

Seating and grouping choices: A chance for making contact

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Abstract: This paper discusses how international students negotiated their chances for making contact with other students in higher education and how such effort affected their educational experiences in Australia. In the past few decades, international students have formed part of the increasingly diverse multicultural student population in Australian higher education. Still, there are concerns about impacts of cultural diversity on pedagogical interactions. The data presented here were drawn from a larger interview study on first year EAL international students' educational experiences in an Australian university. The interviews were interpreted through Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts of field and capital. The analyses showed that EAL international students were strategic about selecting seats and group members in the classroom to enable meaningful interactions with peers. The paper concludes with pedagogical implications for optimizing students' chances for experiences of diversity, including making contact with linguistic and cultural others.

Keywords: international students, pedagogy, strategy, Bourdieu

Introduction

International students who use English as an additional language (EAL) come to study in Australia as part of their quest to seek English-medium Western education (Doherty & Singh, 2007). The EAL international student is typically from affluent sectors of Asian countries such as China, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam, and makes up a substantial portion of the diverse student populations in Australian higher education institutions (DEEWR, 2011). The students' quests may entail not only personal and familial investment in international education (Doherty & Singh, 2007), but also national investment in building a bilingual workforce by outsourcing the education of elite students to Western countries (de Wit & Knight, 1997).

EAL international students' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds have affected pedagogical considerations and practices in the higher education sector of Western countries (Sidhu, 2006). The students' different levels of English proficiency and readiness with respect to academic skills required in Australian higher education have posed challenges of classroom participation (Strauss & Alice, 2007). Group discussion and logistics, in particular, have concerned the students and their local peers, as well as their teachers (Strauss & Alice, 2007; Sweeney, Weaven & Herington, 2008).

In this paper, I took the position that conversing with speakers of a target language can foster opportunity for language learners to improve oracy in the target language (Norton, 2000). Prior research in school contexts has shown that language learners may benefit from conversations and classroom discussions with peers in the target language (Miller, 2003; Toohey, 2000). However, chances to converse in the target language with more advanced speakers of that language are not always available (Miller, 2003; Toohey, 2000). The study I report here sought to address such dynamics in higher education.

Amongst other things, the study looked into EAL international students' seating and grouping choices for classroom activities. Specifically, I examined how EAL international students make decisions as to who to sit with in the classroom, and how they talk about these decisions with regard to their expectations of study in Australia. I begin this paper with a review of relevant literature on EAL international students in higher education and discussions on experiences of group work. Next, I present a theoretical framework drawing on the sociological concepts of Pierre Bourdieu; the background to the study; and the research methods by which my data were produced. I then provide analyses of narratives told by three EAL international students—two Malay-speaking undergraduates from Malaysia and one Chinese-speaking postgraduate from Taiwan. Finally, I close with discussion of contentions and dilemmas relating to the EAL international students' strategies, and make suggestions for pedagogical implications in language classrooms.

Literature review

For EAL international students, levels of English proficiency impact upon many aspects of their study and experiences in Australian higher education (Ahern, 2009; Doherty, Kettle, May &

Caukill, 2011). Academically, the students may be far less prepared than they had thought they were for the level of challenge involved in listening and speaking tasks in English-medium lectures (Doherty, et al., 2011). Some refer to lack of English proficiency as one of the major factors in their unsatisfactory classroom participation in Australian universities (Doherty & Singh, 2008). The challenge is exacerbated when oral English fluency is more salient than other skills in group work and classroom discussion (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009). Finally, many EAL international students may have overlooked what might be involved in learning through and about English in English-medium educational contexts (Koehne, 2006).

In addition to challenges involving English proficiency, many EAL international students are explicitly oriented to the manner of classroom participation demanded for better adaptation to university requirements (Kobayashi, 2003). Researching EAL international students in higher education in North America, Kobayashi (2003) stressed that support from other EAL group members in preparatory programs helps students to make sense of group work assessment. Kettle (2005) reported that it takes time for the EAL international student to feel comfortable using English to actively participate in classroom discussion. Still, EAL international students in higher education are viewed by some lecturers and peers as having limited or silent participation in classroom activities in higher education (Remedios, Clarke & Hawthorne, 2008). Further, the students are not necessarily welcomed by their local counterparts when groups are formed for collaborative assessment pieces (Strauss & Alice, 2007).

Socially, the EAL international student may encounter loneliness produced by cultural and linguistic differences in their daily interactions in broader university contexts in Australia (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2008). To help reduce the level of loneliness in the study abroad context, Sawir et al. (2008) advised universities to take action to create opportunities for EAL international students to build social connections with students of both international and domestic backgrounds. However, the body of research on EAL international students in higher education has typically lacked discussion over social aspects of classroom interactions, or how pedagogical activities and assessment practices such as group work and classroom discussion might contribute to building social relations and networks.

Research has shown that when learning about and through English, EAL international students in higher education negotiate

their sense of participation in English-medium pedagogical activities (Kettle, 2005; Koehne, 2006). Given time and support, these students may improve their English and engage in classroom discussion, at least to some extent (Kettle, 2005; Kobayashi, 2003; Koehne, 2006). Nonetheless, there has been little discussion as to how these students approach pedagogical activities with a view to improving English and building social relations with peers. To further understand these dynamics, I looked to Bourdieusian concepts that gave purchase on principles and limitations of students' strategies for making social contact and acquiring language proficiency.

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital are useful in explaining principles and limitations of strategies such as seating and grouping choices in higher education classrooms. I take the concept of field as a social space with sets of rules of the game, both explicit and implicit, whereby individuals struggle to acquire resources (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In these terms, I view the broad Australian university as a field in a Bourdieusian sense. In this field, nested and overlapping sub-fields are adjacent to each other (Luke, 2008). A university classroom is an example of a sub-field where a range of pedagogical and assessment activities are practiced. One such activity is group work, in which views are exchanged in both verbal and written forms by students for rewards, such as useful knowledge, recognition from peers and/or lecturers, or a grade. A successful exchange of rewards and resources is not guaranteed (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Different readings of social divisions such as ethnicities and who counts as a legitimate user of a language can hinder exchange and induce struggle for new entrants to a field (Luke, 2009).

In the field of an Australian university, explicit rules include those that are described and defined in manuals and protocols, such as the grading system. Lecturers need to follow these explicit rules when considering a grade. However, a grade is also affected by implicit rules, such as those that are inherent in expert readings of a particular discipline. These rules may not only be taken-for-granted, but also vary somewhat from teacher to teacher (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In a Bourdieusian sense, a field is also a social space where capital is defined, recognised, and exchanged (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Capital has varied forms and takes time to build

and to convert to other forms (Bourdieu, 1986). Capital needs to be recognised by members of a field to firstly have value and then a good exchange rate (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Cultural capital can be embodied in values, beliefs, tastes, and manners, and forms part of dispositions and orientations that orient individuals to act in a particular way (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986). School-related resources that help advantage students in their educational outcomes are another form of cultural capital (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). In education contexts, they are employed by students in order to seek other useful resources, for example an opportunity for language learners to use the target language (Miller, 2003; Norton, 2000; Toohey, 2000). For EAL international students in an English-medium education context, the opportunity to use and practice English can contribute to potential for accruing knowledge and other useful resources.

Building upon cultural capital, Curry (2008) discussed spatial and participation competences as embodied forms of capital, acquired through past educational trajectories. According to Curry (2008), spatial competence is demonstrated in the selection of seats and space by which students can gain greater access to teachers. For this paper, I extend the concept of spatial competence beyond teachers to access to knowledgeable peers who possess the capital valued in a given field. Participation competence is an understanding and awareness that can generate productive engagement with teachers and peers through participation in curricular practices (Curry, 2008). The competences can manifest in actions taken for the purpose of making a good start toward positive educational outcomes.

In this paper, I see spatial and participation competences as enabling EAL international students to make contact with, and create friendship with those who sit close by, and to engage in pedagogical activities and social events in Australian higher education. The competences are embodied in the action taken by the EAL international students to build social relations and to improve language proficiency. To be more specific, building social relations with peers may be part of the educative strategies by which an EAL international student accrues social capital, and with this access to other resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). However, not all social relations can be translated into social capital. That is, educative strategies can produce potential for positive outcomes, but cannot guarantee successful accrual (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In summary, in the field of an Australian university, EAL international students may apply the resources from their cultural and social trajectories to act in a smart way in a sub-field such as a classroom or even a group for the purposes of acquiring new resources and rewards to advantage their educational outcomes. This theoretical perspective gives purchase on how the students in my study made choices in seating and grouping arrangements and how they talked about those choices.

Method

The data presented in this paper came from a larger interview study that investigated how EAL international students talked about coming to belong in an Australian university. Semi-structured interviews were used to invite participants' accounts of experiences and their views on relatively broad topics relevant to the study. The semi-structured interview approach gave participants some control of what they might like to contribute in the interviewing process (Kvale, 1996; Silverman, 2005). To recruit participants, I gave a brief introduction to the research design at a large university orientation event. Over the course of the two-day orientation program, seventeen international students expressed interest in participation. These students came from nine countries, including Malaysia, Korea, Japan, China, and Taiwan, and all used English as an additional language. They were interviewed face-to-face for up to an hour at each of three points across first year—at the beginning of the first and second semesters, and at the end of the second semester. They were further contacted by email between interview sessions to update their experiences and to offer comments on these. English was used in interviews and emails with most participants, except when Chinese-speaking participants expressed a need to use Mandarin Chinese. The three-interview and email-update research design was created to capture possible change in views, feelings, and reflections over time.

As the sole researcher and interviewer, I acknowledge that my background as a Chinese-speaker from Taiwan, and a user of English as an additional language in Australia, might have both limitation and merit in the data generation process. My visible and linguistic qualities could have prompted participants to include me as part of 'us' in their talk around their classrooms and experiences. However, the pronoun 'us' was complicated in its references to exclude an absent third party or those with different

backgrounds. To mitigate possible implications of othering, I adopted a Bourdieusian theoretical frame, and a careful coding and analytical design to understand readings of the data. Nonetheless, my background had merit when participants felt comfortable talking about how they went through their early and sometimes difficult experiences as international students; it may also have helped build rapport with participants who were asked to commit to a three-time interview design.

I adopted a narrative approach to data analysis. Participants' accounts were coded, first of all, for the boundaries of narratives, those being orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda in Labov and Waletzky's terms (1967/1997). I looked for sections of data where participants talked about what went wrong—this being the complication; in what context—which field or sub-field; with whom; how they felt about these events—this being evaluation or the lesson learned; and what actions they took—this being the resolution. Data were then coded through theoretical concepts, such as capital, as in valued resources that had an effect on participants' lives and study. The coding processes helped locate patterns in the ways that participants reacted to new conditions, how they resolved their problems, and how they talked about their experiences and feelings.

Preferences for a seat and grouping arrangement emerged from participants' talk around their pedagogical activities in Australian higher education. The data selected in this paper were pertinent to how these arrangements affected social relations with peers. In the following, I discuss data relating to two Malay-speaking students, Siti and Fatima, and one Chinese-speaking student from Taiwan, Sandra M. (all names are pseudonyms).

Grouping with compatriot members or others

I begin with Siti's talk of an experience for an assessed group assignment. Siti was an undergraduate student from a nation-select cohort that had been sponsored by her country's government and her home university. Prior to study in an Australian university, she had preparatory foundation education in both home and host universities, including training on academic literacy. In Excerpt 1 below, she talked about a group project for a core unit, assessed up to a final grade.

Excerpt 1 (Siti, Interview 1, English language interview)

Orientation I have one group assignment here

- Complication but in this group it is all people from my own country. We don't mix with others due to the title we choose...
- Resolution It's a bit easy because all of us know each other very well so we can give our full cooperation,
- Evaluation but then the negative side maybe we don't really have a chance to work with Australians,
- Coda so we don't even know how they study, how they work in a group,
- Evaluation because if you work with your friends for group work, so it's not very different. Like in my country we did have a lot of group work,
- Coda so it's supposed to be our opportunity to work with Australian right, you know, like to get to know them better,
- Resolution but ... since we chose similar titles, so the lecturers give us the group.

According to Siti, members of her compatriot group could profit from each other's talent and skills to the fullest in the collaborative project. However, this was not ideal: she felt like she was losing an opportunity to work with domestic students. Grouping was viewed by Siti as a first step towards experiencing diversity as part of the on-campus experience for which she aspired as an international student in the broad field of an Australian university. This hope was also shared by several other international students in the larger interview study at the beginning of their first year experiences in Australia.

The compatriot group to which Siti belonged was a special case involving nation-select peers on government sponsorships. These students could mobilize a composite of talents and skills that Siti believed could enhance her group project. Also highlighted in the data was the view that working in this compatriot group could ease group work logistics in a new field of education in Australia. Nonetheless, the formation of such group was not a voluntary action on the part of Siti and her compatriots, but a result of the lecturer's pedagogical decisions. The point here is that pedagogical decisions, such as grouping arrangements, might have worked differently; they could have been used to create room for students to interact not just on academic terms, but also socially.

In contrast to Siti's compatriot group, I introduce Sandra M. who was taking a three-hour class that combined lecture and

tutorial components of a Master's course in Education. Sandra M. was a Chinese-speaking postgraduate student from Taiwan. The background of the following excerpt was the first tutorial of the semester. Six students were present, including Sandra M., another Chinese-speaking student from China, and four domestic students. In the data below, Sandra M. gave her views on one grouping experience for an assessed group presentation and written assignment.

Excerpt 2 (Sandra M., Interview 1, Translated)

Orientation I usually sit beside Asian students. I look for students with black hair, not necessarily Chinese, but Asians, like Japanese, Koreans, so that I would have a sense of security. Not knowing why, we tend to sit together and they [Australian students] sit together too. At that time, I would like to group with another female student from China,

Complication but the lecturer didn't seem to like to see us in the same group. We were also concerned about using too much Chinese at discussion.

Resolution It turned out that the other Chinese-speaking girl paired with one Australian local teacher, and I with another; as such, we formed different groups.

Interviewer: Did the lecturer make the decision?

Yes, my lecturer asked, 'Why don't you come here?' I agreed, so I went. The last group was two female students, both local teachers, who seemed unwilling to group with us—they, sitting adjacent to each other, initiated to pair up. Thus they avoided the lecturer's intervention. This made me uncomfortable.

Evaluation Now I am not worrying about not having teaching experience. My classmates, except the Chinese girl and myself, were all local teachers, who seemed to know about teaching.

In the excerpt, Sandra M. reported that she chose to sit with students who she believed shared her Asian backgrounds. She talked about worrying about not having teaching experience at the first lecture and tutorial. She was well aware that she might not use

much English when she sat next to her China counterpart. She stressed that she was to seek a sense of comfort in her first lectures and tutorials. This is a counter example to the classroom participation competence (Curry, 2008) by which Sandra M. avoided an opportunity for talk in English. Nonetheless, later the lecturer in the postgraduate course came to intervene and directed her to pair up with a local student. The pedagogical intervention reversed Sandra M.'s adherence to a familiar social pattern at that point and opened up new possibilities.

I take 'black hair' as Sandra M.'s term for students from Asian countries who use English as an additional language, but acknowledge that this term does not reflect demographic complexities in Australia and might have contested political connotations. Furthermore, while Sandra M. might be wrong in her reading of 'black hair' as a visible difference marking her ethnicity, the term 'black hair' indicates that she was aware of the possible 'reading' of the symbolic value that might be inherent in the differences (Luke, 2009). The symbolic value might work to project actual or potential possession of cultural capital, beneficial to her group assignment, such as English proficiency (Luke, 2009) and knowledge of the local teaching practice in Australia (Doherty, et al., 2011).

The uneasiness Sandra M. felt at her tutorial came in part from (i) her sense of visible differences, (ii) her novice status in the presence of a certified local teacher, and (iii) limited teaching experience. Nonetheless, the opportunity to pair with the local teacher which arose from the intervention of the lecturer, lessened Sandra M.'s uneasiness and fostered potential for networking with a local student and for using English more exclusively in the discussion. The lecturer's intervention acted to create a break in the seating routine that led to an opportunity for networking with domestic peers. It is shown that Sandra M., like the EAL international students in Kobayashi's paper (2003), came to participate in pair discussion with the support of a peer who might have relevant teaching knowledge.

In the cases of Sandra M. and Siti, grouping with compatriot students could prompt a sense of belonging to familiar patterns, like using the same language or having similar group experiences. At the same time, such grouping practices could also limit chances for diverse group work experiences and extending social networks. This is a dilemma that cannot be easily resolved by students. As Sawir et al. (2008) advised, it might be better for pedagogical

decisions to serve multiple purposes, including bonding peer students in the sub-field of an Australian university.

Seating outside of a compatriot cohort or not

To contrast grouping for assessed assignments, I talk about personal seating choices of Fatima, who was in the same nation-select cohort as Siti. In the following excerpt, Fatimah described a prolonged dilemma of breaking a seating routine with compatriot students at a tutorial.

Excerpt 3 (Fatimah, Interviews 1-2, English language interview)

Orientation we tend to sit in our own groups sometimes ... Usually this table [is] for this kind of students; this table for [that kind of] students. So whenever we go to the class, there is the seat for us.

Evaluation ... I don't think we really mix that much except for group discussion or when you are scrambled in class ... Sometimes it's good but sometimes it's better to mix with other people because you are in a new country and it's best to meet new people ... But sometimes it's good to be in our own group because we understand us and they [my compatriot cohort] accept us for where we are now.

Resolution And then right now I tend to mix up with Australians, other students. I don't usually sit with my cohort anymore ... Because I think in order to, like, talk to other Australians maybe it's quite good to practice first in tutorials, because in a small group I tend to have more courage to speak.

Evaluation So when I'm sitting with my [compatriot] cohort I don't have the opportunity to talk to Australians. So if I sit with Australians maybe sometimes we have pair work so I have more opportunity to talk with them... it's a good practice to talk English...

Resolution I'll be sitting [at a table] with the less people groups ... just the first days because the table is already full so I can't join that table anymore. So I tend to sit at ... other places. And then when the next weeks to come ... I don't really sit there [with my compatriot cohort] anymore.

Interviewer: Did that change your relationships with your friends?

Complication No, not really, but at first it feels quite weird because I keep sitting somewhere else...

- Resolution I said that at first ‘because the table is already full so I didn’t see that there’s a place there.’ But then when the weeks to come I said ‘Just it’s okay to mix with other students because our lecturer always said try to mix with other students also’
- Coda [Course coordinator] always say ‘Try to mix with other students, try to be friends with them, try to talk to them’ ... because different people have different things ...’

In this excerpt, Fatimah explained why she did not resume her routine to sit with her compatriot cohort and how she managed to maintain her relations with them. Although it was not her initial intent, Fatimah strategically utilized chances to sit with local students. This showed her awareness of spatial and participation competences (Curry, 2008), that is, choosing a space in a classroom that can enable accrual of capital through curricular and pedagogical interactions with teachers and knowledgeable others. Also, Fatimah made explicit her intention of practicing English with local students at the tutorial; she felt more comfortable there than in a large lecture hall. Her preference to talk and interact with local students was encouraged by lecturers.

For Fatimah, seating choices had the potential to broaden social networks, enhance English skills and enhance accrual of other capital. Nonetheless, this strategy put her existing social networks at some risk, as shown in her comment ‘it’s quite weird.’ This comment does not necessarily tell of any unsatisfactory consequences produced by removing herself from her compatriot group. Rather, the comment indicates that it took some effort and support to justify her actions in order to mitigate possible misunderstanding on the part of her compatriot friends.

In terms of breaking a seating routine, the case of Fatima as represented in Excerpt 3 was a special one. The prolonged consideration and careful explanation of her seating choices might have reflected the level of bonding among the nation-select cohort and Fatima’s concern not to risk losing existing relations and friendships. In contrast, in Excerpt 2 Sandra M., on meeting another Chinese-speaking student for the first time, was straightforward enough to act out her preference for choosing to sit with another new student. She did not mention much loss of existing social relations, possibly associated with her seating choices. Four months later, in the second interview session with Sandra M. again,

I wondered whether there were any differences in her interactions with her student peers and thus invited her to elaborate.

Excerpt 4 (Sandra M., Interview 2, Translated)

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|--------------|---|
| Orientation | I had more interactions with my Australian classmates in the unit I mentioned earlier [same unit in Excerpt 2] than other units in this semester. I felt this is because we had only six students in the class, a very small group ... |
| Evaluation | And I found them very friendly. In fact, only three of them are Australians. We usually had some chat, and they seemed to be interested in my culture. They asked me and the other Chinese-speaking student about my culture ... during break time ... they were keen to know about China and Chinese culture. I felt very good about this. |
| Complication | But I did not have much interaction with Australian classmates in other units. Not much life experience to share with them. There was no foreseeable reciprocity between them and myself. Nothing would prompt them to approach me. |
| Evaluation | I can't really say that they are not friendly. We are here for class, so making friends may not be a priority, perhaps! Anyway, communication is difficult ... because there is nothing in common in our lives. I can understand why they act like this. ... Perhaps it is like the Chinese saying 'You walk on your sunny path, and I go on my single-planked bridge.' (妳走你的陽關道；我過我的獨木橋。) That kind of feeling. So I do not feel anything in particular about this. |
| Coda | Anyway, I have good interactions with my Australian classmates in one unit. That is good enough for me to feel comfortable about having them around. I am happy to meet them there. |

According to Sandra M., some interactions were welcoming, so that she was happy about them, while other experiences were more pedestrian. She enjoyed the happy interactions she had in one unit; at the same time, she understood reasons for lack of such interactions with certain groups of students: she had 'Not much life experience to share with them. There was no foreseeable reciprocity between them and myself'. She also realised that 'making friends was not a priority' for the local students and 'communication was difficult'. In short, Sandra M. learnt that she

was taking a different route in terms of making social contact from that of her domestic counterparts.

Over time, Sandra M. adjusted her initial expectations of interactions with the domestic students. She came to realise there were reasons behind the nature of the interactions she experienced, that is, that some were more pleasant and others more limited. For example, she realised that she felt she did not have sufficient capital to enable exchange for social capital, and that there were different levels of interest in intercultural experience. Sandra M. was aware that she might need to offer something in reciprocal exchange, both potential and existent, in building and maintaining social relations. As a consequence, Sandra M. withdrew her effort from networking with domestic students, and gradually became more comfortable about what was on offer in terms of extending social relations.

In Excerpt 4, Sandra M. was shown to have given up on seeking some sense of belonging with someone of a background to which she could relate. The tutorial of which she talked remained a sub-field for an exchange of knowledge and discussion, and was less of a sub-field for social interactions and making friends. Although these students were positive about the support they had from other group members (Kobayashi, 2003), there was insufficient time or incentive for such social support to develop into social capital. Still, the welcoming interactions had created some positive experiences in Sandra M.'s life as an EAL international student in an Australia university.

Discussion

In this paper, I discussed considerations and effects of grouping and seating choices made by three EAL international students in an Australian university. Grouping and seating choices were employed as part of these students' strategies to seek chances of networking with their domestic counterparts. Though varied in its extent and direction, these students demonstrated their spatial and classroom participation competences (Curry, 2008). Nonetheless, these strategies were not necessarily successful; for the EAL international students who participated in the research: chances for enhancing oral English fluency through other peer students were relatively confined, and social interactions were limited in volume and capacity to create friendship. In Bourdieusian terms, these students' educative strategies had limitations in successfully accruing social capital.

The divisions between ‘Australian’ and ‘international EAL’ students that run through the data were made by the participants and were based on visible and noticeable characteristics of ‘other’ peers. As I noted earlier, the students’ readings of these characteristics were not necessarily accurate and could evoke questions about who counts as ‘Australian’. However, the data show how some of the cultural divisions the students made were adjusted over time given some experiences of diversity in the classroom. This is cause for reflection about the pedagogic significance of grouping and seating arrangements for prompting interactions across difference in diversified campus populations.

Possible pedagogical implications

In practical terms, this paper provides some insights into pedagogical practices involving large presence of compatriot students at lectures and tutorials. The concern is whether to intervene in grouping and seating arrangements and if so, how to optimize chances for language exchanges and extending social networks. Rather than committing to a certain grouping or seating pattern throughout, I would suggest that lecturers and tutors adopt pedagogical tasks that would allow variable selections of seats and group members in their design. The purpose is that the EAL international students can have some sense of belonging to their compatriot groups at some times, and can be challenged enough by new student peers of different linguistic and ethnic groups at others when necessary.

Specifically, to encourage diverse grouping among students throughout the semester, it is suggested that lecturers and tutors vary grouping selection patterns corresponding to the aims of assessment tasks. For classrooms where ample pair/group work discussion is required, a feasible member rotation and seating scheme can be mapped out systematically and purposefully across the semester. The point is not to divide compatriots or to force friendship through group work activities, but to foster optimal opportunities of extending social relations to likely peers.

I would also like to stress that the EAL international students’ grouping and seating choices can be personal and strategic, but outcomes of these choices can be easily affected by group dynamics and pedagogical decisions. These choices will further be affected by idiosyncrasies and varied levels of English proficiency among EAL international students. Nonetheless, particularly in language classrooms, linguistic and communicative tasks involving pair or

group participation are sub-fields that can assist EAL international students in developing their language skills through curricular and pedagogical designs, and that these sub-fields can also be helpful in providing opportunities for building social relations.

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