Postgraduate Students' Engagement in Cooperative EFL Writing: An Investment Perspective

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Abstract

The past few decades have foregrounded cooperative learning and its pedagogical implications for students' academic, psychological, and social gains, particularly, in the Western context. These gains, nonetheless, were sometimes questioned and doubted in the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) countries such as China. This study adopts Norton's investment model and seeks to investigate Chinese postgraduate students' experiences of cooperative writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in a local context. The focus is particularly on the mechanism of Chinese students' engagement/disengagement with cooperative learning and the multiple influences on it. Analysis of the data set, which includes five focus group interviews with postgraduate students from a local university in mid-western China, shows that Chinese students' group engagement patterns may vary and be closely linked with their current and imagined identities/communities that engagement in cooperative writing could bring to them. Implications are then drawn to better realize the potential of cooperative learning in the identified context and beyond.

Keywords: Student engagement, Cooperative writing, EFL, Chinese postgraduate students, Investment and identity

Cooperative learning, which advocates the structured use of small groups for maximized learning outcomes (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), is currently one of the most widely adopted classroom pedagogies. This popularity is not only grounded on the latest learning and cognitive theory (Tran, 2013), but also on the solid and ample evidence from baseline research (Gillies,

Millis & Davidson, 2023). Studies, for example, have found that students, while engaging in dynamic group interactions, would improve more in cognitive capacity and critical thinking skills, develop more positive attitudes towards their learning experience, and enjoy better relations with group members and higher self-esteem than they do in competitive or individualistic learning settings (Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2009, Slavin, 1980). The largely positive correlation of cooperative learning with students' academic, social, and psychological gains in the Western contexts, however, is questioned in Confucian Heritage Cultural (CHC) contexts, where competition is intense, and learners are believed to be generally passive and reticent (Thanh-Pham, 2014). This is because the key to unlocking the benefits of cooperative learning relies largely on learners' engagement (Gillies, 2016). When students in competitive settings are accustomed to individualistic learning, cooperative pedagogy might become complicated and even problematic (Hiver et al., 2021).

This exploratory study is situated in China, one of the typical CHC contexts, and seeks to explore the complexities involved in Chinese postgraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' engagement/disengagement with cooperative writing. The focus is particularly on how Chinese learners of a higher degree engage in group work and what factors may impact their engagement or disengagement. This study is expected to add to the nuanced understanding of the applicability and application of cooperative learning in China and possibly the CHC contexts in a more general sense.

Learner Engagement: A Working Definition

Learner engagement encompasses students' cognitive, emotional, behavioral as well as social involvement in the learning process (Fan, 2020, Philp & Duchesne, 2016). This study, however, chooses to use student engagement in a more general and integrated sense. This is because we see learner engagement as an interplay between all these intra-personal dimensions and the situated context, and categorizing learner engagement into dimensions may have little value to the purpose of this study, which is to understand our learners' engagement experiences and dynamics in group writing. We operationalize engagement in our study with a focus on the behavioral aspect as "all domains of engagement involve some degree of action" (Hiver et al., 2021, p. 2) and adopt Sang and Hiver's (2021, p. 21) view of behavioral engagement as "students' expenditure of effort on learning tasks, the quality of their participation, and their degree of active involvement in the learning process".

Learner Engagement in Cooperative Learning

The myriad of benefits that group work has for students are well evidenced (Sawyer & Obeid, 2017), among which particularly noted is the predictability that in-depth and authentic engagement has for quality learning outcomes (e.g., Coates, 2005; Nguyen et al., 2016; Schlechty, 2011). While group work is often employed to enhance learner engagement and active and deep learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), putting students in groups, however, does not necessarily lead to cooperative learning. For cooperative learning to happen, key principles such as positive interdependence, promotive interactions, individual accountability, pre-trained skills, and group processing (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) must be embedded within group structure. In this paper, we refer to group writing as cooperative learning because the training we provided to the students was based on the five principles of cooperative learning.

Previous research on peer interaction in group work has revealed that certain interaction patterns among peers seem more conducive to learning than others. Storch (2002), for example,

develops a model of dyadic interaction out of an investigation of Asian ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. The model identifies four distinct peer interaction patterns: collaborative, dominant/passive, dominant/dominant, and expert/novice, and positions them along the two indexes distinguished in the work of Damon and Phelps (1989): equality (group learners' authority over the task) and mutuality (the level of group learners' engagement with each other's contribution). Storch (2002) also reveals that interaction patterns and ESL learners' proficiency development are highly correlated with more positive knowledge transfer occurring with the collaborative and expert/novice interaction patterns.

Storch's (2002) work on dyadic interaction inspired later research on peer interaction in different contexts and of different group sizes. Most of the studies on pair work do not find the dominant/dominant pattern, but their findings resonate with Storch's (2002) conclusion that patterns of interaction impact on language learning. Research on Japanese university ESL learners (Watanabe & Swain, 2007), for example, reveals that student pairs are more likely to achieve better learning outcomes or enjoy English learning opportunities more when engaging in collaborative interaction patterns. The collaborative relationship within a dyadic pair is also found to have more consequential impacts on the learning opportunities of Saudi Arabic university ESL learners than the language proficiency variable (Storch & Aldosari, 2013).

Also drawing on Storch's (2002) model, researchers investigated the interaction patterns in larger groups of three, four or more in various ESL and EFL writing contexts (Cho, 2017; Li & Zhu, 2013, 2017a, 2017b; Loo, 2019; Wang, 2022; Zheng, 2012). Three distinct interaction patterns, are found among Chinese university EFL students: 1) collectively contributing/ mutually supportive, 2) authoritative/responsive, and 3) dominant/withdrawn (Li & Zhu, 2013), with the first pattern reporting the most learning opportunities. Li and Zhu's (2017b) later findings in the US context show a similar relationship between interaction patterns of small groups and writing quality although the patterns of interaction differ from their previous study (Li & Zhu, 2013): Collective (High equality, high mutuality), expert/novice (mid-low equality, high mutuality), dominant/defensive (low equality, low mutuality), and cooperating-in-parallel (high equality, low mutuality). Cho's (2017) and Wang's (2022) studies compared the collaboration patterns of student groups across two writing tasks and found that students exhibited the facilitator (expert)/participant pattern in task one, but that pattern either changed to collaborative pattern or dominant/passive pattern in task two. As one of the few that compare out-of-class collaboration in face-to-face mode and computer-mediated mode, Loo's (2019) study of English learners at a Malaysian university reveals that the former mode has higher mutuality than the latter.

Compared with students' patterns of interaction in L2 group writing, factors affecting engagement patterns are under-researched. Early studies tend to attribute different interaction patterns to learner differences in personality and language proficiency (Storch, 2004; Ghanbari & Abdolrezapour, 2020). Later research, on the other hand, attempts to interpret interaction patterns using activity theory (Cho, 2017; Storch, 2004; Wang, 2022) and sociocultural theory (Li & Zhu, 2017a). Storch (2004), for instance, finds that the varied dyadic interaction patterns displayed by her participants in an ESL writing class reflect different learner goals and goal alignment of the pairs working on the writing tasks. More recent studies, like Li and Zhu (2017a) and Cho (2017), while trying to explain the interaction patterns of English learners working on two group writing tasks using wiki, indicate the critical roles of goals, agency and emotion in interaction patterns across the two tasks. Loo (2019) finds that the most critical influencing

factors for face-to-face groups include roles played by group members such as group leader and critique, relationships among group members, group size, members' attention to language, and the presence of group members. For the computer-mediated groups, members' attitudes to the collaborative tasks, online mode of collaboration, and pedagogical aspects (the submission deadline for example) matter more for collaboration. Also, when group work is part of the curriculum and students are assessed on it, their engagement and interaction would be impacted by assessment (Adesina, et al., 2023; Nichols & Dawson, 2012). For instance, 40 of the 64 EFL students in Ajmi and Ali's survey (2014) believe teachers should have in place clear assessment criteria that reflect students' contribution to group writing. The fact that some students can get a free ride in group writing lead six students to prefer individual work.

While early studies on pair writing were mainly conducted in a face-to-face and in-class mode, most research on small group writing occurs in computer-mediated communication settings such as Wiki, where students can collaborate both synchronously and asynchronously. Students in these studies do not need to meet face to face in order to collaborate, thanks to the affordance of digital technology (Storch, 2019). While some of these studies specify where the collaboration in question occurs (outside class or in class) (e.g., Ansarimoghaddam & Tan, 2013; Li & Kim, 2016; Peeters, 2015), most do not provide such information. As a result, we believe whether group writing is performed in class or outside class does not make much difference in the computer-mediated context. Our students' small group writing mainly occurred outside the class and in a traditional face-to-face setting. A literature search reveals that very little research examines interaction patterns of L2 group writing in such settings or compares in-class and out-of-class writing collaboration. Loo's (2019) study, which focuses on out-of-class collaboration in the face-to-face and computer-mediated modes, mentions in passing the differences between in-class and out-of-class collaboration. The author argues that for out-of-class collaboration, the need for group members to take on roles can be stronger than in-class collaboration, where the instructor can be relied on to guide and monitor the collaboration. In summary, most past studies on interaction in small-group writing concern undergraduate students in a computer-mediated mode or in a face-to-face class setting. Our study on graduate ESL students' group writing attempts to fill the research gap in the literature by examining out-of-class face-to-face small group writing at the upper-intermediate level (Zhang & Plonsky, 2020).

In addition, previous studies have mostly adopted a predominantly psychological lens and quantitative method. As a response to the "social turn of applied linguistics" (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 36), our study attempts to explore postgraduate students' out-of-class group writing engagement from a sociological perspective. Rather than quantitatively analyzing students' turn distribution, contributions, and language functions to derive group interaction patterns and their psychological influences, we elicit data via in-depth interviews to give voice to learners and explore their group writing experiences thereby. Specifically, we intend to examine from students' perspective how they behaviourally engage in cooperative writing, and how their patterns of interaction shape and are shaped by the understanding of their relationship to the world.

Investment and Language Learning

We argue that students' engagement in EFL group writing is a form of investment in language learning and, hence, attempt to interpret their engagement with the language investment theory (Norton, 1995). This theory views learners' investing in a particular target language as usually

coupled with the expectation of "a good return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources" (Norton, 1995, p. 17) and an opportunity to change their real or imagined identity in their social context (Norton, 2010). Conversely, learners' existing and imagined identities influence their investment in the target language and the language practices of a particular classroom.

The framework foregrounds learners' agency in their investment in the target language or certain language practices (Darvin & Norton, 2015). If a learner does not see the relevance of or benefits from their investment to their identities, they may choose to invest less or stop investing in the target language. Similarly, the perception that the practices of their learning context oppose their values or place them in a powerless position may negatively affect the learner's investment in those language practices (Norton, 2003; 2013). In contrast, when learners are given freedom to make meaning in learning activities and possess expertise over the meaning-making activities, such investment can have more personalized meanings, give learners more power and sense of ownership (Trent, 2008), and reinforce the identities desirable to them (Norton, 2010). Just as one's identity is multiplex and constantly changing over historical time and social space, investment in a target language involves constant power negotiation in the learning process and therefore can be "complex, contradictory and in a state of flux" (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 37).

A large body of literature adopts the investment framework in understanding learners' engagement in SLA (e.g., Gao et al., 2008; Norton, 1995, 2013; Norton & De Costa, 2018; Trent, 2008). Norton's (e.g., 1995, 2001, 2013, 2016) own works on immigrant women, for example, reveal that some decided to withdraw from the ESL classes either because the classroom language practices failed to address their complex identities as immigrant learners, or because their imagined identities were not affirmed or extended. The imagined community ("any community of the imagination that is desirable to the language learner" (Norton, 2016, p. 477) played a critical role in two Taiwanese doctoral students' investment in English learning and, more importantly, in the future communities they aspired to join (Chang, 2011). School children in Norton (2003) displayed more agency, passion, and willingness to invest in self-chosen rather than teacher-prescribed reading because the enjoyment from reading gave them ownership and power over meaning construction and further a more confident identity and stronger agency.

Most of this research, however, focuses on reading and speaking (e.g., Gao et al., 2008; Trent, 2008; Norton, 2003). This exploratory study attempts to fill in the research gap by probing into the group writing engagement of EFL learners from the perspective of language investment and identity. Specially, this study wishes to address two research questions:

> *1. How did Chinese postgraduate students engage in cooperative EFL writing?*

> *2. What influenced Chinese postgraduate students' engagement as viewed from the investment perspective?*

Methodology

Context

This study was conducted in a tier-1 university at a mid-western inland province of China, where both economy and education indexes rank among the lowest in the country (National Bureau of Statistics, China, 2021). Its higher degree education had been in a rather

disadvantaged position as well, with limited national and local financial support until the university was enlisted in the *Double-First-Class Initiative* (An initiative that the Chinese Government launched in 2017 to build up top-class universities and academic disciplines) lately. The university, hence, could usually enrol graduate students, whose scores at the National Postgraduate Entrance Examination are minimally above the national enrolment cut-off line. Notably, though, as one of the earliest universities in the country, it is keen to catch up with the latest higher education developments. The group work that this study focused on is an attempt for this university to turn to innovative pedagogy to invigorate its classrooms and uplift its education quality.

The expansion of the graduate enrolment from 1500 to 4500 annually over the past few years, seems to, on the other hand, have put great pressure on English teaching staff, the number of which has not increased as rapidly. Despite the exemption policy to those who have passed the College English Test Band 6 (the advanced level a nationwide popular English proficiency test in China for non-English majors) or 6.5 in IELTS, the class size was still large, with 50 to 60 students on average.

Curriculum and Teacher Arrangements

The study is based on a semester-long EFL essay writing course designed to prepare first-year graduate students of non-English majors for English writing in their subsequent learning and academic careers. The course is compulsory for all those who have not been exempted. The curriculum includes a weekly two-hour lecture and requirements in terms of English written communicative abilities, English writing strategies, and 5-6 essays of 300-500 words and of varied logical patterns. The topics used over the data-collecting term included "why many young people do not like to get married these days (cause and effect)", "my parents' generation and my generation (comparison and contrast)", "mobile phone users as I know of (classification)", "how XX university come to this far" (chronological pattern), and so on. These topics, mostly practical and close to students' lives, were chosen so that they can get information easily. Still, the heavy workload that teachers are faced up with has made student engagement and cooperation via group work crucial for this course to achieve the intended teaching/learning objectives. At least, the teacher and one of the researchers thinks so and she has taken the following measures to make the EFL writing class a cooperative one.

Firstly, the teacher asked the students to group up in 3s to 4s as they chose to and select a group-leader for each group. Bigger groups were allowed on special occasions only, like the students sharing a dormitory or they strongly requested so. This is grounded on Thanh-Pham's (2014) finding that friendship and leader-led grouping works better for CHC learners than mixed-ability and role-rotating grouping.

Secondly, the teacher shared with students the rationale for cooperative learning and its five principles (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), and provided them with training on how to cooperate, which is a prerequisite for cooperative pedagogy (Gillies, 2016). Specifically, the teacher asked students to write an essay on a given topic in the first session on paper or their electronic devices such as a laptop or tablet, and then used student essay samples to demonstrate in the next few weeks 1) how to divide labor and cooperate with peers; 2) how to identify gaps for improvement; 3) how to provide and act on specific and constructive feedback for idea development, content, logic, organization, grammar, vocabulary use and mechanics, and 4)

how to facilitate further revisions on the draft and to improve the text quality. These procedures are further clarified in Table 1 below with the first writing as an example.

Table 1. Procedures followed in and out of class

Week	Class arrangements	Students Tasks
1st	Teacher shares curriculum arrangements. Teacher elaborates on why cooperative learning is needed. Teacher asks students to group up into 3s or 4s.	Students draft an essay in class on a given topic on "Why so many people go to graduate school these days?"
2nd	1-2 groups of students demonstrate how they worked out their first draft. Other groups provide feedback. Teacher provides feedback and shows with these examples to the class how to work cooperatively within groups, stages of writing (such as brainstorming, outlining and drafting), and how to avoid possible pitfalls.	Students work on their first draft based on the teacher's and other groups' feedback in class and continue out of class.
3rd	1-2 groups of students demonstrate how they worked on their second draft. Other groups provide feedback. Teacher provides feedback and shows with these examples how to identify room for improvement in the areas of idea, structure, and language.	Students continue to work on their second draft based on the teacher's and intergroup feedback in class and continue out of class.
4th	1-2 groups of students demonstrate how they work on their third draft. Other groups are encouraged to share their experience in intra-group interaction. The teacher shows the class how to give and act on feedback with their examples for further improving their writings.	Students continue to work on their third draft based on the teacher's and intergroup feedback in class and continue out of class. They then submit the final version.

Throughout the process, the teacher encouraged and facilitated students to work collaboratively and engage themselves in intra- and inter-group interactions. In this way, the teacher has tried to fulfil a teacher's role as required for cooperative pedagogy (Gillies, 2016) and demonstrated to the students how to work in groups to improve EFL writing. With each session time limited (2 hours), most of the group work was done out of class as homework or assignments. Students were encouraged to meet face to face for the sake of immediate response and close interaction. As a result of this process, each group needed to complete three drafts for each of the 6 writing tasks. As these groups shared the same grade for their group work, students were expected to work as hard in their groups to improve their writing as they possibly could. Given the evidenced washback effect of assessment on student engagement in group work (Adesina et al., 2023), the impact of the assessment arrangements as such on participants' behavior is expected. For that reason, the grades from these co-authored essays accounted for half of the final assessment results, with the remaining 30% allocated to a timed essay writing examination at the end of the term and 20% to class participation. Our study mainly focuses on out-of-class intra-group interaction which took more time than in-class cooperative writing. As their interactions out of class were unable to be observed and asking them to keep a journal would

increase their workload, we adopted the focus group interview to collect data, being aware of the limitations of the methodology (Creswell, 2015).

Participants Selection and Data Collection

At the last teaching session, the teacher and researcher asked for voluntary participation in a focus group interview. Five groups from the two classes accepted the invitation. The students were of mixed genders, with majors ranging from History, Physical Education, Arts, to Chemistry, and 22 to 25 years old. With each group consisting of three to four members, the participants of this study numbered 17. Focus group interviews encouraged the interaction of group members, while allowing different opinions to be expressed efficiently (Creswell, 2015). Focus groups also enhanced the trustworthiness of our research because participants talked about the engagement dynamics of their group in the presence of other members. Information about the research was conveyed to the participants to ensure they understood the purposes of the study. Consent was obtained from each of the participants before the focus group interviews were conducted. They were also informed that the interview data would be anonymized and used for research only, and that their participation/non-participation would not affect their grades or any other stakes.

The five group interviews were conducted at an agreed time, at an agreed place on campus. Mandarin Chinese was used to ensure full communication and conveyance of nuanced meanings. An interview schedule consisting of open questions was adopted to examine the participants' experiences of group work and the factors influencing their engagement. Students were also asked to provide specific examples to explain their statements so that data was contextualized and the validity of the research was ensured. The five focus-group interviews, which lasted for 45-60 minutes each, were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

The prepared interview data were subjected to a categorical content analysis, which aims to explore meanings, themes, and patterns from the text data source (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Specifically, the researchers read the data several times and annotated using either the participants' words such as "future plans" and "good relationship within the group" or generated codes (Creswell, 2015) such as "varied English proficiency" and "interaction pattern". This careful open coding process was iterative and gradually condensed so that larger themes emerged by collapsing the initial codes (Creswell, 2015). See Table 2 for the process when generating the second theme from the data: "varied English proficiency and reduced interest in English".

Table 2. Example of step-by-step data analysis

Data analysis procedure	Examples of codes and categories
Open coding (initial categories either using students' original words or researchers' summaries)	English is deteriorating (group 1) Feel one's English is not good enough (group 1) Different levels of English: lower proficiency members are dependent, thus less engagement (group 2) "Not interested in English" (group 4) "losing goals in English learning, English is a tool after all" (group 5)
Collapsing of initial categories	Different Levels of English; less and less interest in English
Re-examining the transcripts using the initial categories to make sure the themes cover all texts	
Combining the two headings into one	Varied English proficiency and reduced interest in English

The emerging categories were further reasoned. For example, when analyzing how our participants engaged in group work, we found the groups reported different interaction patterns. We initially attempted to use the previous interaction models based on mutuality and equality to scrutinize our data and explain the patterns, only to find it insufficient for our data: we realized that equality and mutuality did not seem to be the factors that distinguish our students' interaction patterns. We then used inductive reasoning to allow the data to tell the story and generated categories of interaction unique to our data. With the influencing factors, the themes were grounded from students' reports first before they were interpreted using the investment framework to get our findings theorized. In this sense, a familiarizing-coding-theme generating-reasoning process (Creswell, 2015) was followed. Constant comparison of the codes with the data across transcripts, and frequent conferencing between the two researchers ensured the trustworthiness and led to below findings related to our research questions.

Findings

The findings are reported under two themes/headings that correspond to our research questions: participants' engagement in cooperative writing and influencing factors for participants' engagement.

Participants' Engagement in Cooperative Writing

Data analysis revealed that the five groups' engagement appeared to fall on a continuum of willingness to engage in group work from disengagement/passive engagement, engagement by division of labor, to willing group cooperation (Figure 2).
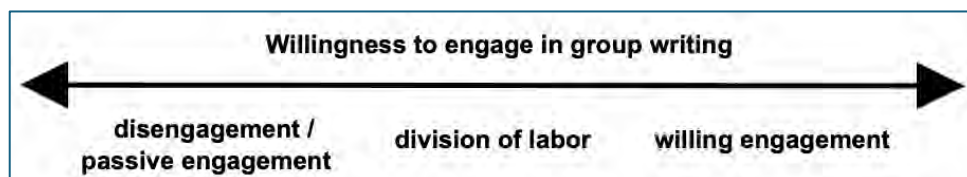

Figure 1. Willingness to engage in cooperative group writing continuum

Except Group 1 whose members displayed little to no willingness to engage in group work, the other four groups all practiced group planning, drafting, revising and editing in accordance with the teacher's instructions. The five groups' modes of engagement fell into two major categories: passive engagement and active engagement as described below in Table 3.

Table 3. Two main modes of engagement

Engagement mode	Division of labor	Responsibility	Interaction
Passive	The writing group is divided into two smaller groups. Each smaller group writes on their own. After comparing their writings, the better version is submitted (Group 1)	Students write in smaller groups or completing individual writing from planning to the final product in the smaller group	No large group interaction
Active	Group members take turns to be the leader for each writing task or each writing task is divided among group members (Groups 2 and 5)	Leader is responsible for drafting, editing and revising or each member responsible for their own part of the writing	Group planning; group reviewing; writer editing and revising
	No division of labor (Groups 3 and 4)	Shared responsibility or main writer making the final decision	Group planning; group writing; group reviewing; group editing and revising

Participants working in the mode of disengagement/passive engagement (as illustrated by Group 1) showed their passivity first of all in not working as a group. Rather, as shown in Group 1 interview excerpts below, they split into two subgroups for convenience's sake and then worked as it suited them. When they could not find time to meet, the two groups "took turns" to save labor.

> A: We do not live in the same dormitory, which made it difficult for us to complete everything together due to varied personal schedules… Therefore, we took turns to do the work. Our small group (living in the same dormitory) completed the whole writing task this time and the other small group did the next writing assignment.

When they had time, each subgroup might come up with homework, which then was compared and contrasted so that they could submit a "better" one.

> C: You know, we two share a dormitory room. Sometimes we do our own [instead of working with others as a group]. When we do not agree with the other subgroup, we compare our work with theirs and decide on a better one to submit.

When neither of the two subgroups finished the assignment, they may "patch up" one from whatever they have got. As B said: "You know, when labor is not clearly divided, duty shirking may happen. None has done the work, then we have to patch up a rough one to submit".

Worse still, the two subgroups did not seem to have written the essay cooperatively at all, as C frankly admitted in the interview: "As my English is not good, I think I'd better leave the work to those whose English is good. So, they did most of the work; I contributed some opinions only."

On all these occasions, cooperative writing might have happened within the subgroups but definitely not as the teacher designed and expected to. They tended to rely more on their own knowledge and skills and/or the teacher's feedback in completing the writing assignments other than the feedback from their group members, as such seemed to have, failed to make the best use of the "developmental affordances provided by language" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 207).

Willingness to engage in cooperative writing not only makes a qualitative distinction between Group 1 and the other groups, but also quantitatively distinguishes the groups in the category of active engagement. That is, compared with Groups 2 and 5, Groups 3 and 4 seemed more willing to cooperate in group writing and reported higher enjoyment of the experience. However, looking closer at the four groups, we found the differences between each pair (Groups 2 & 5 and Group 3 & 4) consisted in their patterns of interaction in cooperative writing.

Members in Groups 3 and 4 seemed to have a more intimate relationship and "the discourse in the engagement is extensive, intimate, and connected" (Damon and Phelps, 1989) as illustrated by the following quotes: "we had good relationships within the group … and there is no conflict" (Group 3) and "we are quite united, … everyone jumped onboard at every writing phase…. Every time we wrote the assignments, we worked on it together in the dormitory" (Group 4). While Group 4 reported more equal standing and collaborating in an everyone-was-involved-at-every-stage manner, it is worth noting that Group 3 was composed of a leading figure and very responsive members as shown in the following quote:

> Group 3: We believe it would be difficult for all to write a single text together. So, we had one main writer and others as supporters at all stages. The writer made the final decision whether to use peer suggestions and revisions or not.

Groups 2 and 5 distinguished from Groups 3 and 4 in that their members showed less willingness to engage in group work and peer interaction, thus showing lower mutuality than the latter groups. Despite this similarity, Group 5 differed from Group 2 in that the leader rotated among members of the former for each piece of writing, whereas the latter divided the labor among its members with each member taking responsibility for a part of the writing without an apparent leader.

> Group 2: We planned together. Then each of us was responsible for a certain part of the writing, for example, the opening paragraph, the body or the closing paragraph. Then we reviewed the text together, paying special attention to the consistent genre.

> Group 5: After we discussed the framework, we left one as the main writer which we took turns to be. All of us gave feedback during the process. The writer made the draft, edited it and revised the final product.

The members in these two groups may not be close, but they were able to negotiate a way to cooperate in the writing through dividing the labor among them.

On the other hand, Groups 3 and 5 both had a member who took the leading role in each piece of group writing whereas Groups 2 and 4 seemed to have a flatter relationship among members.

Most previous findings on patterns of interaction of small groups were based on the indexes of mutuality and equality. However, we came to realize that such deductive analysis fell short of explaining the interactions of the four groups in our study sufficiently; instead, these four writing groups seemed to be better differentiated by the indexes of mutuality and hierarchy. We therefore base the interaction patterns of the four writing groups on these two dimensions (Figure 2): the mutuality distinguished Groups 2 and 5 from Groups 3 and 4, whereas Groups 3 and 5 differed from Groups 2 and 4 in relation to the hierarchy among group members.
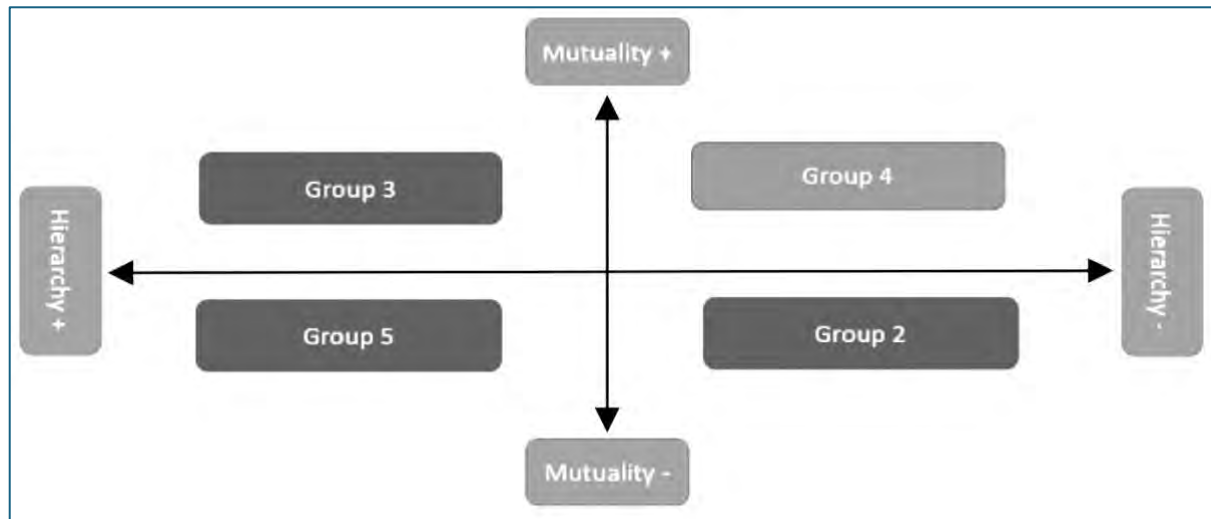

Figure 2: Interactive patterns of actively engaged groups

Influencing Factors for Participants' Engagement

In addition to these Chinese students' engagement patterns in cooperative writing, we probed the influencing factors for their engagement; that is, why they invested or not invested in cooperative writing. The data analysis revealed the following four factors: intra-group rapport, language proficiency, scoring rubrics and varied individual schedules or plans.

Intra-group rapport. Intra-group rapport (the friendly and supportive relationship among group members) was the most reported influence for group engagement, and also the most challenging one for most students. Good intra-group rapport led to students' active engagement and positive experience in the cooperative group work, which made it possible for learners to draw on peer resources to develop ideas, improve writing abilities and enhance writing quality. Three members from Group 4 emphasized the unity in their group, and here is an illustrative statement:

> In every stage, all expressed opinions and all voices were heard. … This provided me
> with an excellent opportunity to learn about others' strengths and weaknesses. And I
> was really inspired by the good points of others, which stimulated me to work hard.

Poor intra-group rapport was the leading cause for the learners' failure to be fully engaged in every stage of the writing process and generate new knowledge through conversational communication. For example, a student from Group 1 reported, "Nobody took the responsibility, and we had to submit a rough work at the last minute." Therefore, intra-group rapport appeared to be the deciding factor that impacts students' engagement in cooperative writing.

When delving deeper into the data, we found that the lack of intra-group rapport seems to have resulted from our participants' varied individual schedules. Unlike undergraduates, postgraduate students in China usually start considering their future career and engaging in part time jobs early in their study.

> Group 1: It's really difficult for us to do group work together. For example, I might have a job interview. He might need to do some part-time job. Things like these were not rare. We really cannot find a time fit for everyone.

In addition, some science students in the class were reported to be so busy with their lab experiments that they may spend long hours in the lab. It appears that for these students, lab research took up a major part of their life and indeed was what their degree thesis was based on. Their busy schedules may have interfered with their full engagement with cooperative writing.

Varied English proficiency and reduced interest in English. Although communicating in Chinese during the cooperative writing process, they reported that different English proficiency among group members was the culprit for the poor intra-group cooperation. For example, a student from Group 3 believed:

> Students' [English proficiency] gap led to unequal engagement/learning opportunity. Students good at English took a dominant role, knew how to get the work done and engaged more in group writing. In other words, under-performed students did not have many opportunities to write. They contributed little to the group work, only opinions.

It seems that students with poorer English were self-conscious of their language skills, making it difficult for them to contribute at the micro language level, particularly to their more proficient peers in the group. According to the extract, they mainly contributed at the macro content level (generating ideas for example) to the group writing. This quote also corroborated their pattern of interaction: one or two competent members dominated the writing, while others happily played the supporting roles. In addition, the reduced interest in English was also mentioned by three groups. Students in Groups 1 and 5 believed that a vicious cycle seemed to be at play: since entering the university, the goal of learning English was not as clear as in high school because English scores played a pivotal role in passing the university entrance exam. Some, therefore, lost the motivation to learn English, which led to performance deterioration and, finally, loss of interest: "English is a tool, after all" (Group 5).

Scoring policy. Scoring is an important part of assessment because it not only provides teachers with a guide to evaluate students' performance but is also used to distinguish students with regards to their performance. In order to encourage students' engagement in cooperative writing, we evaluated students not on the individual basis but on the group basis. However, in the focus group, the group-based scoring policy was the third most reported factor affecting engagement in group writing. Here is a typical quote from Group 5 interview:

> Since what we did was group work, the whole group was evaluated according to the final product. You would receive the same score as your group members regardless of your contribution. As a matter of fact, even if someone did not do anything, he/she received the same grade as their peers who completed the whole work. Therefore, some students took advantage of the product-based scoring policy and were happy to get some scores without doing any work.

The issue of scoring rubrics was particularly raised by Groups 1 and 5, where there was either minimal engagement in group writing or rotation of leadership in their interaction. Some participants believed such a scoring policy also allowed some members to evade their responsibility with the excuse of being less competent in English or being busy because "there are always others doing the assignment even if I am not doing it" (Group 1). This not only encouraged irresponsible behavior but also dampened the morale of the actively engaged members. During the focus interview, some participants also expressed their helplessness when such members were in their group because they were classmates after all. Yet, a Group 5 member asserted: "So the scoring must be improved. For example, no work, no grade. If so, students could be forced to participate and make contributions".

Students' short-term goals and future plans. As the students taking the writing class were from different disciplines ranging from archaeology and history to electrical engineering, they had varied career plans, which had important implications for how they treated English learning in general and English writing in particular. Some students' comments show that they may hold pragmatic but short-sighted views about English learning and its relevance to their future jobs can influence their engagement in group writing:

> Group 5: After we entered the university, we were not as motivated as in middle school because English is a must in the University Entrance Examination. So, this is the fact: when students feel it is useful, they will learn, if not, they won't. After all, language is only a tool.

When their short-term goal was to enter the university, they invested time and effort in learning English. However, when they achieved that goal and when English was not as "important" as it used to be in achieving their current goals, they chose to invest less. Their current goals not only include succeeding in the lab experiments and completing the degree but also finding a desirable job. Students of other majors did not seem to perceive the role of English in their future plans.

> Group 4: Future plans really matter. For example, we are Archaeology majors. English might have very little use for us in the future. Our main goals are to get the credits and have some basic reading ability. In comparison, if some of our classmates want to transfer to the Western History major, they will need to spend more time in English study than those who majored in Chinese History. Or some may consider studying abroad, or finding a job related to English, say in a language training institute. Then, they must really learn English well.

The above excerpt reveals that some students believed that their future jobs (in archaeology and Chinese history for example) may not have as high a demand on English as those where English would play a critical role such as career in Western History, nor would it require as much writing as reading. As a result, they felt that some skills to read English literature in their disciplinary area would be sufficient.

Discussion

As one of the first attempts to explore postgraduate students' experiences of cooperative writing, this study examined the modes of engagement and influences on their engagement in cooperative writing of five groups of Chinese non-English-major postgraduates from a local university in a mid-western province of mainland China. These findings are significant in that they provide empirical evidence about a unique group of students' engagement in group writing and its interacting dynamics in a unique sociocultural context. They also highlight the

important roles that the sociological factors of identity and power could play in shaping students' engagement and interactive patterns in cooperative writing. The following discussion will be based on the two research questions.

How Did Chinese Postgraduate Students Engage in Cooperative EFL Writing?

The findings indicate that while writing groups displayed a continuum of willingness for cooperative writing, they also demonstrated two major modes of engagement: disengagement/passive engagement and active engagement. With disengagement/passive engagement, the writing process remained a private act, and the writers did not take advantage of linguistic resources of the whole group to enhance their learning during the composing process (Li & Zhu, 2013). Cooperative writing in the active engagement mode foregrounded dialogic communication and the feedback tool (Zamel, 1985), and conveyed a sense of individual responsibilities and ownership as well as the shared responsibility for and the ownership of the final text produced (Norton, 2003).

Informed by the models presented in previous studies of peer interaction in group writing, this study identified four interaction patterns within the active group engagement category. However, rather than being distinguished by the indexes of mutuality and equality as previously reported (Cho, 2017; Li & Zhu, 2013, 2016b; Loo, 2019; Wang, 2022) the group interactions in our study seem to fall along the dimensions of mutuality and hierarchy. The reason may be that all our participants either passed or were exempted from the English proficiency test in the postgraduate entrance exam so the control over the writing of most participants may be quite comparable. Group 3 may have a leader who "dominated" all writing tasks, but the members willingly selected and followed the leader. Within a group high on mutuality like Group 3, the members did not feel the dominance from the leader but perceived it necessary to have a leader in the group rather than dividing the task equally among them: "Each group should have a backbone and other people can play the subordinate role" (Group 3). As such, we believe the hierarchy was more of a group structure for effective completion of group writing than the inequality over the control of the writing task that is in the authoritative/responsive pattern in Li and Zhu (2013).

Similarly, Group 5 had low mutuality; rather than the leader taking over the writing task and receiving minimal contributions and challenges from others, the members took turns to lead the writing tasks, and members who were not leading also provided feedback. This was also different from the expert/novice (Cho, 2017; Li & Zhu, 2016b) and dominant/passive (or defensive/withdrawn) interaction patterns (Li & Zhu, 2013, 2016b; Wang, 2022), where equality is low. The hierarchical structure seemed to be the collective decision based on the negotiation among the group members who had similar L2 writing abilities. The misalignment of our model with previous research may also be attributed to the different data sources: our study mainly used students' self-reports, whereas previous research examined the process of students' collaboration as captured in peer talk transcripts (Li & Zhu, 2016a, 2016b; Loo, 2019), screen-recordings of collaborative writing activities (Cho, 2017), or students' online discussion (Wang, 2022). This suggests that further research combining multiple data sources is needed to provide a full picture of group interaction.

What Influenced Chinese Postgraduate Students' Engagement as Viewed from the Investment Perspective?

The focus group interviews revealed four main influencing factors on students' engagement: in-group rapport, language proficiency, scoring rubrics, and short-term goals and future plans. Our participants reported that intra-group rapport was the most important influence on the degree of their engagement in cooperative writing, supporting past research about students benefiting more from collaborative engagement (Li & Zhu, 2013; Li & Zhu, 2017b; Storch & Aldosari, 2013; Zhai, 2021). Group 4's rapport seems to stem from sharing the same dormitory and the harmonious .among the members. They not only found it easier to meet for the group work but were all willing to make the time. This finding also echoes Loo (2019), who reports that positive relationships (such as familiarity and trust) among group members facilitate group writing: students would take up roles more willingly and provide and receive comments from their peers without feeling offended or having offended their peer. According to the investment theory, people derive their identities from their communities (Waseem, 2008) and investing in language learning is investing in one's identity (Norton, 1995). As such, Group 4 members' willingness to invest in cooperative writing may reflect their willingness to invest in a harmonious dormitory community where they acquired a positive identity from being treated as equals or even family members. In a collective culture such as CHC, building harmony in a group is of utmost importance for group members (Thanh-Pham, 2014). People living in a small community tend to build a closer family-like relationship (Chang & Holt, 1991) The prospect of living together in one dormitory for the following three years and the fact they were on good terms may make the dormitory community worth investing in. Conversely, investing in group academic practice may also enhance their friendship as well as language learning – both valuable symbolic resources (Norton, 1995).

In contrast, for most Group 1 members the writing group was formed for the writing purpose only, so they may not feel as connected as Group 4 members. When the writing community was mostly made up of members with weak emotional bonds and would last for one semester only (for taking the same English writing course), the return from investing in the writing group may be perceived as unworthy of the time and effort. They would rather invest time in activities such as attending the lab and mixing with peers from their own disciplines to maximize the return. This was especially true when students' disciplinary studies competed for time, and different time schedules and living arrangements made group meetings challenging. Pedagogically, it may be advisable for teachers to consider students' familiarity with each other to facilitate their engagement in cooperative writing. Teachers also need to provide more opportunities for group members to build rapport in class so that when they start working outside class the rapport already built among the group members can bind them together and create group learning opportunities.

If intra-group rapport impacted students' engagement in cooperative writing both qualitatively and quantitatively, language proficiency seems to be more of a quantitative influence, a finding consistent with previous studies (Cho, 2017; Loo, 2018; Zhai, 2021). Variations in knowledge and skills in English may create different power dynamics and identities for group members (Trent, 2008). Those who perceived themselves as less capable in their language abilities tended to perceive themselves to have a relatively powerless identity in the group and, therefore, may contribute less. This finding corroborated previous studies using the investment theory: learners choose to invest more in what they perceive as beneficial to their existing identity

(Darvin & Norton, 2017; Norton, 2003), and select to be silent when they sense the power imbalance to their disadvantage (Trent, 2008). Student's imagined identity was also inseparable from the amount of capital accessible to them (Norton & De Costa, 2018). This may explain the minor role played by those with insufficient language capital as narrowly defined by their low English competence in our study if the low social capital also handicapped them—unfamiliarity with their group members. The influence of language proficiency on cooperative writing has implications for teaching. In grouping students for cooperative tasks, teachers may take students' language proficiency into consideration. In addition, teachers should stress that students' contributions in cooperative writing should not be restricted to the vocabulary, grammatical, semantic levels but encourage them to leverage their knowledge in Chinese essay writing to contribute ideas, arguments, and structures. Teachers can also promote student agency by assigning students writing topics that are of interest and relevance to them.

The third influence on students' investment in cooperative writing was scoring policy. Our participants indicated that cooperative writing provided opportunities for some students to get the marks without much contribution and believed that may partly explain these students' lower degree of engagement. This influencing factor did not seem to have been reported in previous literature on EFL group writing but it points to the structural issues that caused the dissonance between investment and return in language learning. For students, a short-term return on their investment in language learning is their marks—a symbolic resource that can be converted into other valuable resources. Indeed, it is widely recognized that for some students, learning can be driven by assessment (Race, 2009). Receiving the same mark irrespective of one's contributions would encourage some to shirk their responsibility in group writing (Ajmi & Ali, 2014). This finding indicates that lack of scoring fairness may lead to a distorted relationship between investment and return in language learning, therefore negatively impact investment. The rotating leadership mechanism and division of labor in Group 5 seemed to have been created to address this perceived issue in evaluating cooperative writing. Teachers organizing cooperative writing should create a fairer scoring policy to engage and assess students. A way to encourage investment in group writing may be for each member of the group to report their own and other students' contributions and provide peer assessment with the final writing product (Adesina, et al., 2023).

The last influence on students' engagement in cooperative writing was short-term goals and future plans. Previous research also identifies students' goals as influences on their interaction patterns, but most of those goals are task-related -- collaboration, teamwork, improving writing/learning and receiving positive peer evaluation (Cho, 2017; Li & Zhu, 2017a, 2017b). Our participants' goals were associated instead with English learning in general. When they were preparing for the university/postgraduate entrance examination, where English has a critical weighting, they were willing to invest in the goal of becoming a university/postgraduate student – a symbolic resource giving them power in the job market. However, after achieving this short-term goal and starting their major studies, some students' investment in English learning was reduced. Compared with their disciplinary studies, language investment was relegated to secondary importance by some because, as non-English majors, they may not perceive how English learning could enrich their immediate identity (Amireaul, 2020). In addition, some students' imagined communities, which can be as important and authentic as a tangible community of practice (Gao et al, 2008; Norton, 2010), also seemed to have a strong impact on their current language learning investment. For example, an archaeology major in

Group 4 explained different investments in English learning by contrasting the value of English for archaeological students with the social power English may bring to a student who considered studying overseas or finding an English-related job after graduation. Different imagined identities and communities seemed to impact on their present investment in English as found by Kanno and Norton (2003). This finding has pedagogical implications: English language teachers need to address students' shortsighted conceptions about English by providing real life examples to illustrate the importance of English in disciplines that have seemingly little relevance to English in the increasingly globalized world. Alternatively, teachers can also get students to discuss/write about what the future of their disciplines would look like and how English would play a role in different future careers. This practice may allow students to consider the status of English in their life in the long term.

Conclusion

This study examined Chinese postgraduate students' engagement in cooperative writing and the influencing factors on their engagement. We found that our students' writing groups showed a continuum of willingness to engage in cooperative writing. Among the four groups that were willing, each displayed a unique pattern of interaction between group members. Our findings about students' interaction patterns in the Chinese postgraduate EFL education context developed the previous models of interaction of small group writing. In addition, our attempt to use Norton's sociological model of investment and identity complemented previous psychologically oriented research on students' group writing engagement. It is also one of the studies to use the investment framework to examine EFL learners' cooperative writing experiences. Adopting the sociological lens, this study avoided presenting an exhaustive list of influences on students' engagement in cooperative writing but integrated the individual influences into a more robust theoretical framework of identity and investment, thus providing a more powerful explanation for their engagement/disengagement and different degrees of engagement. Most writing research in the Chinese context studies undergraduate students, so by examining cooperative writing in postgraduate education—an under-explored context this research has filled the research gap and expanded the scope of EFL writing research.

This study has its limitations. Firstly, the study is mainly based on the students' focus group data, which may be biased by the subjectiveness some may feel expressing themselves. For example, some interviewees in this study were more articulate than their peers, it is possible that less articulated participants were underrepresented in the findings. Combining interviews with self-recorded discussions in their group work as in Loo (2019) may generate a more balanced picture of their patterns of interaction. Secondly, since cooperative writing has been reported as a strategy for producing high-quality writing, a stronger case for the value of this activity would be made if an analysis of writing products were included in this study. Thirdly, future research could also explore the differences and similarities in interaction patterns between group writings within class and outside class to help teachers improve group work. All these open up space for further investigations.

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