"Let me be the timekeeper!" Expand understanding of international students group assignments

Zhongyue Cheng - University of Gothenburg - June 2025

Background

As a Chinese student studying in Educational Research program with limited experience in group work, especially limited experience in working with international students, my understanding of internationalization mainly comes from the exchanges with local people during several trips abroad and the one-year study experience so far since coming to Gothenburg. These experiences have laid the foundation for my understanding of international learning and communication.

Throughout this portfolio, my engagement in an international educational-research group unfolds as a coherent narrative. The experience was deliberately planned to meet the two EUCL learning outcomes: first, by weaving every activity into a sustained reflection that continually connects my own observations to wider academic conversations, and second, by keeping cultural and linguistic difference at the center of my attention.

The first strand of my portfolio centers on a discourse-analysis project that occupied more than twenty hours of sustained, collaborative work.

During my graduate program, I was involved in a group assignment in May and June this year. Working alongside peers from different countries, I helped to craft a small-scale critical discourse analysis that asked how the Swedish bands Kent (2000–2016) and Hov1 (2017–2024) imagine "living well." My involvement unfolded in four overlapping phases. First, I spent three hours curating the data set, extracting Spotify play-counts and selecting the five most-streamed tracks from each band. Next came four hours of translation coordination: I guided a multilingual quartet—Swedish, English, Iranian, and Chinese—toward English renditions that were at once faithful and idiomatic, negotiating nuance whenever

a single Swedish word carried emotional baggage that refused to travel. A further five hours were devoted to thematic coding, where I applied Fairclough's textual dimension to surface keywords, metaphors, and modality across the twenty thousand words of lyrics. Finally, I co-authored the comparative findings section in three and a half hours, weaving our close readings into a 2,500-word argument. Translation itself became an arena of intercultural negotiation. The Swedish phrase "*du är min ros*" literally means "you are my rose," a line that felt weighty in its original context yet struck Iranian student as overly sentimental. We settled on "you are my compass rose," preserving the metaphor's navigational force while allowing the sentiment to resonate across linguistic borders. This micro-decision illuminated how every lexical choice mediates culturally specific affective economies.

During the process of group assignments, our group members not only support each other in academic tasks, but also share our knowledge and experience, which promotes the depth and breadth of learning through mutual assistance. We didn't always work together every day, but we learned and developed through shared activities and interactions, and for both group assignments we set up contribution documents so that everyone could update our thoughts and feelings online anytime, anywhere.

During the first step of our assignment, we need to interview our tutor Catarina, we had an in-depth discussion around her academic career. When we listed the interview questions, the question of "*how to balance work and family*" was opposed by the German girl. She said, "*Asking female researchers how to balance work and family may be sexist because such questions are rarely asked to male researchers*" (J, 2025). This viewpoint has sparked reflection among our group members on gender roles and social expectations. In the end, we decided not to use "how to balance work and family" as an interview question, but to turn to understanding her experiences and insights in her academic career.

This discussion not only enriched the group members' understanding of gender issues, but also reflected the important role of education in promoting gender equality. Through this discussion, I realized that education is not only the

transmission of knowledge, but also the process of shaping social concepts and cultural cognition.

The diversity of individual experiences and perspectives is one of the aspects I most appreciate in group assignments. It allows me to engage with a range of distinct individuals and gain exposure to viewpoints that I have never previously considered. This, in turn, enables me to learn from modes of thinking that are not typically encountered in other learning environments.

These positive experiences not only enhance the cohesion among group members, but also promote the development of cross-cultural understanding and teamwork skills.

As one of the international students, I felt lucky to have had the opportunity to observe our own study process. The meanwhile, I also witnessed the complexities of cross-cultural teamwork and the difficulties international students face, such as exclusionary behavior and non-compliance with group rules. During the grouping process, one student who failed to join her desired group on time colluded with some members of that group to exclude another student from Bangladesh privately, to secure a spot for herself. I overheard their plan "*Let's all jump to another group that has no members yet, leaving her alone*". I still remember my shock at the time, which made me feel lucky for a moment that I was not in the same group with them, because I didn't know what I would face. I also remember the disappointment and anger on the face of the Bangladeshi girl when she was finally kicked out of the group. She said something to her companions in Bengali, but did not argue with the members who kicked her out of the group. Although I felt unfair for the Bangladeshi girl, I did not fight for her, but chose to remain silent. In the second grouping, I kindly welcomed her to join our group. This experience is a typical example of group work involving international students from different countries and with different abilities. I found that grouping by country increased the vulnerability of students from marginalized countries. Such behavior is indicative of the broader challenges that international students may face in navigating cross-cultural collaborations, where cultural differences and personal interests can sometimes lead to unethical practices and a hostile group

environment.

In our first group assignment, the task was to interview the researcher, Catarina. During the group discussion, I originally expected the interview scene to be that we four group members sat together with the teacher and asked questions in turn according to the pre-prepared outline, and everyone had the opportunity to ask questions. However, when discussing, a group member suggested that the task be divided into four roles: one person is responsible for interviewing the teacher and asking questions, one is for taking notes, one is responsible for recording, and one is for timing. Since the interview is designed with three sections, the time for each section needs to be controlled within 10-15 minutes. When this group member proposed such a division, I wanted to propose another division way. The words of me, before I could make my own suggestion or worry that my suggestion would not be accepted, "*Let me be the timekeeper!*" speaks directly to my own lived experiences of being vulnerable. Through this, I realized that I need to be more active in expressing my ideas in future group assignments to promote more effective teamwork.

The impact of cultural conflicts and family life on group assignments cannot be ignored. These conflicts not only affect the relationships between group members, but also have a negative impact on the overall effectiveness of group assignments. These experiences reveal the complex challenges that international students may face in group assignments, including cultural differences, communication barriers, uneven task allocation, and interference from family responsibilities. The existence of these issues reminds us that when designing and implementing group assignments, we need to pay more attention to the diversity needs of team members, establish effective communication mechanisms, and provide necessary support to promote the harmonious and efficient operation of cross-cultural teams.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of each team member's subjective experience during our collaboration, I asked them open-ended questions before drafting my paper, aiming to uncover potential issues in groupwork from individual perspectives and to use their feedback to optimize my observation.

In the following quote, a member describes her overwhelming during the group work, "*Being so used to communicate face to face, online messages in our WhatsApp group makes me feeling really lost, deficient and passive while communicating mostly digital, making me feel very overloaded*' (R, 2025). She also found it hard to participate effectively, especially with complex methods, and noted a lack of understanding of each other's "researcher identities."

The Iranian peer aims to quickly agree on research methods in future assignments to collaborate more efficiently and utilize everyone's talents fully.

Another Chinese student said, influenced by cultural habits, was cautious in team discussions, which could lead to missing opportunities to voice opinions.

It is worth noting that students from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have not given me any response when I wrote this paper. This silence itself is also a reaction, which may imply certain experiences or feelings they have in group assignments, such as communication barriers, or lack of participation, suggesting issues like marginalization or poor communication mechanisms that need attention.

Drawing on Communities of Practice (CoP) theory, I analyzed how our group functioned as a micro-community with shared goals but unequal participation. Cultural differences in communication styles—such as my tendency to avoid direct confrontation, rooted in Chinese norms of harmony—sometimes hindered this process.

Intercultural Awareness and Reflection

Both activities required navigating linguistic and cultural differences. In the discourse analysis, translating Swedish lyrics revealed how cultural concepts like "lagom" (moderation) or "jantelagen" (egalitarianism) lack direct equivalents in other languages, necessitating negotiated meanings within our multilingual group. Similarly, in the autoethnographic reflection, I observed how non-native English speakers struggled to assert their ideas, leading to imbalances in participation. One Iranian member shared feeling "lost" in digital communication, while another Chinese student noted cultural reluctance to challenge dominant voices. These experiences underscored the intercultural learning outcome by highlighting

how language proficiency and cultural norms shape group dynamics. By positioning myself as both participant and analyst, I gained insight into how cultural identities intersect with academic practices, sometimes reinforcing exclusion but also offering opportunities for growth.

Conclusion

This portfolio demonstrates achievement of the learning outcomes through deep reflection on international group work. By linking personal experiences to CoP theory and discourse analysis, I have shown how cultural and linguistic awareness enhances collaborative research. The activities, totaling 30 hours, were substantial, approved, and directly relevant to intercultural and reflective learning. Moving forward, I aim to apply these insights to foster more inclusive practices in future cross-cultural collaborations.