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## **One Big Happy Family? An Investigation into Students' Perceptions of Group Dynamics on an MA TESOL Program**

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### **Abstract**

This study addresses the perceptions of a cohort of MA TESOL students regarding the evolution of group dynamics among them. Group dynamics refers here to the learner group's internal characteristics and its evolution over time, which affect the learning and teaching process (Dörnyei and Murphy 2003). Two sets of open-ended questionnaires were administered to each member of the group (20 participants in total) to gather data, one at the beginning of the first term and one at the end. At the beginning of the term, the participants were asked to answer questions about some of the factors which potentially influence group dynamics. At the end of the term, they were invited to reflect and report on any changes in their views and any developments in the group dynamics of their cohort from their perspective. Using a grounded theory approach, the data from the two sets of the questionnaires were analyzed. The findings of the study contribute to observations and ideas within the academic field of language group dynamics and also importantly extend them in relation to the specific and unique MA TESOL context.

**Keywords:** TESOL; TESOL classroom dynamics; student perceptions, intercultural dynamics; intercultural competence

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### **1. Introduction**

The present study focuses on a group of international postgraduate students' perceptions of the classroom dynamics. 'Group' refers here to the single MA TESOL cohort at a specific phase of the program under study, namely the 'postgraduate certificate stage'. The cohort had enrolled on a one-year MA TESOL program at a UK university, which consisted of three stages. The first stage, i.e. the postgraduate certificate stage, comprised three core modules on principles of English language teaching, linguistics and English language teaching practice. The student cohort consisted of both experienced teachers of English and students with no prior teaching experience. Whilst the aim of the MA program was to equip students with the knowledge and skills required to teach English to speakers of other languages, the majority of students were themselves learners of English as an L2, and therefore had the additional goal of improving their own English language skills.

A great deal of attention has been paid to the individual learner in the language classroom, whilst the social dimension of language learning has in comparison been somewhat neglected (Ushioda 2003). Senior (1997), looking at the perceptions of experienced English language teachers regarding the nature of 'good' English language classes, observed that "language teachers appear happier and more comfortable when they find themselves teaching friendly classes where the students have formed bonds with one another and work well together" (p.6). This triggered our interest in undertaking the present study and like others before us, such as Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) and Chang (2010), we found ourselves asking why two different classes often respond in completely

different ways to the same teacher and the same materials; why one group gets along well and another sends out uncomfortable feelings; why one is a pleasure to teach and another quite the opposite. It is naturally much more agreeable from the teacher's point of view if the classroom atmosphere is positive and supportive, and as a teacher, it is undoubtedly hard to teach a group that is not 'on your side'. But does it matter to the students? Or is it of more concern to the teacher? In the present study we chose to explore the students' perspective on group dynamics; to investigate from their point of view what constitutes a good group and what factors influence group dynamics in general, as well as the dynamics of their own group. We also wanted to find out whether the students would perceive any development in the dynamics from the beginning to the end of the first phase, i.e. the postgraduate certificate stage, of their Master's program. As Dörnyei (2014) puts it, an awareness of group dynamics can reduce the threat of classroom events to the teacher and help her/him to manage the class more efficiently. This in turn, according to Dörnyei (2014), can help the teacher to facilitate the development of cohesive, creative and well-balanced groups, which has an impact on the students' motivations. Moreover, the literature on the students' perspectives on TESOL classroom dynamics is scant. The present study is an attempt to fill in this gap in the literature as well.

In the following section, the literature relevant to the present study is reviewed. As the researched here are an adult group, the review below includes the literature mainly, but not merely, referring to adults.

## **2. Literature Review**

Schmuck and Schmuck (2001) have observed how "classrooms have a hidden world" (p. 115) and Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) refer to the 'invisible classroom', conveying the idea that there are socio-psychological forces operating behind the scenes that determine the whole atmosphere and chemistry of the group. Central to this group atmosphere and chemistry is the group's cohesiveness, which Dörnyei (2014) defines as "the strength of the relationships linking group members to one another and to the group itself" (p. 527). While a lack of cohesiveness can be detrimental to a group's dynamics, it should not be forgotten that cohesiveness can sometimes be negative too. Dörnyei (2014) stresses the former aspect of cohesiveness by saying that "the motivational significance of a cohesive classroom becomes obvious if we consider its opposite, a classroom with cliques and a lack of proper communication among students" (p. 527). Ushioda (2003), however, draws attention to the negative effects of "peer group influences and classroom counter-cultures" and points out how these can end up in collective demotivation and collective disaffection (p. 94).

Several studies have looked at the relationship between group cohesiveness and student motivation (see Chang 2010; Dörnyei 2014), group productivity and performance (see Mullen and Copper 1994; Ehrman and Dörnyei 1998) or learners' autonomous beliefs and behaviours (see Chang 2007). However, there is a paucity of the literature on the evolution of language students' ideas and perceptions regarding groups in general and MA TESOL groups in particular. At the same time, we should not ignore the influence of group dynamics on the learning process altogether. As Ushioda (2003: 90) points out, learning is tightly bound up with the learners' relationships with their teacher and fellow-learners. Hence, the present study intends to look into the processes of classroom dynamics from a student perspective.

One of the factors influencing the dynamics of the group is the teacher. As Dörnyei (2014) puts it, the teacher does have a role in the classroom climate because “friendly and supportive behaviour by the teacher is infectious, and students are likely to follow suit” (p. 528). We hoped, therefore, to elicit the student participants’ views on the role of the teacher indirectly, as we were particularly interested in exploring the students’ own preferences concerning teaching styles and whether their views would change in the course of the semester, through being part of a particular group and through perhaps experiencing different teaching styles and a variety of classroom situations. Various taxonomies have been presented in the literature to help understand leadership in educational contexts, one of these being autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire leadership (Ehrman and Dörnyei 1998: 159). According to this model, the autocratic, or authoritarian, leader makes almost all the decisions and does not allow input from the group members. Democratic leaders, on the other hand, allow the members to take responsibility for their own growth and development, rather than dictating to them. Under laissez-faire leadership, ‘anything goes’ and the leader exercises no authority. The group members are given complete freedom in their decision making and are not given any guidance from the leader, unless they request this. Lewin and Lippitt (1938) found that the three leadership styles led to distinct differences in student behaviours. They judged the effectiveness of the leadership styles according to the resultant productivity and the emotional climate of the group. The laissez-faire leadership style was least effective in both cases. The democratic leadership led to a more positive emotional climate, but productivity was greater under the autocratic leadership.

Experiences of different leadership styles and ideas regarding what constitutes good leadership, as well as what constitutes a good group, are likely to vary from one culture to another. The international composition of the group should therefore not be overlooked in the present study (see the ‘Method of the Study’ and ‘Discussions’ sections below).

It has also been observed that students from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds bring different cultural norms and expectations to the classroom. They have been socialised into ‘cultures of learning’, based on the educational and cultural traditions of their own societies. In this regard, Dogancay-Aktuna (2005) writes that students’ behaviour in the language classrooms is affected by their expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about learning and teaching as well as how language learning and teaching are influenced by the nature and purpose of education. A study by Ho and Crookall (1995) on the influence of Chinese cultural traits in the language classroom shows that certain traditions and characteristics of the Chinese students seem to be a hindrance to the promotion of autonomy in the classroom and investigated ways of confronting this problem. Likewise, Schmuck and Schmuck (2001) mention that classroom groups are affected by the students’ past experiences in school and that the skill levels of students who have had authoritarian teachers are different from students who have experienced cooperative and collaborative group work.

It is therefore worth considering possible influences of cultures and traditions on classroom dynamics and on students’ perceptions of the dynamics. For the findings and further discussions on this, see ‘Group as a Family’ in the ‘Discussions’ section below.

Given the above literature review and the paucity of the literature on the evolution of TESOL students’ ideas and perceptions regarding groups in general and MA TESOL groups in particular, the present study looks into how group dynamics evolve in an MA TESOL cohort and what changes and

developments happen in the group dynamics of the cohort over time from the students' points of view.

### **3. Method of the Study**

Since we intended to explore the perceptions of a cohort of MA TESOL students regarding the evolution of group dynamics among them, an interpretivist qualitative paradigm seemed a suitable approach to the study for the following reasons.

Ontologically and epistemologically, we believe various and different explanations and interpretations are possible for any human behaviour and educational phenomenon. In other words, we consider reality to be subjective, constructed, multiple and diverse (Cohen et al. 2011; Heighman and Croker 2009). We would like to see how individuals experience and interpret the world around them (Bryman 2008). We contend that human beings, as opposed to inanimate objects, can interpret the environment and themselves and these interpretations vary across times and places (Bryman 2008; Heighman and Croker 2009; Vine 2009). We believe theory is emergent and arises from particular contexts rather than preceding research (Cohen et al. 2011: 18; Bryman 2008: 373).

As far as the nature of the research topic is concerned, our research questions start with a how and a what (see the above section). In fact, we would like to describe what is going on from the student participants' viewpoints. In other words, we do not look for a comparison of groups (e.g., Is Group 1 better at something than Group 2) or a relationship between variables with the intent of establishing an association, correlation or cause-effect relationship. The emphasis within our research topic is on description, exploration and gaining insight rather than experiment and the mathematical treatment of a phenomenon (Heighman and Croker 2009).

#### **3.1 Participants**

20 participants representing seven different language backgrounds, namely Chinese, Arabic, Korean, French, Polish, English and Urdu, participated in this study. 9 of the participants were Chinese, 5 Libyan, 1 Iraqi, 1 South Korean, 1 Belgian, 1 Polish, 1 British of Indian ethnicity and 1 was Pakistani. 19 of the participants spoke English as a second language and 1 spoke it as her first language. 6 of the participants were male and 14 were female. The age range of the participants was from 22 to 50. All of the participants had a first degree, a minimum IELTS band score of 6.5 (except for the student whose first language was English) and had enrolled on the MA TESOL Program starting September 2010. The following table succinctly illustrates the nationalities, first languages, age ranges and genders of the participants.

**Table 1. Nationalities, L1s, age ranges and genders of the participants**

Nationality	Chinese	Libyan	Iraqi	South Korean	Belgian	Polish	British	Pakistani
Number	9	5	1	1	1	1	1	1
L1	Chinese	Arabic	Arabic	Korean	French	Polish	English	Urdu
Age	22-30	22-50	33	25	40	28	24	44
Gender	7 females and 2 males	3 females and 2 males	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male

The fact that this cohort was the only group of MA TESOL students accessible to the researchers and the only available one at the time of the research (the sample and population were the same here, i.e., 20 students) shows that we have adopted a kind of convenience sampling approach to the selection of the participants. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where participants are selected due to their convenient accessibility to the researcher. Nazari and Allahyar (2012), drawing on Ellen (1984) and Stake (1995 & 2000), argue that the accessibility of the researched is advantageous, as too little can be learnt from less accessible and less hospitable participants.

### 3.2 Materials and Procedures

Two open-ended questionnaires were prepared and administered to the participants (see Appendix A and B for a copy of the questionnaires). Each questionnaire consisted of 13 open-ended questions. The questionnaires were prepared based on a literature review, Internet search and the experiences of the researchers.

For example, question 2 (What do you think makes a not so good group?) in our questionnaire was adopted and adapted from a question by Dornyei and Murphy (2003) in their book *'Group Dynamics in Language Classroom'*, i.e. "Do you remember something about the bad group?" (p. 4). As another example, question 3 (How do you feel at the beginning of this course?) in our questionnaire was adopted and adapted from a question in the same book, i.e. imagine you are going to start a new course, "how do you feel and what are you thinking?" (p. 14).

The Internet search helped us with formulating questions such as question 5 (How do you find the classroom climate?) and question 6 (Have you experienced any conflicts in your class at the beginning of the term?) in our questionnaire, which were adopted and adapted from a research report questionnaire done in 2009 and available on [http://is.muni.cz/th/244323/pedf\\_b/Bachelor Thesis Michaela Navratilova.pdf](http://is.muni.cz/th/244323/pedf_b/Bachelor%20Thesis%20Michaela%20Navratilova.pdf). The source questions in the above questionnaire were "There is supportive atmosphere in the group" (p. 48) and "Have you experienced any other types of behaviour or situations in the classes of adult students which you found hindering for your teaching?" (p. 49).

Our questionnaires were ultimately subjected to a discussion with a couple of colleagues who had long experiences in language learning and teaching. As a result of the discussion, we refined a couple of the questions. For instance, question 7 was initially about the students' preferences of teaching styles. After the discussion, we added a second part to the question, i.e. 'how does this affect the way you relate to this new group?' As another example, question 12 which was on intercultural miscommunication lacked the definition of intercultural miscommunication. After the discussion, we added the following to the initial question: 'has someone misunderstood you or have you misunderstood them because of cultural differences?' (See Appendix A).

The first questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the course and the second questionnaire at the end of the term, i.e. after three and a half months. As mentioned earlier, this was done in order to compare the participants' perceptions and see how their ideas of the group's characteristics would evolve over time. Before the administration of the questionnaires, the researchers had a meeting with the participants in which they explained the purpose and content of the questionnaires to the participants in order to ensure that they would interpret the questions in a similar fashion. In the questionnaires, we maintained that the information the respondent provided would only be used for the purpose of our research. We assured them that no information about them or their answers would be disclosed to anyone or used in any way that was out of the scope of this research. We emphasised that the respondent's anonymity would be respected and the data they provided would be handled confidentially. Finally, we stated that they could also choose not to participate in this research and withdraw from it whenever they so wished (Heighman and Croker 2009; Dowling and Brown 2010). The participants took the questionnaires home and emailed their responses to the researchers. The return rates on both occasions were 100%.

#### **4. Data Analysis**

As we had little knowledge and limited preconceptions about the perceptions of an international cohort of MA TESOL students regarding how group dynamics evolve among them in an English speaking environment, using the principles of grounded theory (which is an approach to research and analysing data without having a preconceived theory and whereby the theory emerges from the data (Skeat and Perry 2008; Cohen et al. 2011)), the data from the two sets of the questionnaires were analyzed by two researchers independently for inter-coder reliability and then the results were compared. We looked for patterns in the participants' answers, highlighted them, coded them and collated the codes. The use of the principles of a grounded theory (GT) approach to analyze the data was justified for the following reasons. First, the existing literature on the evolution of group dynamics among international cohorts of postgraduate TESOL students from the students' perspective is limited. Consequently, the application of the principles of a grounded theory approach could help us with discovering and formulating a theory in an area where little is known (Denscombe 2007; Heighman and Croker 2009). Second, GT is in line with an interpretive qualitative study, as both allow for the inclusion of the viewpoints, voices and interpretations of participants leading to an understanding of their experiences and actions (Denscombe 2007). Third, GT has been increasingly applied to the disciplines of TESOL and Applied Linguistics, thus reassuring researchers of its plausibility and rigour.

The tables in Appendix C illustrate part of the analysis process and allow a comparison in order to see any changes in the views of the participants and any developments in the group dynamics of their cohort from their perspective.

We are aware that the data analysis we carried out here is subjective. We think the issue of objectivity in social research can be looked at in at least two ways: attempting to reduce the amount of subjectivity as the positivist paradigm suggests, or acknowledging the nature of subjectivity and how it affects the data and their analysis as the interpretivist paradigm puts forward. Wolcott (1994) points out that whereas in the 1980s the researcher was expected to maintain a distance to assure objectivity, personal reflection is now not only accepted but also expected. In a similar vein, Ivanic and Weldon (1999) argue that an objective stance is unobtainable in social research and that multiple perspectives and viewpoints are required to add depth to our understanding. From an interpretivist point of view, the rigour, then, is in the subjectivity. We, therefore, believe in social sciences, subjectivity adds to the rigour of research rather than downgrade it.

## 5. Discussions

We started this research with an interest in the perceptions of an MA TESOL cohort, with an international composition studying in an English native speaking environment, regarding the group dynamics. The results of the analysis of the data collected through two open-ended questionnaires administered to the participants at the beginning of the course and at the end of the term are thematized and discussed under four subheadings. This thematization is in order because in this way the researcher makes sense out of the data analysis by selecting things that s/he considers important and leaving out others (Ryan 2006: 100). The subheadings are as follows: group as a family (including the themes of family, group cohesiveness, group longevity, cliques and in-groups), group development (including the themes of emotional ambivalence, classroom climate and sense of closeness and distance), teacher as group shaper and mediator (including the themes of shaper, mediator and democratic teaching styles) and intercultural dynamics (including the themes of positive attitude to the international composition of the group, English as a glue, cultural understanding and educational background).

### 5.1 Group as a Family

The results of the data analysis reveal that the participants look at their cohort as a family and believe that group cohesiveness and length of time spent together are two of the factors which make a good group and therefore affect the classroom dynamics. The female Polish participant, for example, said, "A group works as one family and helps each other"; the male Iraqi participant said, "We help each other. We support those who are weak or have a lack of experience or self-confidence. We work as a family"; the female British participant said, "In such a group, individuals' differences complement the group as a whole." This is interesting because in spite of the fact that the students did not choose each other as classmates, they nevertheless saw the cohort as a family unit whose members complement one another. A similar situation can be observed in real families, where filial ties cause the members to pull together and be there for one another, even if they would not deliberately select their relatives as friends. As the international students studying at an English native speaking environment are normally away from their families and as they are likely to be under academic and social pressure, it seems that they take their classroom cohort as a surrogate family to enable them to cope with the pressure.

As for group cohesiveness, the participants emphasised in particular the role of cooperation and teamwork as an important factor in helping the group to gel together. For instance, one of the female Libyan participants said, "I think in a good group, the team work together, are patient, cooperate with one another and have good communication and discussions, because if everyone sticks to their own opinion and does not listen to others, then the group will be divided." Inozu (2010) argues that if the class is positively coherent, "students become more motivated to interact and this contributes to a creation of a positive group dynamic that increases the effectiveness of lessons" (Inozu 2010: 1061). The participants themselves seemed to make this link between the cohesiveness of the group and its effect on their motivation. They brought to light the fact that motivation is not purely an individual affective variable in learning, but is also a social construct. They believed the more motivated and motivating other group members are, the more they will become motivated. One of the female Chinese participants, for instance, said, "I think a good group comprises highly motivated individuals"; the male Pakistani participant said, "With this international composition, I really guarantee I will learn a lot in this group and gain a great deal of experience"; the female Belgian participant said, "If students are silent most of the time, it will not be good for an effective group." As Ushioda (2003) puts it, learners' motivation is bound up with their relationships with their fellow learners and motivation indeed is a socially mediated phenomenon.

Concerning the length of time spent together, it seems the participants believed that the more time the group spends working with one another and the longer the life of the group continues, the stronger a sense of togetherness, community or even family will develop. In this regard, one of the male Chinese participants, for instance, said, "Time makes a good group. The longer group members stay together, the better they'll know each other." Getting to know each other can facilitate cooperation and social relationships within the group, as the group members can discover what they have in common with others and as a consequence they are likely to realize what they can offer and what they may require. Group longevity normally results in group members getting to know each other more closely and becoming aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses. As group dynamics develop over time, the role of time in helping students establish a synergy and therefore aiding them to gel as a group or as a family should not be neglected.

At the end of the term, the participants believed that lack of motivation, uncooperativeness, dominance and formation of cliques are the traits of a 'not so good group'. Chinese students, in particular, said their background helped them to relate to a certain subgroup, namely the Chinese. Other students believed that when small groups stick together, this adversely affects the dynamics of the group. For example, one of the female Libyan participants said, "I think that perhaps if the individuals are not open to other members and prefer to stay in their own little groups (usually same nationality group), then a group lacks integrity." This is perhaps the kind of 'classroom subgroup' identified by Schmuck and Schmuck (2001) as an example of negative cohesiveness (Schmuck and Schmuck 2001: 115) and which Ushioda (2003) regards as one of the negative effects of 'peer group influences'. It seems that the Chinese students in the present study see themselves as the 'ingroup' and do not identify themselves with the group as a whole. For instance, one of the male Chinese participants said, "I mingle well with my fellow Chinese students. As a Chinese group, we share culture and background which result in helping each other." In this regard, the Female Belgian participant said, "Perhaps the perception of the Chinese students is completely different, because they are in a group, but for me as an individual who doesn't have any fellow students from a similar culture, the atmosphere in the class is neither cold nor warm." The male Iraqi participant said, "To

be honest, we have a small group in a big whole group now. Sometimes that can be negative.” We contend that one of the roles of the teacher is to facilitate the integration of students with the larger group and to reduce the adverse effects, if any, of the formation of cliques. This will be discussed in the following section entitled ‘Teacher as Group Shaper and Mediator’.

## 5.2 Group Development

The participants’ comments regarding how they felt at the beginning of the course and at the end of the first phase conveyed a sense of emotional ambivalence. Both at the beginning of the course and three and a half months later, they expressed a mixture of positive and negative emotions. Many reported that they felt happier and more confident by the end of the first stage of the course, but some also expressed apprehension about their academic work and dissatisfaction with the progress they had made. Reporting on the classroom climate, they conveyed both a sense of closeness and of distance from beginning to end, but the sense of distance seemed to fade as time went by. For instance, the female Korean participant said, “At the beginning of the course, I felt uncomfortable because of these unfamiliar people. But when the course proceeded, I found everyone in our class very nice and friendly.” A clearer change in views was apparent where the participants’ performance was concerned. While at the beginning of the term some were satisfied with their performance and some were unhappy, after three and a half months of being on the course all of the students except one believed that they had performed better than the beginning of the term, both academically and socially. The female British participant, for example, reported, “In fact, it was a good start even though I was afraid of the work that we were supposed to do. But now I feel comfortable to work with my teachers and classmates.” While the participants expressed a range of positive emotions about their student cohort, the group, as discussed above, still seemed to be characterized by an unintegrated subgroup (see the quotations from the participants on page 12), one of the markers of a less mature group (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003).

## 5.3 Teacher as Group Shaper and Mediator

The participants emphasized the role of the teacher in shaping a group. As was mentioned above, Chinese students seemed to see the in-group as being more important than the out-group. They did not see the group as being the whole class (see the quotations from the participants on page 12). In a cohort with an international composition, this could result in some students feeling socially isolated (see the quotations from the participants on page 12). The teacher, according to the participants, can considerably contribute to lessening such unfavourable impacts by moulding the cliques into a large group. Concerning the role of the teacher, the female Belgian participant, for example, said, “The role of the teacher in a group is important because I think that teachers influence the group dynamics a great deal.” Hadfield (1992) points out that the teacher, among her other roles, is also a manipulator in the sense that whatever she does manipulates and affects the group and its dynamics. It seems that the teacher could then benefit from this manipulating power to shape the group and integrate the cliques into the larger group as much as possible. To what extent this is possible and to what extent it is actually within the power of the teacher are subject to research.

The participants also reported that they experienced no conflicts as such during the course but if there were any, they looked to the teacher as a mediator. They also underscored the role of the teacher in creating a good class climate. For example, the female British participant reported, “A

student made an inappropriate comment about race and it was quickly diffused by the teacher in a respectful way.” Given the concept of the family and the fact that the participants refer to their group as a family and considering that they say they look to the teacher to resolve conflicts (if any), it seems that the teacher could play the role of a parent to resolve conflicts and to establish and maintain a positive class climate. Elaborating on the favourable outcomes of a positive class climate and classrooms with fewer conflicts, Adelman and Taylor (2005) write that there are strong correlations between achievement levels and classrooms with greater cohesion, less conflict and less disorganisation. Needless to say, pre-service and in-service training of teachers in how to establish a good class climate and how to mediate to resolve conflicts can be helpful in equipping teachers with knowledge and skills to perform these roles.

Although the students looked to the teacher as a mediator and group shaper, when it came to reporting on their preferences concerning the teaching styles of teachers (namely democratic vs. authoritarian styles), the majority of the participants at the beginning of the term and almost all participants at the end of the term stated that they preferred democratic styles of teaching. They gave a range of reasons for this preference, including ‘a democratic style of teaching provides us with freedom to express ourselves, helps with exchanging our views, promotes creativity, enhances cooperation, encourages deep learning, helps with practising the English language, leads to autonomy, is more effective and is more motivating’. It seems that the students prefer active to passive learning in that they would like to be more involved in learning rather than learn by mere observation and listening. Considering this preference, it is for the teacher of an international cohort to strike a balance, albeit a difficult task, between her role as a mediator, group shaper and designated group leader on the one hand and applying democratic teaching styles on the other.

#### 5.4 Intercultural Dynamics

The analysis of the data show that the participants believed that being part of a group of students with different language and educational backgrounds encouraged them to assist each other like family members, socially construct knowledge and enhance their cultural understanding. The participants expressed a positive attitude to the international composition of the group, valued learning English and embraced the opportunity to enhance their cultural understanding. For instance, the male Pakistani participant wrote, “We are interdependent and trust each other. We exchange and discuss our opinions. We are helpful, friendly and patient when we have diversification. We respect each other. I really get encouragement from my classmates. I give them advice and encouragement too. I enjoy exchanging views with them and I'm patient as a listener. It is also a great chance to practise my English to improve my communicative competence. We correct each other's mistakes in pronunciation and in grammar. It is a good chance to know other cultures as well.” Only a small minority expressed some reservations about the international composition of the cohort at the beginning of the term in that they felt nervous and challenged due to not understanding others' accents and/or cultures. However, they also said they wanted to get used to various accents and to improve their cultural awareness. The data show that the reservations of this minority faded away by the end of the term. Our interpretation is that, on an MA TESOL course, being in a cohort with an international composition could contribute to improving the students' intercultural competence, defined by Huth (2010) as “the ability to communicate competently within and across linguistic and cultural boundaries” (Huth 2010: 154), English language skills and subject area knowledge. The fact that the participants maintained they shared more personal and

course-related information as the term went by and that the English language worked as a glue in forming and shaping the group testifies to this interpretation. It is noteworthy that while the students expressed a positive attitude to the international composition of the group, there was simultaneously a negative attitude towards the formation of a sub-group and its negative influence, which was discussed in the previous sections. It seems that both attitudes were operating at the same time.

The participants also said they had not come across intercultural miscommunication during the term. Only a small minority said there had been a misunderstanding about sponsorship and about humour. For example, a couple of the Chinese students said that being sponsored by parents was downgraded by their peers as a sign of being spoiled. Some said such misunderstandings did not affect the way they related to the group whereas others said they did. Some of the participants also pointed out that their multicultural background and socio-cultural values helped them to relate to the group. For instance, at the end of the course, some of the Chinese students said Confucianism affected the way they related to the group as it influenced them to behave in a modest way and not to speak out loud. Arab students said that their educational background affected the way they related to the group, as they had had a religious and single sex education. For example, one of the male Libyan participants wrote, "Coming from a different culture and society, especially the fact that I am Arabic and Muslim coming from a different continent, which is Africa, affects my communicating with fellow students from other cultures and societies. In addition, my age, accent and gender affect me, since I am older, while the majority of fellow students are female and younger." To improve the intercultural dynamics of the group, some of the students said more intercultural contact and extracurricular group social activities would be helpful.

Referring to the students' suggestions on how to improve intercultural dynamics, we will elaborate on the implications of the study in the following section.

## **6. Implications of the Study**

The study has implications for MA TESOL teachers and students alike. The findings have shown in particular that teachers need to be more vigilant about the formation of single-nationality or ethnic cliques which might lead those on the outside to feel as though they have been left out in the cold and excluded from the 'family'. In order to avoid this, they should try to encourage integration and thereby promote cohesiveness. One step to accomplishing this, for instance, might be to keep the seating arrangements fluid. Hadfield (1992), who writes extensively on how teachers can enhance classroom dynamics, suggests techniques for achieving this in her very practical guide to improving classroom dynamics. Similarly, Senior (1997) and Dörnyei (2014) suggest ways for promoting group cohesiveness and group norms to facilitate the development of well-balanced and cohesive cohorts.

For students, further reflection on the intercultural dynamics of the group should help equip them with the kind of knowledge and awareness of cultural differences and intercultural communication necessary in their future careers as teachers of English around the world. It is worth noting in this regard, that some MA TESOL programs include specific training in intercultural communication in the syllabus, as trainers recognise the necessity to develop intercultural awareness in their TESOL students. Nelson (1998), for instance, commented on this need in the US by highlighting the fact that as English has become an international language, it is no longer appropriate to teach American or

British culture and it is for masters' programs in TESOL to raise MA TESOL students' cultural consciousness and train them to become effective intercultural communicators.

In a mixed-nationality group such as the MA TESOL cohort in the present study, activities to promote group self-reflection could be offered as an alternative or complement to teaching students about intercultural communication in a more traditional lecture-style format.

### **7. Limitations of the Study**

With regard to limitations, it must be acknowledged that as this study was an attempt to investigate the students' perceptions, it relied on two questionnaires as the means of gathering data. Moreover, the composition of the group, i.e. most of the students were Chinese and most of them were female, might have affected the results of the study. Furthermore, one has to be cautious in interpreting and generalizing the findings of this study due to its small group size, although the context of the study is not entirely dissimilar to other MA TESOL contexts and therefore the matters discussed here have relevance to other MA TESOL milieux. Also, the findings of this study are based on analytic induction and are not to be taken as grand ineffable generalizations. According to Sarantakos (2013: 375), analytic induction entails providing provisional explanations of a social phenomenon that could contribute to the formation of a theory. If the explanation turns out to be valid through examining similar phenomena, saturation is achieved and the explanation will turn into a valid theory. If the explanation is not confirmed through examining similar phenomena, it should be reformulated and again contrasted with similar phenomena in an attempt to formulate a theory (Sarantakos 2013: 375). This study is meant to contribute to the development of such an explanation.

### **8 Recommendations for Further Research**

The present study could be extended in a number of ways. Since we acknowledge the crucial role of the teacher in influencing the group dynamics, it would certainly be useful to investigate that role in more detail. For example, an exploration of the extent to which it is within the power of the teacher to bring about harmony in the group could be one of the avenues for further research. The role of the individual members and their influence on group dynamics is also another factor which would be worth investigating. In addition to this, it would be interesting to carry out a comparative study with distance learning cohorts, where the concept of the 'invisible classroom' (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003) takes on a double meaning. Also, given that the findings of this study are to be taken as analytic induction and not grand ineffable generalizations (see the section above), re-running the study on a group of similar postgraduate learners is something worthwhile to do as further research.

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## Appendix A

### Group Dynamics Questionnaire 1

The purpose of this study is to explore the group dynamics in an MA TESOL cohort. Group dynamics refers to the learner group's internal characteristics and its evolution over time, which affect the learning and teaching process (Dornyei and Murphy 2003).

The information you provide will only be used for the purpose of this research. We assure you that no information about you or your answers will be disclosed to anyone or used in any way that is out of the scope of this research. Your anonymity is respected and the data you provide will be handled confidentially. You can also withdraw from this study whenever you so wish.

Please try to answer the following questions as fully and openly as possible.

1. What do you think makes a good group?
2. What do you think makes a not so good group?
3. How do you feel at the beginning of this course?
4. Think about the group you are in now. What do you think they will be able to give you? What can you offer to them? What might you have to give up?
5. How do you find the classroom climate (e.g. warm, cold, hostile, friendly etc)?
6. Have you experienced any conflicts in your class at the beginning of the term?
7. Which teaching styles do you prefer, e.g. democratic, authoritarian, etc? And how does this affect the way you relate to this new group?
8. How do you think you are you performing within your group at the beginning of the term?
9. How do you feel about being in a cohort with an international composition?
10. How much and what kind of information about yourself have you already shared with your fellow students?
11. How do you think the culture, society and educational background you have come from affects the way you relate to this new group?
12. Have you experienced intercultural miscommunication in this new group, i.e. has someone misunderstood you or have you misunderstood them because of cultural differences? If so, how has this affected the way you relate to the group?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add about the group dynamics of your class? If so, explain.

## Appendix B

### Group Dynamics Questionnaire 2

At the beginning of the term you were asked to fill in a questionnaire regarding the group dynamics in an MA TESOL cohort. We would now like you to answer a second questionnaire. Some of the questions will be the same, but you are asked to answer them in the light of your experience of being part of the MA TESOL group for the past three and a half months.

The information you provide will only be used for the purpose of this research. We assure you that no information about you or your answers will be disclosed to anyone or used in any way that is out of the scope of this research. Your anonymity is respected and the data you provide will be handled confidentially. You can also withdraw from this study whenever you so wish.

Please try to answer the following questions as fully and openly as possible.

1. What do you think makes a good group? Please include reasons for any differences between your answer here and your answer given in Questionnaire 1.
2. What do you think makes a not so good group? Please include reasons for any differences between your answer here and your answer given in Questionnaire 1.
3. How do you feel at the end of the first term of this course?
4. Think about the group you are in now. What do you think they have given you? What have you offered to them? What, if anything, have you had to give up?
5. How do you find the classroom climate now (e.g. warm, cold, hostile, friendly etc)?
6. Have you experienced any conflicts in your class since completing Questionnaire 1?
7. Which teaching styles do you prefer, e.g. democratic, authoritarian, etc? And how does this affect the way you relate to this group? Please include reasons for any differences between your answer here and your answer given in Questionnaire 1.
8. How do you think you have performed within your group during the first term?
9. How do you feel about being in a cohort with an international composition? Please include reasons for any differences between your answer here and your answer given in Questionnaire 1.
10. How much and what kind of information about yourself have you shared with your fellow students since completing Questionnaire 1?
11. How do you think the culture, society and educational background you have come from affects the way you relate to this group? Please include reasons for any differences between your answer here and your answer given in Questionnaire 1.
12. Have you experienced intercultural miscommunication in this group since completing Questionnaire 1, i.e. has someone misunderstood you or have you misunderstood them because of cultural differences? If so, how has this affected the way you relate to the group?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add about the group dynamics of your class since completing Questionnaire 1? If so, explain.

**Appendix C**

**Tables illustrating the analysis of the data**

**Questionnaire 1:**

Question 1	
Risk taking	Risk taking
Tolerance and respect Diversity Inclusion Family Leadership Friendliness Sense of giving	The concept of the group as a family
Motivation Mutual target Cooperation/teamwork/solidarity	Group cohesion
Learning as a social practice leading to individual learning	Learning as a social practice leading to individual learning

**Questionnaire 2:**

Question 1	
Being together for a long time	Length of time together
Tolerance and respect Individuals differences and similarities Working as a family Mutual understanding Complementing each other	The concept of the group as a family
Motivation Cooperation/team work	Group cohesion

Question 2	
Imbalance in the group Lack of leadership Lack of communication Lack of diversity Lack of inclusion Lack of tolerance and respect	Lack of democratic relationships

Question 2	
Lack of cooperation Lack of mutual understanding Lack of communication Lack of team work Not supporting each other Having conflicting view points Lack of common goals Not sharing ideas	Uncooperativeness

Lack of a mutual target	Lack of a social milieu	Lack of competition	Lack of motivation
Lack of a sense of social		Lack of motivation	
Lack of solidarity			
Lack of cooperation			
Lack of friendliness			
Lack of motivation			
Lack of social practices and social learning			
Silence	Silence	Vociferous group members	Dominance
		Silent group members	
		Strong national identity	
		Small groups sticking together	Formation of cliques together

Question 3		Question 3	
Sense of insecurity	Ambivalent feeling	Having apprehension about the academic work	Ambivalent feeling
Sense of encountering difficulty		Having dissatisfaction with progress in academic work	
Sense of confusion		Feeling more confident	
Sense of pressure		Feeling happier	
Sense of excitement and happiness about diversity and learning new things		Feeling better	
Sense of determination			

Question 4		Question 4	
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Social construction of knowledge Language learning Subject area learning Sharing ideas	Social construction of knowledge	Opportunities to practise the English Language Sharing ideas	Social construction of knowledge
Cooperation Enhancing group atmosphere Receiving and giving encouragement Working as a family	The concept of family	Working as a family	The concept of family
Cultural understanding and removing intercultural miscommunication	Enhancing cultural understanding	Cultural learning	Enhancing cultural understanding
Some students would not like to give up anything.		The students said they hadn't had to give up anything. Only one European student said she had to conform to other nationalities' expectations.	

Question 5		Question 5	
Friendly Optimistic Cooperative Warm Helpful Welcoming Positive	A sense of closeness	Warm and friendly Encouraging to learn Group relationship improved Working as partners Feeling comfortable Warmer than the beginning of the term	A sense of closeness

generous			
Cold Quiet Polite Neutral (neither warm nor cold)	A sense of distance but hoping for a positive change of climate	One student said 'Cold'	A sense of distance
Some students emphasised the role of the teacher and singled her out as a person who contributes a lot to the classroom climate.	Teacher as a group shaper		
Some of the students seem not to see the whole class as a group, because they used the phrases like 'some are friendly and some are cold'.	Formation of in-groups		

Question 6
Most students experienced no conflicts.
Some said there actually was a great deal of friendliness.
A couple of students said they sometimes heard inappropriate comments and said such comments might have been due to little cultural understanding.  They said they look to the teacher to resolve conflicts.

Question 6
No conflicts were experienced.

Question 7	
Democratic style of teaching	

Question 7	
Democratic style of	

<p>because it:</p> <p>provides them with freedom to express themselves</p> <p>helps them with exchanging their views</p> <p>encourages cooperation</p> <p>causes creativity</p> <p>encourages deep learning</p> <p>is more motivating</p> <p>is more comfortable</p> <p>causes independence and autonomy</p> <p>gives them more space to choose</p>	<p>Preferring active to passive learning</p>	<p>teaching because it:</p> <p>helps with expressing ideas</p> <p>helps with practising the English language</p> <p>builds up a relaxed learning atmosphere</p> <p>is more effective</p> <p>is more motivating</p>	<p>Preferring active to passive learning</p>
<p>Three students said they would like both teaching styles and balance between the two, because they want organisation and order.</p>		<p>One student said it depends on the context.</p>	

Question 8

Some of the participants were satisfied with their performance. Two said that they had taken on a leadership role.

Some of the participants, however, were tentative about their performance or believed they hadn't performed well. These students either took responsibility for their bad performance or blamed environmental factors, such as the change of their environment. These students also seemed to be self-critical and would like to perform better.

Question 8

Most of the participants said they have performed better as far as the coursework was concerned. They also said they had been mixing socially as time went by.

Only three students said they were struggling with their learning activities.

All participants believed that they had made an effort and were doing their best.

Question 9		Question 9	
<p>Feeling comfortable</p> <p>Interesting and exciting experience</p> <p>Like it</p> <p>Helps with learning other/different teaching styles</p> <p>Helps cultural understanding</p> <p>Helps with changing mind about other people</p> <p>Helps language learning and improves communicative skills</p>	<p>They have an overwhelmingly positive emotional response to the international composition of the group.</p> <p>They value the enhancement of intercultural communication.</p> <p>They value the necessity to use the English language and thereby to improve their language skills.</p>	<p>Positive</p> <p>Pleased</p> <p>Valuable experience</p> <p>Not feeling lonely</p> <p>Helps with learning other/different teaching styles</p> <p>Helps with learning other cultures</p> <p>Helps with practising the English language</p>	<p>They have a very positive attitude to the international composition of the group.</p> <p>They value the necessity to use the English language as well as to learn other cultures.</p>
<p>Being nervous and feeling challenged due to not understanding others' accents and/or cultures. But they say they want to learn and improve.</p>	<p>Some reservations coupled with a willingness to engage.</p>	<p>Only one student said he was still stressed.</p> <p>One of the students expressed a desire for having more compatriots in the cohort.</p>	

Question 10		Question 10	
<p>Origins</p> <p>Where they live now</p> <p>Hobbies</p> <p>Cultural background</p> <p>family</p>	<p>Personal information</p>	<p>More about their lives</p> <p>More about their cultures</p> <p>More about their lives in the new context</p> <p>More about their feelings</p>	<p>Sharing more personal information</p>

<p>Their teaching experience</p> <p>Their objectives and dreams</p> <p>Their educational experience</p> <p>Their ideas about the classes and the course</p>	<p>Course-related information</p>	<p>More about their teaching experience</p> <p>More about their learning experience</p>	<p>Sharing more course-related information, especially their teaching experience</p>
		<p>Two students said they hadn't shared more information than before.</p>	

<p>Question 11</p>
<p>The multicultural background of some of the students helps them to relate to the group.</p> <p>The socio-cultural values of some of them, namely Africans and Chinese, help them to relate to the group.</p> <p>The background that some of them share with a certain number of the students, namely Chinese, helps them to relate to that subgroup.</p>

<p>Question 11</p>
<p>Their educational background, e.g. single sex education and religious education, affects the way they relate to the course and in turn affects the way they relate to the group.</p> <p>Confucianism affects the way they relate to the group by causing them to be modest and to not speak out loud.</p> <p>One student said she felt left out due to her lower socio-economic class.</p>

<p>Question 12</p>
<p>Most said 'no', as the group members make allowance for intercultural miscommunication and also share common goals.</p> <p>Some said 'no', as they didn't enter cultural discussions as such.</p>

<p>Question 12</p>
<p>The majority of the students said there had been no intercultural miscommunication.</p> <p>A minority said there had been minor cultural misunderstanding and inappropriate assumptions about sponsorship as they might be judged on this basis. A minority also said there had been minor cultural misunderstanding about humour and that it had sometimes been difficult to communicate humour and it had become a bit serious. Some said these hadn't affected</p>

	the way they related to the group whereas others said they had.
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<p>Question 13</p> <p>The participants prefer diversity in group work.</p> <p>They believe getting to know each other helps them to form a group.</p> <p>Having a leader is an important factor in shaping a group.</p> <p>The role of the teacher in shaping the group and having a good class climate is important.</p> <p>The role of English as a glue in forming and shaping a group.</p>	<p>Question 13</p> <p>One student said extracurricular group social activities could help the group dynamics.</p> <p>Another student said more intercultural contact would be helpful for the group dynamics.</p> <p>Another said she believed relationships were made more intranationally than internationally.</p>
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