to complete the online questionnaire. A five-point Likert Scale was used to collect data about EFL students' perceptions of anonymity in online interaction. Questions were developed and modified from previous studies on similar topics (Beaudoin, 2002; Hosack, 2004).

Two open-ended questions which allowed participants to express themselves by using their own words (Denscombe, 2014), were used for gathering information about students' perceptions of the use of anonymity. The two open-ended questions in the study were:

- 1) Are you willing to engage in interactive English learning activities in the classroom? Why/Why not?
- 2) What benefits do you think there are in the use of anonymity for interactive English learning?

Twenty-four student participants, who had completed the questionnaire, voluntarily engaged in online EFL learning on the provided platform after class. Participants' learning documents, including learning logs that were generated in their online learning process, and recorded interactive productions, were collected and analyzed to assess their engagement in interaction on the platform.

At the end of each learning module, participants provided their reflective reports regarding their perceptions and use of anonymity in the learning process. The reports were designed to gather information about participants' immediate reflections on their learning activities. Reports focusing on students' thinking on different types of interaction were collected, categorized and compared.

FINDINGS

Participants' perceptions in regard to revealing their names during interaction were not the same in different types of interaction in the EFL learning context. As shown in Table 2, most participants were not willing to reveal their names to peers in interaction (mean=2.45). More than a half of them (51.6%) indicated that it was not acceptable to let peers identify them during the interaction (Q9). When interacting with teachers, participants held a more neutral viewpoint of anonymity (m=3.04). Approximately 37% of them indicated it was not acceptable to reveal their real names to teachers in interactive EFL learning, while slightly more participants (39%) claimed it was acceptable (Q10).

Table 2: *Participants' perceptions of revealing of identities during interaction*

| Perceptions | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree | Mean | Std. D |
|--|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|------|--------|
| Revealing my name when interacting with peers | 17.8% | 33.8% | 11.0% | 17.5% | 9.1% | 2.45 | 1.314 |
| Revealing my name when interacting with teachers | 9.1% | 27.3% | 24.7% | 28.6% | 10.4% | 3.04 | 1.160 |

In Table 3 below shows participants' reasons for the use of anonymity when interacting with peers. It showed that most participants (72.7%) agreed or strongly agreed on the need to hide their learning achievements from peers in EFL learning (Q5), while it was acceptable for most of them (55.8%) to let their teachers know (Q6). More than half of all participants (56.5%) preferred not to reveal their identities to peers in case they made a mistake during the interaction (Q7), while (28.5%) were concerned that their teachers would identify them in the same situation (Q8).

Table 3: *Participants' purposes for the use of anonymity.*

| Purposes | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree | Mean | Std. D |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|------|--------|
| Hiding my learning achievements from peers | 9.1% | 11.0% | 7.1% | 50.6% | 22.1% | 3.66 | 1.201 |
| Hiding my learning achievements from teachers | 17.5% | 38.3% | 14.3% | 18.8% | 11.0% | 2.68 | 1.273 |
| Covering my mistakes from peers | 8.4% | 24.7% | 10.4% | 42.2% | 14.3% | 3.29 | 1.226 |
| Covering my mistakes from teachers | 18.8% | 31.2% | 21.4% | 17.5% | 11.0% | 2.71 | 1.268 |

As can be seen from Figure 1 below, the number of EFL students who engaged in non-anonymous interaction and anonymous interaction were the same. The number of participants slightly dropped to 10 in the optional context, where international students could freely choose to use their real names or pseudonyms to engage in learning. 107 participants engaged in the non-anonymous interaction and the optional interaction. The number slightly increased to 113 in the anonymous interaction context. Participants' average production from the non-anonymous interactive learning to the anonymous did not increase significantly. Only a very mild rise (5.7%) was observed in this process.

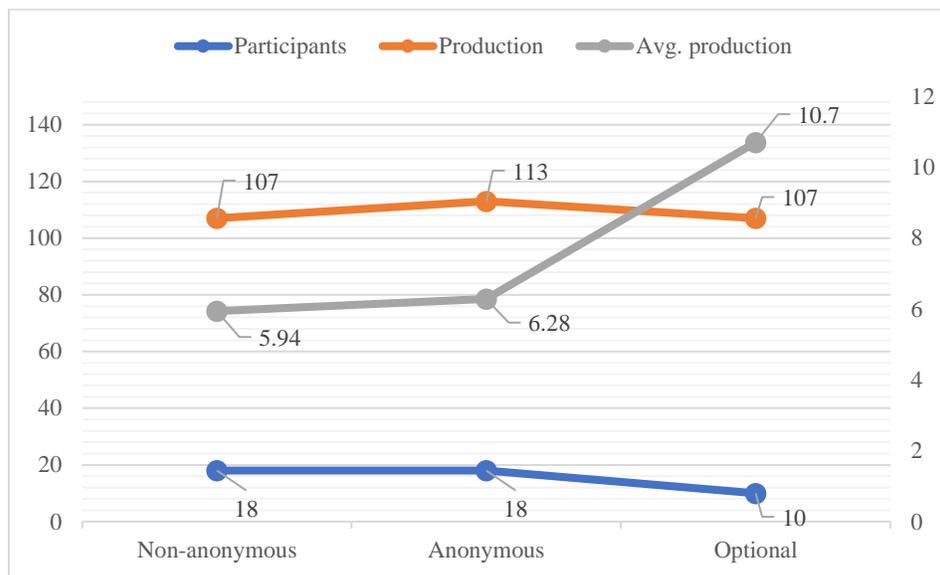


Figure 1: Participation and production in interaction.

As Figure 2 below shows, the proportion of anonymous users was 76.2% in peer-peer interaction. However, teacher involvement was an indicator for change. In two types of teacher-involved interaction (teacher-student interaction and mixed interaction), the proportion of students participating anonymously decreased. In teacher-student interaction, such as answering teacher-raised questions, explaining their opinions to teachers, and requesting more information from teachers, a majority of students (80.4%) engaged by using their real names. Only 21 (19.6%) pseudonyms were used. In learning activities with the mix of both teacher-student interaction and peer interaction, the use of real names still accounted for a larger proportion (34.3%) than those in peer interaction.

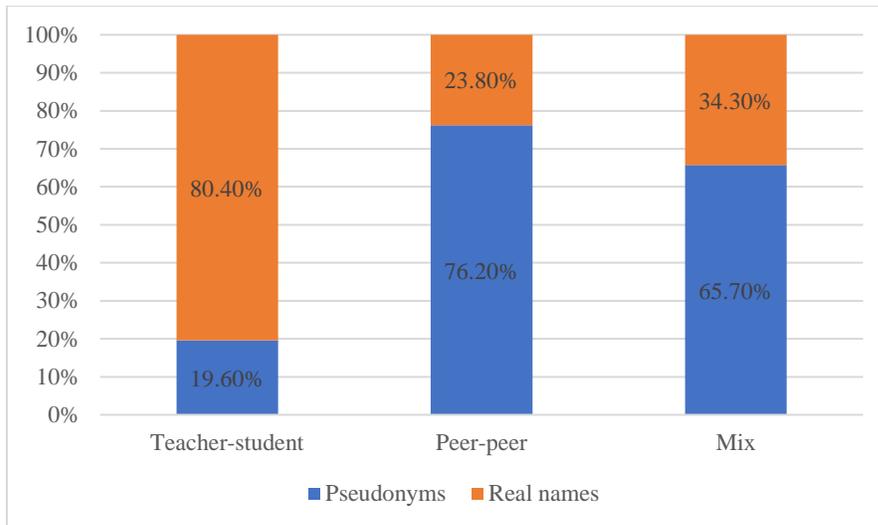


Figure 2: Participants' use of anonymity in different types of interaction.

In this study, participants also provided their perceptions of the use of anonymity in terms of two types of interaction, the teacher-involved interaction (including both teacher-student interaction and mixed interaction) and the peer interaction (Q13). Some indicative comments collected from their reflective reports are shown below.

Teacher Involved Interaction

I did not necessarily use a pseudonym when interacting with teachers. ...I engaged in learning under the command of an authority in that occasion. (A)

I would be very happy if my teacher recognized my language abilities. ...I would rather put my name at the beginning of my work. (B)

Displaying my learning achievements to teachers is quite common in the university. (C)

It was not embarrassing to make mistakes in front of my teachers. ...I would treat it as an opportunity to improve my learning. (D)

Peer Interaction

There was a sense of protection that enabled me to take a bolder step in peer interaction. (B)

From my perspective, it (anonymity) was a necessity to peer interaction. (E)

If I had a choice, I would not let peers know my achievements in English learning. ... It was like showing off my intellectual superiority. ... That might be harmful to the maintenance of the good relationship between us. (F)

Using anonymity enabled me to give very critical comments on peer's mistakes without the concern of hurting her ... (A)

I was obviously bolder and franker, as well as more confident in interaction when my real name was covered. (D)

It (anonymity) helped me free from peers' low evaluations on my learning. (C)

When asked if they engaged in interaction in the English classroom, most participants (nearly 70%) conceded their unwillingness (Q12. *Are you willing to engage in interaction in the English classroom? Why/Why not?*). Less than 25% of participants engaged in the in-class learning voluntarily. Using English for interaction in a traditional context was not common for these participants. The data in Table 4 indicates that approximately 25.9% of participants interacted with teachers in the English classroom (Q2). While even less participants (around 23%) used English to interact with peers in the English classes (Q3). Nearly 70% of these participants believed that the revelation of their real identities was responsible for their disengagement from interaction in the classroom (Q11). If anonymity were used, more than half of all participants (63%) stated that they would engage in interaction (Q4).

Table 4: Participants' interaction in EFL learning

| Interaction | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree | Mean | Std. D |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|------|--------|
| Answering teacher's questions | 18.2% | 41.6% | 14.3% | 18.8% | 7.1% | 2.55 | 1.194 |
| Interacting with peers | 25.3% | 46.1% | 19.5% | 17.5% | 4.5% | 2.43 | 1.176 |
| Interacting in an anonymous context | 5.8% | 19.5% | 11.7% | 28.6% | 34.4% | 3.66 | 1.290 |
| Disengaging from interaction in a non-anonymous context | 1.9% | 10.4% | 18.2% | 44.2% | 25.3% | 3.81 | 0.997 |

Participants in this study also confirmed their belief in anonymity in the reflective reports. Some indicative comments collected from their reflective reports are shown below.

Yes. I would definitely engage in interaction if I were allowed to use a pseudonym (A)

It (Anonymity) is a decisive factor of my engagement in interaction. (G)

Engaging with a pseudonym seems to be a protection for me. ... I can act more like "a real me" in interaction with a pseudonym. (C)

Anonymity is a source of confidence in interactive EFL learning for me. It solves such a problem that I am too nervous to speak out my mind. (H)

Several factors that might lower students' willingness to interact during EFL learning in a traditional context were mentioned by participants. Figure 3 illustrates some of these key factors. It shows that the factor of anxiety was mentioned by more than 70% of all participants, ranking as the biggest reason for their unwillingness to participate in interactive EFL learning activities in a traditional context. Some other factors mentioned in the responses were the difficulty of interaction, topics and the content of the interactive activities, and assigned schedules in the classroom.

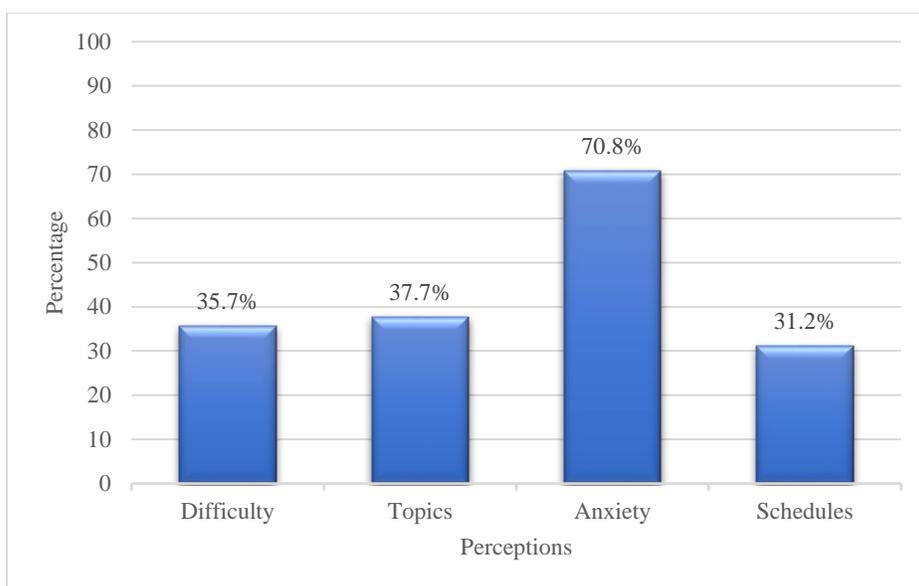


Figure 3: *Participants' perceptions of interactive EFL learning.*

DISCUSSION

Through both qualitative and quantitative data gathered from different sources, this case study uncovered Asian international students' willingness to employ anonymity to cover their real identities in online peer interaction when learning EFL in an Australian context. A large proportion of participants in this study chose to use pseudonyms to hide their real identities when teachers were not engaged in the learning process (see Figure 2). Some participants described anonymity as "a necessity", revealing its importance in peer interaction (see Table 1). Use of anonymity was believed to provide these students with "a sense of protection" to "enable ... to take a bolder step" allowing for a higher level of participation and production in peer interaction. This finding was consistent with previous indications that anonymity was effective for inducing students' active engagement in peer interactive EFL learning (Poza, 2005; Roed, 2003). The point of maintaining friendly relationships with peers and keeping a low profile among peers, were raised as the interpersonal and self-factors for students' preference for anonymity during peer interaction.

Interpersonal relationship is an important cultural and social concept in Asian countries (Bian & Ang, 1997; Vanhonacker, 2004). International students with Asian backgrounds always attempt to keep friendly relationships with peers during interaction (Ding et al., 2017). By using anonymity, student-participants suffered from less social pressures of breaking relationships with peers (Chen & Goh, 2011), since "nobody knows me" in this anonymous context. They were observed to be "more straightforward" and gave "very critical comments" on peers' presentations. In line with empirical studies (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011), anonymity was believed to help students maintain good interpersonal relationships with peers in interaction. Although they usually had diverse backgrounds, common themes of culture and social traditions emerged from these Asian international students. Therefore, anonymity was used as a preferred strategy by these international EFL students to address a lack of opportunities for interaction, which was reported as a key issue in the literature, faced by international students and host universities in EFL learning and teaching (Yates & Wahid, 2013).

In an identifiable learning context, on the contrary, student-participants “dared not” give critical comments on peers’ work in interaction. They were concerned that their disapproval would make peers “lose face”, which was considered as a serious situation by most Asian students (Liu, 2007). To maintain positive relationships and group harmony, EFL students avoided confrontations or conflicts with peers in public (Hofstede, 2003).

Regarding the self-factors of employing anonymity in interaction, deindividuation freed students from peer assessment (Lu & Bol, 2007), leading to their active engagement in EFL learning. For those higher-competent EFL students, anonymity enabled them to hide their language learning achievements from peers in interaction. The data showed that the students did not want to be outstanding among peers (see Table 2). Making their learning outcomes public during peer interaction was usually interpreted as “showing off ... intellectual superiority”. For keeping a low key profile among peers, participants used pseudonyms to detach their identities from their learning performances and outcomes, which was a reflection of deindividuation (Lu & Bol, 2007). In this way, anonymity created a learning environment, where higher-competent students were not targeted (DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001). This helped students enjoy learning with “both confidence and respect” during interaction (Bradley & Lomicka, 2000). Therefore, pseudonyms were preferred by participants in peer interaction for EFL learning.

For those lower-competent EFL students, anonymity was also employed as a strategy to ease their self-condemnation when they made mistakes in learning. It has been argued that lower-competent students usually suffer from negative feelings for not doing better in learning activities (Duchesne & Larose, 2018). Anonymity was used to create a learning context, where lower-competent EFL students could hide their mistakes that they did not want to show to their peers (see Table 2). Without revealing their real identities, students were encouraged to be more productive in interaction since they were “more relaxed” and “more confident”. Anonymity in peer interaction worked as a less threatening strategy to encourage anxious students to learn in a more positive environment, and eased their self-condemnation in the learning process (Abrar, 2018).

On the other hand, the study found that student-participants did not mind revealing their real names when teachers participated in interaction. Revealing their identities was “not a concern” for many of the international EFL students (see Table 1). In the online learning process, not many student-participants used anonymity in teacher-involved interaction either (see Figure 2). This aspect was neglected in previous studies on anonymity (Lu & Bol, 2007; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011), but played an important role in online interaction and EFL learning in this study. Teachers’ authority and the enthusiasm of demonstrating students’ learning achievements were believed to make anonymity less influential in teacher-involved interaction.

Considering students’ self-factors, their autonomy in EFL learning was compromised by teachers’ authority. It is believed that students from Asian backgrounds are easily impacted by teachers’ authority in learning (Triandis, Chen, & Chan, 1998). To date, EFL teaching and learning in many Asian universities has still applied a teacher-led approach (Qi, 2018). Teachers’ authority is influential and unchallenging, and in this study it was found that the Asian students follow “teachers’ requests” to engage in EFL learning. As researchers have put it (Chester & Gwynne, 1998), a major contribution of anonymity is to help balance all participants’ social status by covering their real identities and social roles, which may reduce their social constraints and encourage students to make more autonomous decisions in learning (Flanagin, Tiyaamornwong, O’Connor, & Seibold, 2002). In a teacher-involved learning context, teachers’ authority broke the balance. Student participants were less autonomous in making learning-related decisions when teachers were present. They were encouraged to participate in interaction for EFL learning by teachers that they could hardly refuse in an Asian cultural context (Rao, 2006). This authority made students less autonomous in interaction in a teacher-dominant learning context.

From an interpersonal perspective, in this study, Asian international EFL students were enthusiastic to display their language learning achievements during interaction. Showing off their learning outcomes was preferred by some participants (see Table 2). It showed that modern international students do not mind being outstanding in front of their teachers. This point is different from some traditional opinions on Asian students, which have claimed that these students would like to keep a low key profile and do not show themselves off among peers (Au-Yeung, 2017; Liu & Jackson, 2008). Teacher praise is valued by Asian international students, and is one of the aims of their EFL learning (Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004). In order to have teacher's recognition in EFL learning, international students might not choose to use anonymity.

Anonymity, as observed in this case study, has contributed to Asian international students' online EFL learning, and helped them have good learning experiences. However, it appeared that this group of international EFL students exaggerated the positive effect of anonymity on their engagement in interaction. Different from some previous indications (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011; Melchor-Couto, 2018), anonymity did not increase international students' overall participation or production in interaction (see Figure 1). The effect of anonymity on inducing their active engagement in interaction was not as effective as students claimed (see indicative comments from reflective reports). There might be a gap between students' perceptions of anonymity and their actual learning practice with it.

Particularly for those lower-competent students, the use of anonymity to a great extent let them find a way of covering their low language levels and minimized the participation in interaction. Students might "misuse the freedom" (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011, p. 176) of anonymity to keep lurking and contribute less to interaction in the learning process (Xu & Liu, 2010). The use of anonymity, under these circumstances, did not benefit students' language development.

Deindividuation affected international EFL students' engagement in interaction in an anonymous learning context. Deindividuation made participants less evaluative of their learning as a member of the group so that they might give up regulating their behaviors in the process (Lu & Han, 2014). As found from this study, some participants insisted that it shall be their peers rather than themselves who engaged in interaction when they were part of a group. Anonymity, under these circumstances, was intentionally employed by some students to escape from learning in an anonymous context. Simply using anonymity could not always benefit interaction in foreign language learning.

Furthermore, anonymity was not the sole factor that impacted EFL students' participation and production in interaction for EFL learning. Besides anonymity, various factors were noticed to lead to differences in students' participation in interaction (see Figure 3). These factors are not the focus of this study, however, this finding still implied that international EFL students' language learning was under the influence of a wide range of factors. Although anonymity can address international students' anxiety in interaction from both self and interpersonal perspectives, it could not necessarily lead to students' productive engagement in EFL learning.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has investigated Asian international students' perceptions and use of anonymity in online interactive EFL learning in an Australian university context. Findings of this case study showed that in peer interaction, Asian international EFL students used anonymity to keep friendly interpersonal relationships with their peers, to avoid being negatively evaluated by peers, and to ease their self-condemnation when making mistakes in learning. Anonymity induced students' higher participation and production in peer interaction. While in teacher-involved interaction, not many students used anonymity, and anonymity was less influential on encouraging international EFL students' engagement. It was found to be related with teachers' high status in international students' home

countries and Asian international students' enthusiasm in the display of their learning achievements.

The use of anonymity did not necessarily lead to successful online interactive learning of international EFL students. On the theoretical level, using anonymity is to be interpreted with caution, and to consider students' situations as well as their cultural adaptation in host countries (Yu, 2009). Particularly for international students, who usually have different backgrounds and understanding of cultural and social norms, anonymity may hold a different meaning for their interaction, and impose impacts on their learning performances. The use of anonymity is related to differences among students, including their cultural and social backgrounds and adaptation, as well as the bigger language learning contexts. On the practical level, using anonymity in interactive learning blindly cannot always lead to satisfying outcomes. Teachers are supposed to try different methods to target students' anxieties and concerns in EFL learning, rather than creating an anonymous context without taking students' real needs into consideration.

In this respect, future studies can focus on a wider range of international students, given the higher education sectors highlighting the importance of appropriately using anonymity for interactive EFL learning and teaching, particularly in a new online context.

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