# Preparing NESB students for the interactional demands of mainstream group assessment projects

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## Abstract
For NESB (Non English Speaking Background) students, the adjustments required to study successfully at a tertiary institution are varied and taxing (Myles & Cheng, 2003). Probably the greatest difficulty they encounter is overcoming the lack of the appropriate linguistic and cultural knowledge needed for meaningful interaction both in and outside the mainstream classroom (Myles & Cheng, 2003; Zou, 1998). In this article, we review research at our university investigating the challenges facing this cohort and their lecturers. This research indicates that many of these students have great difficulty with oral communication in English and are uneasy about interacting in groups, particularly with their ESB (English Speaking Background) peers. Obviously, this difficulty impacts negatively on their participation in group assessment projects commonly used at our university. Many NESB students find it difficult to participate in the meetings which are an essential part of group projects and often feel sidelined or belittled particularly by their ESB counterparts. We discuss possible reasons for this state of affairs and make suggestions as to how EAP (English for Academic Purposes) lecturers can prepare NESB students to become more successful in their interaction in group projects.

## Introduction
Research at our university indicates that in an education climate where group work is strongly encouraged at university level, and where group projects are routinely used as assessment tools, the difficulties NESB students experience are a cause of growing concern. ESB students are understandably concerned that the presence of students who do not appear to be able to cope with the demands of group projects will negatively impact on their marks. Yet those of us who teach these NESB students know what an enormous contribution many of them are capable of making, and are indeed eager to make, to group projects. The best way, it would appear, to counter the resentments of ESB students and the unhappiness of their NESB counterparts is to encourage open communication. Unfortunately, the oral communication that takes place during the meetings for the group projects can sometimes exacerbate rather than ameliorate the problem.

## Initial study
While we were aware that group projects presented difficulties at our university (Strauss, 2001), the extent of the problem only became apparent during our initial study (Strauss & U, 2005) when we investigated the challenges facing NESB students and their lecturers in mainstream classes at our university. These findings led to our work on group projects.

### Participants
In the initial study, lecturers in all faculties at the university were emailed information about the proposed study and invited to participate. Those who accepted the invitation were asked if we could have access to their classes. Ethical consent for the studies

described in this article was obtained from the university's ethics committee. The project was explained to students in these classes and they, in turn, were invited to participate. The lecturers in the initial study had a wide range of tertiary teaching experience and represented disciplines in the Faculties of Arts, Science and Engineering, Business and Health (Table 1). The students were enrolled in first year degree programmes in the faculties across the university and were from diverse language and cultural backgrounds. (Table 2).

## Table 1: Lecturers' Profiles

| Number of lecturers | Faculty | ESB lecturers | NESB lecturers | Experience in tertiary teaching | Number of NESB students in classes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **21** M = 8 F = 13 | Business – 10 Arts - 7 Health - 2 Science and Engineering - 2 | 16 | 5 | 3 – 24 years | 20% - 50% |

## Table 2: Students' Profiles

| Number of students | Residency Status | Faculty | Ethnicity | Educational Background | Entry Level | Most difficult language skills |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **24** M = 16 F = 8 | Int. – 10 PR – 10 NZ citizen - 4 (time in NZ: 1 mth -10 yrs) | Sc. & Eng. – 11 Business – 10 Arts – 3 | Chinese – 13 Indian – 3 Philipino – 1 Singaporean – 1 Tongan – 1 Samoan – 1 Iranian -1 Iraqi – 1 Russian – 1 Tahitian – 1 | Masters (overseas) - 2 Bachelor (overseas) – 6 High Sch. (overseas) – 8 High Sch. (NZ) – 6 | IELTS – 14 Bursary - 6 RPL - 2 | Speaking -11 Writing – 8 Listening – 3 Reading and Terminology - 2 |

The study employed a qualitative descriptive design (Sandelowski, 2000 ) and involved semi-structured interviews with the lecturers and students. This approach allowed us to ask the questions in the same way of each interviewee but at the same time granted us the latitude to alter the sequence of the questions and investigate certain issues that appeared to be of importance to the interviewees more deeply (Robson, 2002). The face-to-face interviews, where lecturers and students were asked to comment on their experiences in multicultural classrooms (Table 3 and 4) lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours each. The questions for the interviews were based on our reading of, and reflecting on, the literature, discussions with our colleagues and informal conversations with small groups of students.

**Table 3: Interview Questions – Lecturers**

| |
|---|
| **General:**<br>1. Faculty<br>2. Tertiary teaching experience<br>3. Number of NESB and ESB students in class |
| **Specific:**<br>1. Challenges in teaching multi-cultural classes<br>2. Positive/Negative effects on students/staff<br>3. Approach and strategies used in multi-cultural classes<br>4. Support from university<br>8. Other comments |

**Table 4: Interview Questions - Students**

| |
|---|
| **General:**<br>1. Faculty<br>2. Nationality<br>3. Time in New Zealand |
| **Specific:**<br>3. Challenges and experience in mainstream studies<br>4. Approach and strategies used for studies<br>5. Support from university and lecturers<br>6. Other comments |

The interview transcripts were returned to the lecturers and the students to check for accuracy and to verify that they were willing to allow the information to be used in our research. The transcripts were then read by both researchers and analysed independently after which the findings were compared. This method is referred to by Patton (1990, p. 464) as "analyst triangulating". This analysis allowed us to explore others' and our own assumptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

**Findings in initial study**

The findings from the initial interviews with the lecturers and students identified a number of areas of interest.

*Lecturers*

The lecturers identified as problematic:

- the English language proficiency levels of NESB students in their classes
- the challenges encountered in the delivery of lectures. Many argued that it was very difficult to pace the lectures in such a way that NESB students would be able to follow, while at the same time, as one lecturer put it "not bore the pants off" the ESB students
- the lack of institutional support for lecturers already carrying heavy workloads who were expected to cope with the needs of the large numbers of NESB students in their classes.

However, the area which seemed to be the major concern for the lecturers was the

uncertainty surrounding the use of group assessments in multicultural classes.

### Students

It is interesting to note that in the student group we interviewed, more students identified speaking English (see Table 4) as their greatest concern than any other. This was supported by the fact that these students identified interacting with staff and other students, especially ESB students, as problematic. They were not comfortable in class debates and discussions, preferring to remain silent in case they revealed their language difficulties and their lack of familiarity with the topics under discussion. Clearly, their major concern was oral interaction. In addition, we became aware, anecdotally, of mounting student unease regarding group assessments. A short article in the university's student magazine headed "10 things that are suckful at AUT and some ways to deal with it" listed group assessments in the top ten. The article asked:

> "Why do we have to put up with this at a university? It's not like the real world makes you do this sort of stuff. You just know you will get grouped with some Muppets who do nothing and get credit for your hard work. Dob them in to your lecturer. You know you want to" (debate Issue 4, 2004, p.4).

### Follow-up study

It was apparent that group assessment was a major area of concern for both lecturers and students. Therefore, a follow-up study to investigate these concerns was undertaken.

### Participants

Follow-up interviews were conducted with those lecturers in the initial study who used group assessments routinely. We did, however, decide that we would not attempt to contact those students who had taken part in the initial interviews as we argued that they might well feel "over-researched". In addition, we wanted, if possible, to get at least some insight into the perspectives of ESB students. It was decided that focus group interviews would be employed for the students because in the individual interviews, some of the students appeared very shy and were reluctant to express their views openly. We hoped that they might respond better if they were not alone. Krueger and Casey note (2000, p.11) "Focus group presents a more natural environment than that of individuals interview because the participants are influencing and influenced by others just as they are in life". The university library has rooms set apart for group projects and one of the researchers, over a period of a few weeks, approached the students working in these rooms and asked for volunteers. Those who emailed that they were willing to participate in the interviews were assigned to focus groups according to which meeting time best suited them. (Table 5 and 6).

**Table 5: Focus Group Students' Profiles**

| Number of students | Residency Status | Time in New Zealand (NESB students) | Ethnicity | Faculty |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **14**<br><br>M = 4<br>F = 10 | International – 4<br>PR – 6<br>NZ citizen – 4 | 1 yr – 5.5 yrs | Sri Lankan – 1<br>Chinese – 6<br>Indian - 1<br>Thai - 1<br>Samoan – 1<br>Malaysian – 1<br>Russian – 1<br>NZ European - 2 | Business – 8<br>Design &<br>Creative<br>Technologies –1<br>Applied<br>Humanities - 5 |

**Table 6: Interview Questions – Focus Groups**

| |
|---|
| **General:**<br>1. Faculty<br>2. Time in New Zealand<br>3. NESB/ESB<br>4. Ethnicity |
| **Specific:**<br>1. Group selection<br>2. Group interaction<br>3. Process<br>4. Likes and dislikes regarding group assessments<br>5. Other comments |

## Findings in follow-up study

### *Lecturers*

The lecturers found that there was much to recommend group assessment practices arguing that such practices prepared students for the work environment by developing and enhancing the social skills needed for interaction in a multicultural society. However, a number had reservations as to whether the negative aspect of the practice did not outweigh its undeniable advantages and even those who strongly favoured this approach were well aware of the challenges of successful implementation. The lecturers raised a number of challenges they faced in successfully implementing group assessments.

### *Group selection*

Lecturers felt that all methods of selection had drawbacks and were concerned about the implications. Lecturer selection meant that the lecturer accepted responsibility for the composition of the groups. While some saw it as an ideal opportunity to encourage intercultural exchanges and an ideal opportunity for NESB students to improve their English, others were uneasily aware of the resentment many first language students harboured towards this practice. Even those first language students who were willing to work with their NESB counterparts were often uncertain as to how to do so. As one lecturer noted, "they don't know how to simplify their language, they don't now how to make points clear, so they just say it again, they say it louder,

they say it slower but they say the same thing". There was a real concern that students, both ESB and NESB, might be placed in groups where they might not be welcome or where they would be disadvantaged because of such placement.

Random selection could have the same result and while self selection appeared to be the method most favoured by students, this did not appear to encourage cultural mixing and raised concern over what lecturers termed "the leftovers" who were not welcome in any of the groups.

*Equity and reliability*
While lectures were concerned about group selection, the fairness and reliability of group assessment was perceived to be the real Achilles heel of the process. There was a perception that some students were progressing through their degree studies "on the back of somebody else".

*Group interaction*
Lecturers indicated that differing levels of English language competence and different interpretations of group work often led to tension and unhappiness. They were aware of the resentment many ESB students harbour towards projects which involve group members from different language and ethnic groups. One noted that groups were unwilling to accept students they felt might jeopardise their chances of a good mark and added that NESB students were especially vulnerable to this discrimination.

**Students**
The intensity of the emotions displayed in the focus groups, particularly by the NESB students, was quite worrying. One student thanked us at the end of the interviews for allowing her to share her feelings of inadequacy and helplessness.

Like the lecturers, the focus group students found much to be said for the implementation of group projects. They felt that these projects offered students an opportunity to engage with peers from different backgrounds. This variety often led to stimulating exchanges of ideas. Group presentations are widely used in group projects and are far more popular than individual presentations because the former relieved individuals of much of the pressure associated with this very public form of evaluation. They also felt that these projects encouraged the development of skills such as time management and the ability to negotiate and resolve differences and conflict. However, despite their very real appreciation of the benefits associated with group projects, the majority of the students in the focus groups were either indifferent towards their implementation or actively disliked being compelled to take part in this type of assessment. They raised a number of issues in this regard:

*Group process*
The idea that the process was unfair and out of their control was expressed regularly and at times, with a great deal of emotion. The students resented having group members who did not contribute or contributed only minimally to the project but were still rewarded with a good mark. They felt that there was a need for group rules and it was argued that lecturers should have greater knowledge of the workings of the group and reward students according to their input. This feeling was summarised by one student who likened group assessment to gambling. Although some students had reported recalcitrant group members to lecturers, the majority appeared to believe that such behaviour was "like telling tales".

*Group interaction*

Although some issues in this regard are not influenced by linguistic or cultural differences, it appears fair to say that the majority of students felt that these differences did at times present difficulties. In one focus group, the issue whether it was impolite to talk to group members in a language that excluded others in the group was hotly debated without resolution. Students whose first language is English felt that they were often forced into leadership roles in cross-cultural groups because of their fluency in English and resented having the role thrust upon them. They were equally resentful of NESB students' expectations that ESB students would help them with their language difficulties. In turn, the NESB students felt that domestic students did not show them any respect and often ignored their attempts to contribute to the group. A number of young female NESB students complained of unkind teasing and said that their accents were mimicked and their language errors derided. Such behaviour inhibited their participation in the group. The NESB students also said that their ESB group members would not take directions from them.

*Logistics of group projects*

Students felt that the logistical problems of group projects were underestimated by lecturers. They complained that there were too many assignments and that the assignments were often poorly spaced with the result that it was very difficult to find meeting times that suited all group members. Students also felt that the necessity of contacting other group members, many of whom only had mobile phones made communication expensive. There was also resentment that they would often have to come to university only to attend group meetings and this meant that they incurred extra transport costs.

**Discussion of findings of follow-up study**

Many of the issues which cause resentment and unhappiness are beyond our control as EAP lecturers and we can merely alert discipline lecturers to their presence. However, we argue that careful preparation of NESB students in EAP classes could better equip them to deal with some of the challenges involved in these group projects, particularly those involving participation in group meetings.

The concerns that emerged from the findings are not peculiar to our university. The group work process is "a set of values that encourages behaviours such as listening and constructively responding to points of view expressed by others, giving others the benefit of the doubt, providing support to those who need it, and recognising the interests and achievements of others" (Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy & Ramsey, 2002, p.116). The linguistic challenges that NESB students face in this regard have been well documented (Dooey & Oliver, 2002; Bartlett, 2000; Coley,1999; Aspland & O'Donoghue, 1994). Many appear to lack the relatively sophisticated command of language which would enable them to engage successfully in the group process. In this minefield, it would appear that both lecturers and students need to be well equipped to deal with problematic situations that may arise. Unfortunately, as Baldwin et al. (1997, p.1393) point out, as far as student peer interaction is concerned, so little is known that "any recommendations made to date really constitute wishful thinking more than empirically supported prescriptions".

Our focus on interactional issues in the group meetings led us to scrutinise the complaints of the NESB students closely. The issues on which we feel we need to

focus more closely concern the breakdown in oral interaction between members of the groups during group sessions. This breakdown appears to be quite often linked to linguistic and cultural issues. Two crucial issues that appeared to be a stumbling block to communication in multicultural groups, and where we felt discussion in the EAP classroom might prove valuable, was the perception of a number of NESB students that they were being teased and made the butt of unkind jokes and that their contributions were sidelined or belittled.

*Joking and teasing*
This issue is not an easy one to deal with. Our interviews with lecturers confirmed that they were aware of the unhappiness in some groups and that a certain amount of discrimination took place against those students perceived as " muppets". In such a case, NESB students should be encouraged to seek help from their lecturers. However, in our communication with these students, the suspicion grew that at least some of this "unkind teasing" was, in fact, a somewhat clumsy attempt on the part of ESB students to establish more friendly relations in the group.

Often teasing is a way of showing acceptance of someone. Davies (2003) notes that Brown and Levinson classified jokes under positive politeness strategies as they are oriented towards solidarity and affiliation through establishing common ground. However, she argues that "different norms exist for appropriate contexts of joking" (p. 1369). In other words, what one culture might interpret as a friendly overture might be seen by members of another as rudeness. Davies points out (2003, p.1362) that "collaborative joking interaction is also arguably the most complex form of communication that we engage in routinely; this situation is also the most 'situated' in its interpretation". Full participation in joking with native speakers "requires a high level of communicative competence" (2003, p.1363).

NESB students need to reflect on what is culturally appropriate joking behaviour in their own culture and how this differs or is reflected in the host culture. Unfortunately, this reflection is complicated by students' problems with language. One of the concerns raised by both NESB students and the lecturers was the linguistic difficulties they experience. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to suppose that they might struggle to make sense of "the most complex form of communication that we engage in routinely". It is very difficult for NESB speakers to evaluate what is good- natured teasing aimed at promoting feelings of solidarity and inclusion, and what is prompted by a desire to exclude and marginalise.

The strategy many NESB speakers appear to employ is withdrawal from their first language counterparts. They will form groups with students of their own language and cultural backgrounds and if they are forced to mix with native speakers, will remain silent, refusing even to speak to group members from their own country. Such strategies are clearly counter-productive and if the ESB students meant well, they might well feel rebuffed and disinclined to repeat the friendly overture. If the teasing was aimed at excluding or marginalising NESB students, their withdrawal rewards the unkind behaviour.

While arguing for this sensitising of NESB students, we do not wish to imply that there is no onus on ESB students to reciprocate in this regard. Clearly, ESB students must also accept responsibility for the breakdown in communication in group

projects, perhaps even more than their NESB peers, as the situation is far easier for them. We feel that these issues should be discussed with ESB students, and have highlighted our concerns to discipline lecturers. Unfortunately, in our positions as EAP lecturers, we have no ESB students in our classes and there is limited interaction with them in other spheres.

*Asserting themselves*
An inability to assert themselves in a cross-cultural groupwork situation was another of the issues raised by the NESB students in our focus groups. They complained of being sidelined and ignored even if they had both ideas and knowledge to contribute. Again, our interaction with lecturers and literature in this area indicate that there is support for this contention. Leki (2001, p.60) argues that ESB students might position themselves as "experts, masters or at least the more senior members of the community or practice" and view the NESB students as "novices, incompetents or apprentices". This can happen even before groups are formed and can result in some students "being tacitly bypassed in group formation" (Leki, 2001, p. 48). The obvious result is that NESB students' contributions will be sidelined or undervalued (Strauss, 2001).

Research also indicates that imputed expertise can clearly affect group members' perceptions and behaviour. External status characteristics are used by group members to form initial expectations about the relative competencies of other members of the group (Karakowsky & McBey, 2001; Ledwith & Lee 1998). An ESB student in the study by Ledwith and Lee (1998, p.115) said, "They (NESB students) could be super-intelligent in their own country … but it doesn't come across, so we just think 'they don 't know what they are talking about' sort of thing". Carrier (1999) points out that a student's native culture might define status relationships in such a way that the student finds it very difficult to question or make requests. Often they will wait for some indication that their contributions will be treated seriously before they enter into dialogue with the other group members.

**Implications for the EAP lecturer**
As indicated earlier, many of these issues are beyond the power of the EAP lecturer to address but we believe that the lecturer can make a difference and better prepare students not only for the socio-cultural and linguistic challenges they will face in group work but also the psychological challenges they will encounter. In particular, we believe we have a role to play in preparing students for the informal interaction they will encounter in the group meetings.

*Raising awareness of issues in group meetings*
One of the important issues that an EAP lecturer can raise with NESB students is their willingness to communicate in a second language. A number of students in the focus groups commented that NESB group members quite often took no part in group proceedings even when they were explicitly invited to comment. This unwillingness to participate appeared to annoy not only their ESB counterparts but other NESB students as well.

Kang (2005) investigated NESB students' willingness to communicate in a conversation partner programme at a state university in the United States. Although the group work in which our students are involved does not fall into the same category, many of the points that Kang makes are of relevance in cross cultural group

dialogue. Kang (2005, p. 291) defines a willingness to communicate as "an individual's volitional inclination towards actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation". The author argued that this willingness to communicate appears to be strongly influenced by the psychological conditions of excitement, responsibility and security. Security was defined as "feeling safe from the fears that non-native speakers tend to have in L2 communication" (2005, p. 282) and appears to be linked with concerns about loss of face. Interestingly, according to Kang, NESB students' reluctance to speak was greater in front of other NESB speakers who were more fluent than they were. This might account for the silence of NESB students when some of the members in their groups shared the same language and cultural background as they did. Feelings of security were also influenced by group size – the larger the group, the more threatening it was perceived to be.

The topic under discussion was also a factor. If it was one with which NESB students were unfamiliar, they appeared to be uneasy in the discussions. Conversely, students were more eager to participate in conversations where they felt they were well-informed. They also took time to warm up to the topic preferring to listen and observe in the early stages of the conversation. This participation led to feelings of excitement which Kang defines as "a feeling of elation about the act of talking" (2005, p. 284) was aroused by topics that interested them and in which fellow group members took an interest. Kang suggests a number of ways in which these non-participating NESB students can be helped to help themselves. Undoubtedly, they need to be well-prepared for group discussions and enthusiastic about the group project. This knowledge and enthusiasm will go a long way to giving them the confidence they need to participate in the group dialogue. As taking part in the early stages of the discussion might be very stressful, a student could indicate his/her interest and then allow a time of observation before entering the discussion.

These suggestions for EAP lecturers can be viewed as background information – suggestions that might facilitate NESB students' participation in group projects in mainstream classes. Khurie (2004) notes that recommendations to improve inter-group contact include intervention on an emotional level, helping people become aware of their negative emotions and helping them believe that they might succeed in these interactions. In an article discussing Chinese students' reluctance to participate in oral English classes Liu (2005, p.14) observes that many of these students "seemed to be helpless about being reticent" and argues that these students should be "aware of and acknowledge the existence of this reticence" if they are to develop strategies to deal with it. Important as it is, however, that NESB students are helped to acknowledge and develop insight into these difficulties, there is more assistance that EAP lecturers can offer.

*Devising strategies to meet the interactional demands of group meetings*
There has been a sudden growth in the number of studies that examine language learners' pragmatic competence in the target language (Koike & Pearson, 2005). Rose (2005) posed three questions in a recent paper asking whether:
- it was possible to teach targeted pragmatic features
- instruction in the target feature was more effective than no instruction
- different teaching approaches were differentially effective

He found that that the research provides "ample evidence" (2005, p.392) indicating the teachability of pragmatic features; that instruction is more effective than exposure alone in the learning of pragmatics and while not resolving the issue as to whether differing teaching approaches were more effective, found that research in this area provides "considerable support for the value of explicit instruction" (2005, p.396). Suggestions include role play, the use of videos, identification of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" responses within a variety of contexts, and bringing ESB speakers in to the classroom to interact with the NESB students.

EAP lecturers could highlight challenges that might arise when NESB students are engaged in group discussions. Role play could be used to simulate potentially fraught interactions that might arise in these groups, and students could be afforded opportunities to rehearse how they would deal with remarks they found belittling or behaviour that seemed to sideline them. If it was appropriate, students could describe how they would behave in similar situations in their own cultures and compare this with accepted behaviour in the host country. Greater understanding of acceptable communicative practices in the host culture might help NESB students to reach a better understanding of their ESB peers in mainstream classes.

**Future research**
Aspland (1999, p. 37) notes that each NESB student is "required to undergo a process of transformation that is fraught with dilemmas and contestations which are difficult to resolve, particularly in isolation". We acknowledge that if the interactions are to be successful, more is needed from both sides. Not only must NESB students attempt to come to terms with communicative practices in the host country but ESB students must also be encouraged to examine their own communicative practices and develop a greater sensitivity towards their peers who have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

However, as EAP lecturers, we can only encourage our counterparts in other departments to encourage this self–examination. We are acutely aware that this is insufficient and are currently involved in further research which we hope will better inform group assessment practices at our university. The students whose opinions are cited in this article volunteered for the focus groups and, very possibly, did so because they felt strongly about group projects. We feel that it is desirable that we have a more comprehensive overview of the opinions of both student cohorts as to the advantages and disadvantages of group projects. We are currently involved in research that investigates the opinions and perceptions of over two hundred students in two faculties at our university. Using questionnaires, we are tracking their insights over a semester of group projects. We hope that the findings of this larger research project will inform group assessment practices at the university and assist us as EAP lecturers to alleviate the "general powerlessness of the language learner in a world of native speakers" Davies (2003, p. 1382).

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