“A Narrow Thinking System”: Nonnative-English-Speaking Students in Group Projects Across the Curriculum

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In examining the contexts of learning for L2 English bilinguals, educators and researchers may have ignored an important feature of that context, the social/academic relationships the learners develop with native-English-speaking peers. Long considered a means of promoting learning and independence among students, group work is one domain where such social/academic interactions occur in university-level courses across the curriculum in English-dominant countries. The research reported here details the experiences of two nonnative-English-speaking (NNES) students in course-sponsored group projects. The findings suggest that the particular social/academic relationships that develop within work groups may undermine the ability of NNES students to make meaningful contributions to the group projects. Furthermore, even group projects that appear to work well may conceal particular burdens for NNES students of which faculty who assign group projects may remain unaware.

In order to understand the academic experiences of L2 English learners in English-dominant educational institutions, researchers have investigated the contexts of learning by observing L2 classrooms, interviewing L2 students and their teachers, and studying the documents that L2 learners produce and consume. Arguably more significant than classrooms, teachers, and documents to these students and to their contexts of learning, however, are the academic relationships that L2 learners form with domestic students. ESL program coordinators in

1 In recognition of the great variety of possible constellations of linguistic and cultural experience among L2 English learners in tertiary institutions, I refer to them as L2 learners, English learners, nonnative-English-speaking (NNES) students, or bilingual students; I refer to native-English-speaking students as either NES or domestic students.
English-dominant countries who recognize the importance of community in language and other kinds of learning have worked to implement programs at the institutional level intended to foster a sense of community, sometimes primarily among the English learners themselves and sometimes between the English learners and their native-English-speaking (NES) peers (for college-level programs, see, e.g., Babbitt, in press; Vann & Myers, in press; for discussion of high school programs, see Walqui, 2000). This effort has sometimes found its way into courses in the form of group projects.

The potential benefits to English learners of working on course projects with NES domestic students seem evident. The domestic students may be more familiar with local, institutional, and linguistic conventions and requirements and, like the experienced peer of Vygotsky’s (1978) work, may be able to scaffold learning for their English learner colleagues. A large and mainly optimistic body of research exists on the benefits of group work among peers. The analytical and theoretical frame for understanding the research participants’ work relationships with domestic students in this study derives partly from the literature on group work and partly from Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work on legitimate peripheral participation.

LITERATURE ON GROUP WORK

Group work has been explored in a variety of school settings. Writing teachers have long used peer responding groups to promote students’ progress in writing. According to L1 researchers, relying on peers rather than only on teachers for feedback lends a kind of autonomy to students that is said to promote, among other virtues, increased independence from teachers, a sense of ownership of and commitment to their work, and deep cognitive processing of the material they work with (Gere, 1987; Lawrence & Sommers, 1996; Nystrand, Gamoran, & Heck, 1993). Several science disciplines across the higher education curriculum, such as biology and chemistry, have traditionally made extensive use of group work in labs; more recently, teachers in other disciplinary areas—for example, education, art, math, computer science, psychology, and business—have also turned to group assignments (Crowley, 1997; Czerneda, 1996; Eklund & Eklund, 1997; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1997). K–12 researchers, too, have claimed a variety of benefits for small-group work (Bejarno, 1987; Bruner, 1986; Jaques, 1984; Johnson & Johnson, 1974; Romney, 1997; Sharan, 1980; Slavin, 1977, 1983a, 1983b), as have researchers in second and foreign language learning (Faltis, 1993; McGroarty, 1989; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Savignon, 1976). The Modern Language Journal devoted the winter 1997 issue (Vol. 81, No. 4) to
exploring ways that collaborative group work can be used in language and teacher education classrooms.²

Whereas early research reports on group work and collaborative learning claimed multiple benefits for students working in groups, more sobering reports eventually appeared on nonnative-English-speaking (NNES) students in college writing classes (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Leki, 1990; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Wong Fillmore, 1985) and in K–12 classes (Cowie, Smith, Boulton, & Laver, 1994; Jacob, Rottenberg, Patrick, & Wheeler, 1996). For example, despite previous claims that working with peers would make students more tolerant of difference, Cowie et al.’s (1994) study with young children showed no particular reduction in cross-racial or cross-ethnic bullying among children engaged in group projects with children from other cultures. Furthermore, group work in Toohey and Day’s (1999) account afforded bilingual children in Grades K–2 only ambiguous access to community language resources. In addition, in higher education students themselves have expressed frustration with group work (see, e.g., experiences of L1 students reported in Fiechtner & Davis, 1992, and L2 and foreign language students and teacher trainees in Horwitz, Bresslau, Dryden, McLendon, & Yu, 1997; Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997; Wilhelm, 1997; for telling accounts of problems in collaboration among researchers, see Durst & Stanforth, 1996; McCarthy & Fishman, 1996).

Nevertheless, many researchers and teachers remain convinced of the value of group work and continue to explore the conditions that lead to either satisfying or negative group work experiences (Bennett & Dunne, 1992; Bruffee, 1993; Cowie et al., 1994; Dunne & Bennett, 1990; Felder & Brent, 1996; Meloth & Deering, 1994; Nystrand et al., 1993; Tinto, 1997). K–12 researchers have concluded that, to succeed, group work must be carefully structured; the students must be thoroughly prepared through social skill-building activities; assignments must be open-ended rather than have preset answers; and the task must be such that a group, rather than only an individual, is truly required to accomplish it (see, e.g., Cohen, 1994; Ford, 1991; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1991; Kluge, 1990; Sharan, 1990).

It is the issue of social/academic interactions, addressed in the K–12 literature by a focus on social skill building, that is of most interest in the research reported here. Social/academic interactions refer to the

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² In the literature on group work, distinctions are made among collaborative learning (Holt, 1993), cooperative learning (Kagan, 1992), interaction (Oxford, 1997), and learning communities (Kogan, 1997). The interactions described in this investigation include primarily instances of what is generally referred to as collaborative learning, that is, construction of knowledge through group work.
relationships that develop among peers doing academic work together, not to friendships that may or may not develop. This area of social/academic interactions between English learners and their domestic peers, the social/academic context of learning, has not been sufficiently considered in the L2 literature. (See Toohey, 1998, for a similar argument and for an example of how NES first graders used material possessions and the withholding of friendship to position NNES first graders as outsiders.) Despite the fact that many English learners in English-dominant countries are surrounded by NES peers most of the day, we as L2 teachers and researchers typically know little about their social/academic relationships with these potential academic colleagues. Yet, by ignoring the social aspect of our students’ academic lives as we study the contexts of learning in our classrooms, we may exaggerate our own importance and the importance of our courses in these students’ educational experiences. We inadvertently create a picture of L2 learners as having only a dimension that interacts with us.

**LEGITIMATE PERIPHERAL PARTICIPATION**

In Lave and Wenger’s (1991) definition, “legitimate peripheral participation is proposed as a descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent” (p. 35). The learner in their study of situated learning is an apprentice, someone seeking to be accepted into a community of practice. The apprentice proceeds by participating with a master, or old-time member of that community, who engages in the practice and by eventually taking over increasingly complex portions of the practice. In this conceptualization, each partner recognizes and accepts the positioning of the other, the apprentice as outsider wanting in and the master as willing guide. An understanding of this configuration has been useful in such L2 studies as Belcher’s (1994) on bilingual graduate students, Casanave’s (1998) on bilingual Japanese academics, and Flowerdew’s (2000) on editorial practices of an English language journal dealing with an article submission from a NNES author. Although none of the relationships within the groups described in this report is in fact that of apprentice/master, Lave and Wenger’s framework nevertheless may help illuminate how attempts to position oneself and the other within a group may contribute to what can go awry in group projects that include both bilingual and domestic students.
Research Questions

The study reported here grew out of a larger ethnography, a series of naturalistic case studies broadly focused on the academic and literacy experiences of a group of international and permanent-resident bilingual university students. The portion of the data reported here involves the working relationships that two of the research participants formed with the other members of their course project groups.

In keeping with methods of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the overarching research question for purposes of data analysis in the study reported here was

- What are the experiences of a group of NNES students in evaluated group work across the curriculum in higher education?

This research question, which guided the in-depth interviews (described in the Method section), was intended to be maximally flexible to allow the participants themselves to designate significant focal areas and define their own experiences. Three subordinate questions helped guide data analysis and interpretation:

1. To what degree did these students regard their formal, evaluated group work experiences as satisfying or unsatisfying?
2. To what degree did these assigned group projects function as the course professors intended?
3. What special circumstances surround NNES students’ participation in assigned group projects across the curriculum?

METHOD

Context and Participants

The institutional context for the study was a large state university in the United States with a student body of about 24,000 students, including about 1,000 international students. Although there are also NNES permanent residents in attendance, some of whom graduated from U.S. high schools, determining the exact number is nearly impossible because it is difficult to identify them based on available records. Most of the middle- and working-class domestic student body is drawn from in-state residents. Although this information is also difficult to document, conversations with students and their teachers suggest that many of the domestic students have had limited experience with cultural and linguistic groups from outside the United States.

Six of the participants in the larger study, who responded to a call for
volunteers for the research project, had had substantial experience with course-sponsored group work. These six included four women and two men (five undergraduates and one graduate student) representing five different majors and five different countries (see Table 1). Two (Ben and Jan\(^5\)) were permanent residents and graduates of U.S. high schools. Two of the students were followed for one semester; the remaining four students were followed throughout their undergraduate careers at the university. For one student, whose progress toward graduation was slower than that of the other students, this report includes work only through his junior year. This is significant because his group work experience became more positive as he became better acquainted with students in his major. All the participants signed informed consent forms as part of the university’s human subjects research review.

**Data Collection**

Data for this research, collected over the course of 5 years, consisted of complete transcriptions of in-depth weekly or biweekly interviews with the six NNES students; field notes of observations of their classes (from a minimum of one observation for some classes to weekly observations in others); transcriptions of interviews with their professors; documents given to them in classes, including syllabuses and course handouts; and their written work, including early drafts, for these classes. The varied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Graduate/undergraduate</th>
<th>Home country</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Time in U.S. at beginning of study</th>
<th>Previous experience with group work?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ling</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>1 week</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tula</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Speech pathology</td>
<td>1 week</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yang</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuko</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^5\) All names are pseudonyms.
data sources were intended to ensure data triangulation, though this report focuses primarily on findings from interview and observational data.

A guide consisting of open-ended questions formed the basis of the interviews with the students and the single interview with each of their professors. (See the Appendix for a sample interview guide.) Depending on how our schedules matched those of the participants and their classes, either my research assistants or I conducted the interviews and observed classes.

In the tradition of ethnographic and phenomenological interviewing (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), the interview questions were intended to elicit an account of the students’ lived experience and a sense of “how [these] people define their world” (p. 9). Interview questions were generally designed to invite students to talk freely about aspects of their course work and their educational experiences that interested them. Because of the frequent contact my research assistants and I had with these students, they soon came to anticipate the questions we were interested in and to mentally collect descriptions of events in their educational lives that we hoped to focus on as well as those they themselves felt an urge to discuss.

For the most part, we did not have direct access to the inner workings of the groups in which these students participated because the groups met irregularly and outside of normally scheduled class times. (However, see the section below on Ling’s geography class.) Information about the functioning of these groups came from the research participants’ interviews, interviews with the faculty assigning the group work, observations of class sessions in which group projects were discussed, and documents given to and produced by the groups.

The faculty interviews, although also intended to be fairly open-ended and to invite commentary on what the faculty member deemed important in the course, were scripted for purposes of efficient use of the faculty members’ time. The questions focusing on group projects asked why interviewees assigned group work, what educational benefits they hoped students would experience as a result of the group work, and what problems, if any, they encountered in using group work.

Analysis

Data analysis followed typical procedures for qualitative research (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Data were read reiteratively, with all instances of mention of group work collated out. Basic categories were generated through content analysis of the interview, observational, and documentary data that involved “comparing, contrasting, aggregating, and ordering” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 171) the data with a view to

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discovering logical groupings and links among categories that would shed light on the students’ overall experiences in these group projects. Because I was after insights into how these collaborative experiences worked, even single instances attracted attention. Student interview transcripts were thus analyzed for both recurring and particularly salient themes. Salient themes were those that occasioned the most (positively or negatively) fraught or agitated comments from the students.

During the period of this study, the students engaged in group work of some kind in 54 classes, excluding English, writing, and ESL classes. Of these collaborative activities, 17 were projects assigned as a required, evaluated part of the course (rather than spontaneous, un(evaluated cooperation among students); 12 of these occurred in the students’ majors (see Table 2).

All course-sponsored group work in a single class was counted as one group work experience because most courses that had group work included only one project. In the few that had more (Ben’s history class, Jan’s geography labs, and Ling’s geography class), the different occasions for group work nevertheless resulted in a similar experience across instances, as reported by the informants.

### TABLE 2
Distribution of Courses With Group Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Courses assigning group work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ling</td>
<td>Geography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tula</td>
<td>Speech Pathology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yang</td>
<td>Nursing Research</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Health</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wellness Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuko</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Work Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>Geography Lab 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geography Lab 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chemical Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mass Transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equipment Design</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Excluding English, writing, and ESL courses, the total number of courses taken by the participants was 81. Of these, the 17 listed here assigned group work.
FINDINGS

Group work is conceived and instituted in a wide variety of ways across the curriculum, generating a variety of themes that threaded through the students’ comments and that can be divided into two basic categories: themes dealing with social aspects and those dealing with academic aspects of their experiences in group projects. These two categories are best viewed as two ends of a continuum because in several cases it was difficult to definitively separate the social from the academic.

Toward the social end of the continuum, four main themes recurred: (a) meeting logistics, (b) task allocation, (c) actual contributions to the project of individual group members, and (d) anticipated contributions to the project by the bilingual students. This report focuses primarily on the last of these, which seems the most important in terms of understanding the bilingual students’ experiences with group work.

The Students’ Experiences in Group Projects

Nearly all the students in this research had had either formal or informal experience with group work in high school or in college in their home countries. The students described these previous experiences as generally positive, allowing them to share the burdens of a heavy workload, to learn through in-depth discussion of a topic, or to compare their own understanding of course material with that of other group members. In these cases they seemed to consider themselves equal participants in the group work process, as partners with valuable contributions to make to the group.

Their experiences in the group projects in their course work in the United States, however, were not so positive even though they were a salient factor in the students’ academic experiences. The participating students repeatedly referred in their interviews to formal and informal group work in their courses across the curriculum. Fifteen of the 17 evaluated group projects were described primarily negatively, not because the final product itself received low evaluations from the professor but for a variety of other reasons that may be especially pertinent for bilingual students—particularly, an a priori expectation on the part of domestic group members that the bilingual students would not or would not be able to make a significant contribution to the project. Four of the six bilingual students (Ling, Yang, Jan, and Ben) expressed dissatisfaction with course-sponsored group projects because of the way they felt their group mates positioned them as a result of these doubts about their potential contribution. In effect, domestic group members variously
resisted or ignored the bilingual students’ potential contributions, appearing to construct them as less capable and therefore not valuable to the project—in some respects, constructing them as mere apprentices to the domestic students’ own roles as masters. In some cases this positioning occurred even before groups were formed and resulted in bilingual students being tacitly bypassed in group formation. As Jan explained, “They didn’t want to [include me in the group] in the beginning because I’m foreign . . . like until they see I’m good in something, they don’t care about [me]. I’ve got to show myself first, that I’m good in something” (interview, August 23, 1995, p. 5).

**Bilingual Students Positioned**

Two of the students’ group project experiences, Ling’s in her geography class and Yang’s in her nursing classes, show clearly how the four social themes cited above played out and how the bilingual students’ potential contributions were undermined.

**Ling’s Geography Class**

I describe in detail two group activities assigned in Ling’s geography class\(^4\) because of the special circumstances occasioned by the NNES students in the group and because of the subtle way in which Ling struggled to position herself as a group member with potential contributions to make while some of the other group members worked to construct her as marginal. The degree of detail is possible because, in his enthusiasm for group work, the professor allotted considerable class time for these activities. As a result, with the teachers’ and the students’ permission, I had the rare opportunity to observe the inner workings of this group and take extensive field notes on the interactions among group members.\(^5\)

Professor G. was very interested in collaborative learning and clearly demonstrated to the students his endorsement of group work by setting aside time two or three classes before each project was due to allow the

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\(^4\) Newkirk (1996) talks about the moral dilemma of doing qualitative research when the result of the inquiry is “bad news” for a participant in the research. I am particularly chagrined to report the failure of these two group activities because of the course professor’s enthusiasm about them, his kindness, and his lack of awareness to this day of how wrong the activities went for the group I focused on. Other groups in the class (all consisting of domestic students) did not seem to suffer from the same problems.

\(^5\) My presence brings up the unavoidable issue of what effect I might have had on the group process. At the first group meeting, I asked the group members for permission to sit in and take notes on their meeting because I was interested in how the group projects would progress. They agreed without comment. In this meeting and subsequent ones, they appeared to ignore me,
groups to meet. Of all the faculty I interviewed, he had the most clearly articulated idea of the potential benefits of group work and was using several of the techniques recommended to ensure success: passing out only one copy of the project so that students would be forced to share rather than read the directions individually, allowing class time partly for students’ convenience but also to demonstrate the importance of the project, and talking and thinking in terms of “learning communities” (Professor G.’s term) rather than competitive groups. In an interview, he said,

My idea for groups is really to see that group dynamic, that interaction, because I think learning communities and working with others is the way to learn, I mean, they are going to have to explain why they rationalize a particular thing, they’re going to have to explain it to other students. In turn they probably will come to some kind of consensus . . . . It’s important that they allocate tasks and know how to do that within the group. (November 12, 1992, p. 3)

Groups were formed by seating proximity. This arrangement initially appeared to solve a problem Ling had worried about. She had expressed apprehension about this group assignment because she had heard negative comments from her Chinese friends about group work. They had told her that Americans did not like to work in groups with “foreigners,” and if the students were simply asked to form groups on their own, the “foreigners” tended not to be invited to join. As Ling reported, “They always say it’s difficult to join a group, so [I’m] always afraid to work group exercises” (September 9, 1992, p. 5).

Because groups were more or less assigned, Ling did not have to experience the embarrassment of not being chosen for a group. Her group of four included three NES women. Their seating arrangement, one behind the other in a very crowded and noisy room, was soon to prove unfortunate in that it appeared to impede communication.

When Professor G. passed out the assignments, he emphasized to the class that he was less concerned with the actual answers than with the group’s rationale for their answers. He told them, “I’d like you to cooperate together and come up with your best guesses . . . . basically brainstorm. It’s a synergistic project and it works better in groups than done alone” (field notes, September 16, 1992, p. 21).

which was relatively easy because they never formed a circle but, throughout their collaboration, remained seated one in front of the other. The domestic students in the group were not aware that I was working with Ling.

Because there was relatively little talk in this group, I was able to write down verbatim what everyone said. As one of the reviewers of this manuscript has pointed out, constructing a case out of specific utterances is a potential source of researcher bias. Data triangulation and multiple research participants are intended to mitigate this danger.
After this encouraging introduction to the project, Ling’s group began work. A leader, the Boss,\(^6\) emerged, and, before she or any of the others had even read the questions on the work sheet, she allocated the tasks: Each group member would take two or three of the questions to answer at home. Another group member, the Writer, announced that she would collect everyone’s answers and write them all down on the one activity sheet to be turned in. The third member of the group, the Outlier, a seemingly shy NES student whose dress marked her as unconventional (e.g., one day she wore elbow-length black lace gloves to class), said nothing. The students packed up their books and left class, apparently pleased to have worked so efficiently. This was the extent of the group members’ initial collaboration.

The assignment called for the use of demographic information to answer a series of questions. The first part of Question 9, Ling’s assigned question, listed names of fictitious neighborhoods, such as Blue Blood Estates, Gray Panther Park, and Newcomers’ Gardens, and the prices of houses in those neighborhoods. In the second part of the question were descriptions of the habits of several fictitious groups of people: the television shows they watched, the make of cars they drove, the types of foods they ate, and the magazines they subscribed to. The task was to use the information about the neighborhoods and the people’s characteristics to place these groups of people into the neighborhoods they were likely to live in based on an analysis of their lifestyle preferences.

Ling read and understood the task but saw immediately that she could not do this assignment. Newly arrived in the United States from Taiwan for the first time, she had no resources available or previous experiences that would have allowed her to complete this task alone. She had absolutely no idea what socioeconomic group in the United States would join civic clubs, use hand tools or snuff, drive a Dodge Diplomat, eat canned meat spreads, or watch Another World on television. She did not know and did not know how to find out whether people who lived in a fictitious place called Gray Panther Park would be more likely to subscribe to Cosmopolitan magazine or Ladies Home Journal, drive a Toyota or a Ford, watch Monday Night Football or Star Trek, or have a college degree or a general equivalency diploma.

The assignment called for the kind of implicit knowledge of U.S. culture that was probably within the grasp of the NES students but far out of the reach of a student just arrived in the United States. The next time the group met in class, Ling had nothing to show. Ironically, the point of the group project had been to obviate precisely these types of

\(^6\) In my field notes on this class, I assigned these students nicknames based on the roles they seemed to take on in the group.
problems. Students were expected to be able to rely on each other’s instincts and experiences to answer the questions. Furthermore, the exercise was intended to make graphic for the students that the very ability to do the exercise depended on their well-developed and possibly unconscious stereotypes. Because Ling did not have these stereotyped images of North Americans, she could have provided an enlightening object lesson for her peers.

Interestingly, Ling was sensitive to this purpose for the exercise and felt that the question she had been assigned would have been difficult to answer even in relation to Taiwan, as she explained in an interview.

I think it not easy to divide what class of people will watch what kind of magazine or TV program. Even in Taiwan I will feel difficulty for this question. I think it’s not easy, not absolutely to decide what kind of the magazine for what level of the people, even the food. Even for car. Some people they are poor but they use expensive car. (September 16, 1992, p. 4)

Ling’s comments point not only to her grasp of the point of the exercise but also to her ability to look at it critically. In other words, although she may not have been competent to answer these specific questions in relation to U.S. culture, her ability to complicate the question through her critical appraisal may have added to her group mates’ understanding of the issues evoked by the exercise, had she been allowed to contribute in this way.

As it happened, however, her potential to contribute meaningfully was never realized because no group discussion of the exercise ever took place. Instead, the Outlier, the shy, unusually attired third member of the group, with whom Ling had become friendly, gave her the expected answers to Question 9. At a subsequent class meeting, the Writer collected all the required sections of the assignment in a stack to take home and collate. As both the interviews and class observations revealed, no one read anyone else’s answers; no one looked at what the others had written; no one reviewed the final collated report that the Writer eventually turned in. The group received a grade of 13 out of a possible 15 points. All was well.

This group project experience had other consequences for the professor, Ling, and her group mates. The good evaluation the group received completely hid from the professor the failure of the group project to provoke the kind of intellectual synergy he had hoped for. For Ling, initial apprehension about group work with U.S. students turned to dread as she contemplated the upcoming second group project with her confidence about her potential contribution shaken. And for two of her group mates, Ling’s initial inability to answer the question assigned to her opened the way for them to position her as less than competent.
Several weeks later, the same group mates worked together on the second group project. In this task, students were to draw cartograms, maps in which the size of a country reflects not its physical dimensions but some other measure. For example, a cartogram of energy consumption in the world would show the United States in its usual position on the map but enormously bloated whereas, say, China would be much smaller. For this exercise, students were to compare two newspapers according to how often they mentioned a particular country and then create a cartogram in which the size of the country on the map reflected the frequency of mention in each of the two newspapers. Professor G. warned the class,

The exercises are not as neat and tidy as they seem. Decide what mention of a country means and be consistent. You need to explain the criteria that you are using to decide what constitutes mention of a country. (field notes, September 16, 1992, p. 4)

The professor hoped that, in doing this exercise, students would be able to detect the particular newspaper’s bias. He told them they could use the same newspaper from two different eras or different newspapers from different places. In answer to a student’s question, Professor G. clarified that they did not need to limit themselves to U.S. papers. This answer caught Ling’s attention.

On the day this assignment was made and the professor’s explanation given, both the Writer and the Boss were absent. That left Ling and the Outlier. In the following exchange, they seemed to be moving in a potentially interesting direction.

Ling: We can choose two newspapers for a week or 10 days. How to make? Do you want to do cross-section?
Outlier: Any particular paper? . . .
Ling: The library has a lot of newspapers, on the second floor. We can choose. Maybe before Wednesday we can go to the library and decide which paper.
Outlier: We can all go to the library maybe Tuesday or Wednesday.
Ling: Yes, in library there are also foreign newspapers, Japan, German. . . . Chinese paper.
Outlier: You could help us out with that.
Ling: Newspaper from America and newspaper from other country.
Outlier: OK. (field notes, October 30, 1992, p. 17)

In this exchange, these two students were collaborating and negotiating as the professor had hoped, with Ling taking an active part. In bringing up the newspapers at the library and then the foreign language newspapers, she implied a possible role for herself as an equal contributor, a
role she allowed the Outlier to suggest—that is, that she be the person responsible for analyzing the Chinese paper.

When the Boss and the Writer returned to class the next time, they got a copy of the assignment from the teacher, and the Writer proceeded to explain it to the Boss, ignoring the other two group members, who had heard the professor’s explanations. The Writer announced the best way to go about this work and told the group that she would go through two newspapers and count the times certain countries were mentioned. The Boss agreed. No one brought up the point Professor G. had tried to make so salient: that they needed to discuss and explain to each other their criteria for what constituted mention of a country. The following account, derived from my field notes, has my notations in brackets:

Writer: After I get it done, someone can look it over. 
[Up to that point the Boss and the Writer have not consulted the other two at all. Now the Boss turns to them for the first time and explains what she and the Writer have decided and asks which numbers of the exercise each of them wants to take. The Boss asserts that Number 4 is the longest/hardest one to do. There is some exchange between the Boss and Ling that prompts the Boss to say, unconvinced,] 

Boss: Do you want to do it? 

Ling: Maybe we can discuss about Number 4. 
[The Boss then again explains that the Writer will go and look at the newspapers and that after the Writer has tabulated everything they can just answer the questions from that. . . . The Boss starts to divide up the questions. . . .]

Ling: If you want we can look at newspaper in other languages. I could do Chinese. 
[awkward pause]

Boss: Would you want to go to the library and do all that work? If you want to, that’s fine. 

Writer: Are you going to have time to do all that? See, I have time to do it this week. 

Boss: There’s not that much time, but if you have free time . . . . [pauses] Are you going to? 

Ling: No. 
[With everything settled now, the Boss and the Writer get up, gather their things, dismissing Ling and the Outlier from their attention, and leave. As they go, Ling speaks to the Outlier.] 

Ling: What do you think? 
[The Outlier . . . just shrugs. She and Ling sit there, facing exactly the same direction as they were in before, not making a move, not even putting their papers away, just looking at the other two leaving. . . . Ling has a wry smile on her face and eventually turns back around and starts to pack up slowly. The Outlier makes a face]
that indicates disgust and frustration.} (field notes, November 4, 1992, p. 9)

As other people began to drift out of the classroom, one group of five continued working, seemingly on the project. Indicating that last group, Professor G. remarked to me proudly, “Who needs teachers? They can do it themselves” (field notes, November 4, 1992, p. 9).

In an interview later, Ling recounted this incident and commented,

Ling: Original, I want to collect some information from the newspaper maybe in Chinese, English. Maybe in Chinese language the newspaper, but they seem not very interested in this suggestion. . . . I think they [would show] much interest in the idea but they don’t. I don’t know why. Maybe they just like newspaper in English.

Interviewer: And what did you think about that yourself?
Ling: I think if we can do this, we can use two kind of newspaper, one of American and maybe not in only Chinese, maybe in other language, that means the newspaper from other country, maybe it should be better than we use two American newspapers.

Interviewer: Why?
Ling: Because for this exercise the newspaper bias [is the question] and I think the special bias will be very clear between, if we use two kind of newspaper from two countries. . . . That[’s] what I think but they don’t like, maybe they are not interested in this.

Interviewer: That day, did you and L [the Outlier] talk about their decision, of their interest or lack of interest after class?
Ling: L say nothing. I already express my suggestion. If they like a newspaper in Chinese, I can do that, but they are not interested. L did not show any opinion. L say she is still very interesting in this, but she say anyway if this two people wanted to do that, just they [would/should] do that. She is not sure; she’s a nice girl but she not insisting in anything.

Interviewer: Do you think she should have insisted?
Ling: Yes, I think. It’s a little bit pity if we don’t use my suggestion.

Interviewer: Did you think about it any more after that?
Ling: Yes, I think about it but I think this is a group exercise. If most of the member in this group want to do this way, I will be in favor, I think. Of course, I think my suggestion is not bad, but if most of member want to [do it] another way, I will agree with. (November 10, 1992, p. 7)

When the exercise was returned to the students, they received 15 out of 15 possible points. The Writer ended up doing the cartograms herself, with Ling contributing the answer to one question. Ling never saw the rest of the exercise and later in an interview described her disappoint-
ment at the whole affair because the most interesting part of the assignment for her would have been to experience drawing these cartograms, and she had had no hand in that.

Several of the expected benefits of group work were perverted in these two examples. Tasks were allotted, but only in the most perfunctory way, with group members neither aware of nor interested in what the other members had done. A leader emerged but simply made decisions on her own. Each member of the group potentially had something different to bring to the group, but Ling was not allowed to bring in her particular expertise; nor was she able to benefit from the expertise of the NES group members in an exercise in which they could have quite precisely informed her. There was almost no opportunity to speak; negotiation took place between the most powerful members of the group and the one the least in a position to insist; apparent consensus masked indifference, possible hostility, and the dictation of terms. Implicit in the remarks rejecting Ling’s suggestion (“Would you want to . . . do all that work? . . . Are you going to have time . . .?”) appears to be a construction of her as not equal to the task and a suggestion that she step back and allow those who were competent to take care of business.

Yang’s Nursing Program

A second, less detailed though perhaps more pointed example of positioning occurred in Yang’s nursing classes. This example seems worth examining because it undermines the possibility that the issue in these negative group work experiences was friendship rather than the failure to develop an appropriate socialacademic relationship. Although Ling was not friendly with the two leading members of her group, Yang was very friendly with her group mates yet was also constructed as something of a burden or a problem to be fixed.

Though trained as a medical doctor in China and typically highly successful in the nursing program’s academic course work, Yang had an extremely hard time communicating orally. Her professors found her pronunciation difficult to understand and reported feeling uncertain about whether she understood them. This posed a real problem in the clinical experiences required in the nursing program, particularly with patients who were ill and therefore unprepared to make an extra effort to understand her Chinese-accented English.

Fortunately, in professional training programs like nursing, cohorts of students take many of the same classes together and come to know each other well. This was the case with Yang. Although her first semester in the nursing program was quite tense and anxiety producing for her, by her second semester she had developed friendly relations with many of her
classmates, borrowing their class notes, for example, because she could not trust herself to understand the lectures well enough to be examined on their content. She also did what she could to reciprocate, often performing or offering to perform small, mechanical tasks, like running over to the next building to photocopy articles for her classmates when the line for the machine in the nursing school was long or sometimes supplying classmates with extra material. She said in an interview,

If I have some good material, I don’t need somebody ask me. I just bring class. I ask, who wants copy? . . . I just do little thing, so student know we can help each other. Maybe student know if my English got good, I can help them. But even though my English poor, I have some material for another class, I just bring class. (February 16, 1996, p. 2)

Many nursing courses required group work, according to the faculty interviews, on the assumption that nurses rarely work alone, and the same group of 7–12 students might work together for clinical rotations for several semesters. The course work for the class in focus here included a group project to be carried out in the community. The four nursing students in Yang’s group were sent to a power company to analyze the health care needs of company employees and then to produce a two-part educational program for the employees on 2 successive weeks that would address those needs. The project took about 6 weeks and required the group to produce (a) a needs analysis, (b) the two-part educational program, (c) a self-evaluation of the degree of success in educating the target group, (d) a paper describing the expected health conditions of the target group, and (e) a class presentation relating their experiences.

During the time period that the group of student nurses traveled to the company, they became well acquainted and developed a fondness for each other. For Yang, having lunch with these classmates once a week while they debriefed each other and prepared their self-evaluation was her only experience in 4 years of study in the United States of participating in an extended, informal gathering of NES students.

Interviewer: How often in the [average] day do you have conversation, friendly conversation?

Yang: Oh, just a little bit. Just meet somebody, just say hello, common greeting, common ask thing, not much. But since last week we got [the community] class, we got four student in one group. We go to communication every day . . . . We sit each other, we sit together, we talking about plan with the patient so we got a lot of opportunity to conversation. . . . So we can have lunch together every time, all the time we work on our project together. (March 15, 1996, p. 2)
She was very happy in this group; the group members worked well together, and the project and group presentation earned them an excellent grade.

What was obscured by this success, however, was the exact role that Yang played. Although she participated in all planning sessions and in the actual teaching sessions at the company, her role as she described it was quite limited.

My job just—a lot of job is done by my classmate—easy. . . . The other conversation job was done by my classmates. Everything else. . . . The [community] group very good, so they take care of everything. They don’t complain to something. But I do best I can. (interview, March 1, 1996, p. 3)

In the first teaching experience, her role was to introduce the other student nurses in her group, saying their names. Although this role was almost certainly intended to give her an easy task that would not jeopardize the group’s teaching program, it was also the most likely to produce complete incomprehension on the part of audience members, who heard the names pronounced in ways they could not anticipate or recognize and had no contextual clues that might have allowed them to become used to Yang’s accent. Her nursing professor, who was there to evaluate the group, was shocked at the incomprehensibility of Yang’s brief contribution.

The client group, middle-aged company employees, had indicated that they would be interested in learning relaxation techniques from the student nurses. In an interview Yang mentioned that she wanted to suggest to her group members the possibility of teaching Tai Chi to these clients, something that would have shown her in a very positive light with an expertise to share: “Maybe I can offer some Chinese technique like Tai Chi Chuan, you know. I will give something, I will talking to my friends, give some demonstration . . . .” (March 1, 1996, p. 5). In the second and final teaching session, however, Yang’s role consisted of holding up posters her group had prepared. She said of this session,

Just hate myself, I can’t get good English. So a lot of times the work my classmates do, I can do just little thing. . . . I can’t do good presentation, so for the same content, if I give presentation, give bad result; if my student-mates give presentation, very good action. . . . I just feel, if I had good English maybe I could do more job, do more work in our group. . . . I just feel, I owe to my friends, something to my group because a lot of job is done by my classmates, not me. (interview, March 15, 1996, p. 17)

This way of dealing with Yang’s presence in a group was not an isolated incident. In the Nursing Leadership class, Yang’s group was assigned to discuss hospital pricing structures. Yang’s public role consisted of holding
up the syringes or bandages that her NES classmates discussed as examples of variable-cost items.

Interviewer: Did you have to do any research?
Yang: No.
Interviewer: So some people got prices, and then some people talked, and then you were the demonstrators? [Another Chinese woman was in this group.]
Yang: Yeah. Demonstrators.
Interviewer: Like on the game show? Like Vanna White?
Yang: Yeah. Game show. Yeah, yeah, yeah. . . . They just say, you only pick up item, then show everybody. So, after she [the other Chinese woman] pick up, I will pick up. (October 23, 1996, p. 14)

Yang had unmistakable problems with English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Yet she had potential contributions to make. Despite the success of this project overall and her emotional satisfaction at developing affectionate bonds with her group mates, Yang’s potential contribution was obliterated by the limited role she was asked to play in the public portions of these projects and the group’s failure to take advantage of the special expertise she could have offered. No one but Yang was aware of her diminishment. Her reaction to this positioning is complex. On one hand, she was aware, with a certain sadness, that she was capable of much more; on the other hand, she was aware of her problems in making herself understood in English and repeatedly expressed gratitude to her colleagues for helping her. She summed up her attitude in one of the last interviews of one semester: “So I just hope no more group work” (April 19, 1996, p. 18).

DISCUSSION

Why Groups May Fail NNES Students

A number of researchers (Cohen, 1994; Ford, 1991; Holt, 1994; McGroarty, 1989) refer to the particular benefit of group work to NNES students in terms of language development and exposure to cultural features of a new environment, and the benefit to NES students in its promotion of increased tolerance to difference among the U.S. students in a group. However, not many of the expected benefits of group work were visible in the experiences of the six focal students. Ling’s and Yang’s experiences may have been the most poignant of those described by the participants in this study, but they were not isolated examples.

What might explain the bilingual students’ negative experiences in
these groups? Research in K–12 classrooms indicates that, to be successful, group work must be carefully planned. In several of the unsatisfying projects observed during this study, in fact, students were barely given more than a direction to work in groups. But in both the geography and the nursing classes, the instructions were precise and well considered. Thus, careful planning may not be enough to preempt unsatisfactory experiences.

K–12 researchers, in their references to social skill building, appear to be referring primarily to the ability to work with others in a friendly, cooperative, polite way. Nyikos and Hashimoto (1997) emphasize the importance of supportive social relations to the success of group work; although such relations may be crucial, they apparently are not sufficient. In Yang’s case, she considered her cohort in general and the students in her work group in particular as helpful, generous, and kind, constituting an important support system for her in her nursing studies. This genuine friendliness, however, did not preclude their seeming anticipation that she would not be able to contribute much to the group and that the group would generously carry her.

As noted earlier, Cowie et al. (1994) found that diversity among children learning cooperatively did not reduce cross-racial bullying. Despite Yang’s warm relations with her group, a perhaps unconscious bias, that is, a sense that linguistic difficulty suggests intellectual incapacity, may have played some role. But another possibility is that, as one international student put it, “The [domestic] student who has no experience on international students owns . . . a narrow thinking system and too much self-oriented mind.”7 In referring to the “too much self-oriented mind,” this student appears to suggest that the problem for these domestic students (or perhaps for anyone with little experience of diversity) is their failure or inability to conceptualize beyond their usual habits of mind.

One factor common to several of the evaluated course-sponsored group projects seemed to be how students allocated tasks. As they did so, students often redefined the task from one that would provide an opportunity to learn or practice to a job that merely had to get done, with the focus then being on how to get it done with the greatest efficiency and least expenditure of time and energy, usually by splitting up the tasks and never reintegrating the sections. This phenomenon is evident in Ling’s geography group. In their work on expertise, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) refer to such attempts to strip down the complexity of a project in order to deal with it in an efficient, routinized

7 Private conversation with an international student who was not a part of the study but had heard of my interest in NNES students’ experiences with group work and volunteered his comments, having participated in numerous group projects as a student in the United States.
way as a *novice* response to a complex problem. They compare this novice response to *expert* response, in which the expert is willing to approach the problem in its complexity and experiment with it or devise new solutions. In a sense, the students in Ling’s dysfunctional group, for example, looked for ways to get the job done without having to learn anything; that is, they were behaving like novices.

Yet in their interactions with the bilingual students in their groups, both Ling’s and Yang’s group mates, consciously or not, appeared to be positioning themselves as experts, masters, or at least more senior members of a community of practice and their bilingual group mates as novices, incompetents, or apprentices. But the relationship among members of a group in a cooperative learning situation and the relationship between an apprentice and a master presume quite a different positioning of work participants. Ling and Yang assumed at the outset of their group work experiences that they would be working on an equal footing with their domestic counterparts and would have something to teach them as well as something to learn from them. That is, they did not position themselves as apprentices seeking to enter a community of practice but rather as equally competent learners in a learning community. Ling in particular attempted to resist her positioning as a noncontributor and assert her right to contribute. Yang may have inadvertently opened the door to her positioning as someone to be trusted mainly with mechanical jobs through her attempts to repay her classmates’ kindness to her by doing them small favors. Yet when she photocopied for classmates the articles she thought they should have, she was struggling to cast herself not only as grateful classmate but also as distributor of knowledge and information.

Furthermore, in their struggle Ling and Yang were not supported by their teachers, who might have been in a better position than the domestic students to conceive of contributions the bilingual students could make and might have intervened in reconfiguring the positionings of the various group members. But their teachers remained unaware of the dynamics of these groups; in fact, part of the philosophy of cooperative learning as understood and instantiated by the faculty interviewed in this study was that group relationships must find their own way, that a leader, for example, cannot be appointed but rather will emerge. In data not presented here, however, there is some evidence to support the idea that when satisfying group work experiences occurred for these NNES students, it was in conjunction with a teacher’s intervention to assert equality of roles within the groups (Leki, in press). We as

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8 Kanno (1999) argues somewhat similarly against an overly sanguine view of communities of practice within the legitimate peripheral participation framework in relation to language minority children.
ESL professionals then may have an important role to play in alerting educators in institutions of higher education to the special conditions created by NNES students in work groups so that they can make a purposeful effort to support these students’ contributions. Perhaps the potential benefits of access to diversity for domestic students cannot be actualized without the specific creation of a more level playing field by someone in a position to do so.

**Power and Language**

Certainly group work evokes issues of power—the power to define others and to force them to behave in ways consonant with that construction. The voices of the least powerful, the NNES students, tended to be muted or ignored in the unsatisfactory group work experiences. Their own presumption of equality with the domestic students collided with the domestic students’ construction of the NNES students as variously handicapped. (See also Lara, 1993, for similar examples of the fate of low-status group members in relation to higher status, male Anglo students.)

In addition, in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) terms, everyone participates in a variety of overlapping communities of practice. For Ling, one such community was the geography class, where she considered herself a full participant. Another was the community of practice of U.S. college students, and here she did not consider herself a full participant, perfectly aware that she was not familiar with all of this community’s practices and knowledge, as her inability to do the first geography exercise showed. She was interested in participating more fully in that community of practice. Yet by refusing to discuss the group exercises with her, Ling’s group mates used their power to deny her access to some of the practices of the U.S. college student community and thus to fuller participation in that community and, by the same token, to full participation in the geography class. Ironically, although Ling was unwilling to accept her positioning as merely a peripheral member of the geography group, she might well have been willing to take on an apprentice role in relation to her domestic group mates’ roles as senior or master members of a certain segment of the community of U.S. college students. Instead, she was denied that access and, as Lave and Wenger predict, in coercive, exclusionary situations such as Ling’s group, “communities of practice may well develop interstitially and informally” (p. 64), circumventing the power holders to some degree, as was the case with Ling and the Outlier.
CONCLUSION

In focusing on such features of the learning environment as the roles of curriculum, teachers, teaching methods, or students’ backgrounds, including their L1s and native cultures, L2 teachers and researchers have tended to neglect English learners’ relationships with their peers and the impact that these relationships have on English learners’ ability to take full advantage of their educational experiences. This study has shown how power differentials, exaggerated by linguistic limitations in English, variously prevented the learners from managing social/academic interactions to their own advantage. In the maneuvering and positioning that takes place within groups, NNES students must struggle to hold their own. In an article examining the notion of consensus in collaborative learning, Trimbur (1989) maintains that working to develop consensus “enables individuals to participate actively and meaningfully in group life. . . . it is through the social interaction of shared activity that individuals realize their own power to take control of their situation by collaborating with others” (p. 604). Unfortunately, the NNES students in this study were not able to “realize their own power to take control of their situation.” Instead they appeared more often to be reminded of their lack of power and control.

The findings of this study also challenge stereotypes about, for example, Asians being better at working in groups because they are group oriented and not individualistic. Ling’s willingness to go along with the group was equally likely to have resulted not from a cultural predisposition to sacrifice the self for the group but rather from a sharp sense of her own powerlessness and lack of support in the face of the two NES students in her group who took over and disallowed significant input from her.

The participants in this study reported many more instances of dissatisfaction with, even dread of, group work than instances of satisfaction. On balance, group work did not fare well with the NNES students, at least in part because of the social/academic relationships they experienced with their domestic peers. In various ways, gaining access to communities of practice required the students in this study to take subordinate roles when they felt entitled to full, not peripheral, participation. The particular obstacles that NNES students face in group projects in courses across the curriculum may limit what they get from the group experience and what they are allowed to contribute, even in groups whose members share friendly relations. Furthermore, often the disappointing features of the group work appeared to be invisible to the course instructor, sometimes hidden behind positive evaluations of the final group project itself. Yet, despite dogma about learning communi-
ties finding their own way, in groups that include differentially empowered students, the teacher’s role may be crucial not only to success of the project but much more importantly to legitimizing the participation of bilingual students and to expanding the “narrow thinking system” of domestic students.

Although conflict may be inevitable in social relations, as Toohey (1998) remarks, “if educators are to understand how to transform the social structures in the milieus for which they have responsibility—classrooms—so as to prepare students effectively for . . . conflicts . . . , investigation of the social practices in those situations must be ongoing, critical, and broad” (p. 83). Researchers have a responsibility to look for answers to L2 research questions beyond the contexts in which L2 teachers and researchers are directly involved and to look toward broader considerations of social contexts and the social, political, and economic world L2 students inhabit. Although what bilingual students experience outside ESL classes may seem to be out of the purview of individual ESL teachers, I would argue that all responsibility for the rest of their college experiences does not end for us at our classroom doors, or at altering L2 students to fit better into their environments. The environment also needs to be altered. Programs that attempt to create communities of learners across linguistic and cultural barriers (Babbitt, in press; Johns, in press; Vann & Myers, in press) have claimed some success. If not individual ESL teachers, then administrators of ESL programs perhaps have ongoing responsibilities to take their knowledge and expertise beyond their ESL programs and out to the wider college. Tricamo and Snow (1995), in discussing programs like Project LEAP (Learning English-for-Academic-Purposes), which attempt to educate faculty across the curriculum about how better to support learning for NNES students, make the point that course adjustments made for the benefit of L2 students benefit all students. By the same token, creating better group experiences for bilingual students creates better experiences for all students and may move them all toward behaving better in a culturally diverse society.

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REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Partial Weekly/Biweekly Interview Guide

The following questions served as a guide for interviews conducted during the semester. Other questions were asked at the beginning and end of each semester and after final exams. The interviewers kept this guide in front of them during the interviews to ensure that they touched on all topic areas, but they did not necessarily ask these particular questions at any given time, the questions were not always asked in order, and other topics arose during the interviews. Interviewers received additional directions on collecting copies of all course documents and assignments. In the interest of space, not included here are questions covering returned work, reading assignments, study habits, daily routine, and social life.

Sample Questions on Writing Assignments

• What are you working on now or what will you be working on in the next two weeks in each of your courses?
• Why do you think your teacher gave you this particular kind of an assignment to do? (What is the professor’s purpose in assigning it? What does the professor want you to learn from it or get out of it?)
• What did you learn from doing this assignment? How useful was it for you to do this assignment?
• How did you figure out how to do the assignment? (Ask teacher, explicit guidelines, ask classmates, follow model of some kind?)
• What do you have to do to do well in this assignment? What is your teacher looking for in assigning a grade?
• How does this assignment compare to other assignments you’ve done? How useful was it to you in helping you learn about the subject or about how to do something in the subject area?

Sample Questions on Group Work

• How is your group project going?
• How have you divided up the work? Which part did you do/work on? When, where, how did you meet to work on the project?
• If you have study partners, how do you help each other? (Share notes, talk about class work, edit each other’s papers, divide up the reading, etc.) Can you give a specific example or show me a specific assignment you did with the help of a peer? Describe how you did this assignment.
• Are you having any problems communicating with study partners or group project members? If so, describe.