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Learner Identities in the ESP Setting of a Business School: Integrating Focus Group Methodology and Interactional Discourse Analysis

This study addresses the complexified nature of today's ESP instruction against the backdrop of new conceptual trends in English Language Teaching. A much-debated question is how the reconceptualisation of English impacts on the identification options available to English language learners with a view to building successful second language (L2) identities. Research on this important issue has however been impeded by the lack of appropriate data collected from ESP learners. The principal objective of this study was therefore to obtain data which will help close this research gap in providing access to both emic and etic perspectives on the institutional discourses prevalent in ESP settings. Another main objective was to uncover the interactional features in focus group (FG) discourse. Methodologically, this investigation takes the form of classroom interventions. Data were collected using FG methodology and analysed by means of MAXQDA (VERBI Software 2021). The methodological approach taken integrates corpus-based discourse analysis and Qualitative Data Analysis. Results showed that ESP learners meet pedagogical challenges by co-constructing themselves as proficient, multi-competent L2 users of English.

1 Background of the Study

In today's globally integrated world, the great demand for English Language Teaching (ELT) has been accommodated within several conceptual trends in English language education, such as Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT) (e.g., Galloway / Rose 2015; Galloway 2017), addressing the pedagogical implications of the changed linguistic practices of using English as a resource (e.g., Seidlhofer 2009). These changed practices, resulting from the detachment of English from a single, nation-based linguacultural centre, have brought about different types of users of English, who together form "a non-specific global community of English language users" (Ushioda / Dörnyei 2009: 3). Therefore, in the absence of a clearly defined L2 target community, the reconceptualisation of English has changed the identification options available to English language learners. While this multi-optionality may afford new learning opportunities as well as exploring untapped potential for identification, it also increases the challenge of learning English today.

To a much greater extent than in comparable sites of learning, the repercussions of the reconceptualisation of English are felt in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (e.g., Csizér / Kontra 2012; Sing 2017). As an educational approach, ESP epitomises a learner-centred approach to English language education, "in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning" (Hutchinson / Waters 1987: 19). These 'specific' learning purposes are distinct from "the general, education-for-life, culture- and literature-orientated language course, in which language itself is the subject matter and the purpose of the course. The student of ESP [...] is learning English *en route* to the acquisition of some quite different body of knowledge or set of skills" (Robinson 1980: 6). This rather specific educational context of content-based instruction may also be described in terms of the important distinction between carrier content vs real content, in that the carrier content "is an authentic topic which can be used as a vehicle for the *real content* [emphasis as original]" (Dudley-Evans / St

John 1998: 11).¹ In the present study, the content area is business studies, with a focus on business administration, economics, finance and marketing, which serve as vehicles for learning English, both general (academic) and field-specific.

A dual learning purpose thus inheres in ESP pedagogy, which adds a dynamic complexity to learning and the ways in which learners interact with their learning environment. Not least because “learners take up ESP in order to have a working knowledge of English in their specialised field to communicate not with native speakers but with fellow professionals around the world” (Csizér / Kontra 2012: 2), the inherent purpose-drivenness of ESP has been increasingly challenged by linguistic realities which give rise to an “ever-diversifying and expanding range of purposes [...] and constantly changing learning targets” (Belcher 2006: 134). As a result, the dual impact of linguistic and economic globalisation is felt keenly in ESP instruction, shaping institutional discourse in a way that creates considerable pressure for accommodating globalised practices while addressing localised needs. For ESP learners today, these ‘glocalising effects’ (Belcher 2006) imply an increasing exposure to new forms of learning and diverse forms of interaction.

Whether or not this diversification of learning is construed as a constraining or empowering factor in ESP settings is largely determined by students’ interaction with the learning context (Creese et al. 2006). In the best-case scenario, students will be supported in developing effective identities as second language learners (L2 learners). Through interaction with their learning environments students’ selves are shaped and reshaped and their identities are put to work, performing a variety of functions in institutional discourse. Due to the close intertwining of learning and identity, the effectiveness of learner identities is conditioned on individual cultural and collective social capital (Clegg / McNulty 2002: 572) as well as being informed by institutional discourses.

It is now well established that learner identities are mediated through institutional structures. Much uncertainty still exists about the influence of a challenging language learning environment, such as the ESP setting of a business school, on constructing successful L2 learner identities. In order to address this gap, the author of the present study adopted a practitioner-cum-researcher role, which helped to identify the research problem in real-time classroom observation and during first-hand experience in teaching undergraduate business students. The in-class discussions about the existing ESP programme indicated a need to understand the various, often conflicting, perceptions of ESP instruction that exist among these students and their instructors. It is this specific type of classroom interaction that has driven this research, aiming to explore the emic, that is, the learners’ own experiences of the pedagogical challenges arising from language learning in the ESP context. Currently, there are however no emic data reflecting the views of ESP language learners, which may be used to complement etic, that is, researcher-generated perspectives.

One main objective of the present study therefore was to obtain data from these business students to gain access to both emic and etic perspectives on the institutional discourses prevalent in the ESP setting of a business school. Participants were recruited from the author’s regular classes in order to take part in focus group (FG) discussions. Data collected from focus groups offer an effective way of examining real-life language-related problems, which necessitate some form of classroom intervention. Despite the commitment and close affinity to language learning and teaching in the field of Applied Linguistics (AL), focus groups “have been given little consideration in the field and are rarely used as a single method in their own right” (Galloway 2019: 290). Therefore, another objective consisted in proposing a research methodology

¹ Dudley-Evans / St John (1998: 11) illustrate the distinction between carrier content and real content by the use of a table of statistics, which is employed to teach the language of comparison to ESP students. In this case, the real content of ESP learning are the linguistic resources used to make comparisons while the statistics, that is the carrier content, is used as a vehicle for learning.

that permits analysing diversified, dynamic and negotiated accounts of learner identities (Duff 2012) while integrating micro-level and macro-level approaches to institutional discourse (Mayr 2015). Focus group methodology can be integrated with discourse-analytical approaches, associated with social constructivism as well as relying on data sources that represent linguistic and communicative practices. In this conceptual framework, research focusing on educational contexts has explored the huge potential of focus group methodology for various research designs and purposes, where it is utilised as a valuable tool for evaluating study programmes or conducting needs analyses (e.g., Kaewpet 2009).

There is however no single method for analysing focus group data. On the contrary, focus group research has included a variety of qualitative and/or quantitative approaches, such as content analysis, ethnomethodology or narrative inquiry. There are certain problems with the use of these methods on focus group data. One of these is a lack of clarity in defining the role of interaction in focus groups. Most previous focus group studies have only considered interaction in the context of data collection, specifically as a means of enhancing data collection. A major problem with this view is the claim that “saying that the interaction in focus groups produces the data is not the same as saying that the interaction itself is the data” (Morgan / Hoffman 2018: 519).

The present study, therefore, critically reflects on interaction in focus group data as well as making interaction the object of study itself. It will be argued that the level of interactivity in focus group data is subject to considerable variation and can thus not be presumed. Instead, focus group data will be conceived as discourse, which is socially constructed and shapes, as well as being shaped by, other discourses, notably institutional discourse. Such a discourse-analytical approach implies an analysis of two levels of textual representation (Krzyżanowski 2008: 169). The first, more general level, concerns the identification of key topics that underlie discourse structures and create a specific patterning of discourse. The second, more detailed micro-level is focused on discourse elements, such as argumentation patterns and their linguistic realisations. The obvious advantage of using a discourse-analytical approach lies in a changed view of language “as a set of interacting units and systems, but also [...] as an instrument put to work. The work which it does is the attempt by one participant or set of participants to influence the ideas, opinions and behaviour of other participants” (Partington / Marchi 2015: 216). The methodological shift of viewing textual data as discourse allows a deeper insight into the discursive construction of identities, as learners’ conceptions of self are shaped and reshaped by their learning environment.

While the present study is clearly focused on research methodology, a third main objective was to describe the business students’ identities as English language learners in view of “the complexified picture of ESP” (Belcher 2006: 134). It will be argued that ESP learners’ interaction with this challenging learning environment is mediated through institutional structures. The focus group discussions thus aimed to gather information about their views of ESP modules in their programme on international business administration.

This paper has been organised in the following way. It begins by introducing the focus group data and research methodology devised for the present study. The two-level examination of focus group discourse and the main results obtained are presented in section 3, labelled ‘Data Analysis and Results’. The Discussion section integrates the results obtained from the various analytical perspectives and draws out the implications for language education in today’s ESP instruction.

2 Data and Methodology

Given that a “focus group isn’t just getting a bunch of people together to talk” (Krueger / Casey 2015: 2), this section has two main aims. It first describes the database of the present study, including details of data production and collection, and then moves on to establish the methodological framework for analysing the focus group discussions.

2.1 Data Collection

Focus groups are extremely flexible primary sources of data, and yet, collecting data from FG discussions is anything but straightforward. The phase of data collection involves designing a suitable research instrument, typically a discussion guide for the focus group sessions, participant recruitment and the actual data collection process, that is, conducting the focus group discussions. It is the suitability of the discussion guide as a research instrument that will ultimately enable data production by prompting focus group participants to talk about the specific topic(s) of interest. Broadly, “[a] discussion guide is a list of topics or, more commonly, a series of factual questions used by the moderator to guide the discussion and keep it focused on the research topic” (Hennink et al. 2011: 141). In designing the discussion guide for the present study, particular attention was paid to its structure which is pivotal to the quality of the data generated during the discussion.

According to Hennink et al. (2011: 142–145), the discussion guide is typically based on a funnel design, with a general introduction and broad opening questions located at the top of the funnel. The middle part represents the centre of the focus group discussion, in which the scope of the questions is narrowed while increasing in their level of specificity. It is only after transitioning to these more specific or key questions that data are being generated. The closing questions at the bottom end of the funnel mark the end of the focus group session, which may be succeeded by a post-discussion stage. These stages in the focus group discussion are characterised by different types of questions, ranging from questions providing cognition and establishing rapport to those generating data and those providing closure and post-discussion information. Examples (1) to (5) illustrate each type of question used in the present study.

By way of illustration, the extracts below (see footnote 2 for transcription conventions) set the scene for the actual discussion in terms of the topics to be covered as well as familiarising participants with the requirements and expectations of their role in the focus group. In other words, these questions have a dual purpose: the introductory question (1) provides cognition so that participants know what to expect of the group discussion while the broad opening question (2) serves to establish rapport between moderator(s) and participants as well as among participants.

- (1) I can explain to you. It’s a study, an empirical study we are doing on (.) students’ approaches to learning, beliefs, attitudes to language, attitudes to particular varieties of English, and uhm influence of contexts, learning contexts, university contexts etc. So, we got a list of questions but I think it’s also quite a dynamic discussion, so, we are not going to stick to this (.) list exactly. So, whenever you want to say something, please do. (FG1, Pos. 1, Speaker: M1)
- (2) And maybe, also, I mean you don’t need to make a special effort, it’s not an exam. We’re just really interested in your opinions basically, okay? So, you can get very personal if you like uhh but we’re not evaluating that, okay? It’s just really, I mean, each and every opinion is fine. (FG1, Pos. 2, Speaker: M2)

Moving on to the more specific questions, example (3) is taken from the central part of the discussion in the first focus group (FG1), when one of the moderators aims to follow-up on what participants said in response to a more general prompt from the questions listed in the discussion guide. The aim is to elicit more specific information about the participants’ previous learning experiences, particularly those associated with language learning in school.

- (3) What I noticed when I was just listening to you is that uhm (.) most of you said something that you disliked or were rather critical of your education like the language language learning in school (.) I was wondering whether you could actually specify that a bit (.) you know I mean (.) what would be the problem areas for you (.) (FG1, Pos. 32, Speaker: M2)

Questions (4) and (5) are located at the bottom end of the funnel, where the moderators begin to wrap up the preceding discussion either in terms of a summary overview or an open question that enables participants to talk about potential uses of English for professional purposes. Question (5), which is raised by one of the participants at the end of the focus group session, sets off a post-discussion session in which the student-participants enquire about the research topic and main objectives of the study.

- (4) Okay I think we started off by (.) you know (.) asking a question about your past and now maybe we should wrap it up asking one (.) open question concerning your future, do you think you'll be able (.) to use uhm the English you learned here or English in general uh later on (.) in your professional lives? (FG1, Pos. 304, Speaker: M2)
- (5) What are you going to do with that? (FG1, Pos. 233, Speaker: P5)

As shown, participant involvement and eye-level discussions were clearly the aim of the participatory design employed during the data production and collection stages. Despite using the set of questions prepared by the moderators, great care was taken to enable a fluid discussion, which not only permitted greater flexibility, but also enabled participant-prompted topics to be included without interrupting the discussion flow. The discussion guide was thus used as a mere 'checklist' and 'memory aid' to ensure that all aspects of the research topic were addressed during the discussion (see Hennink et al. 2011: 142).

On the question of participant recruitment and sampling procedures, eligibility criteria required students to be well advanced in their studies in order to be able to reflect on their previous learning experiences, including language learning in schools, during their exchange semesters or as part of their formal education at university level. Due to the overall aim of bringing together both emic and etic perspectives on language education in the ESP setting of a business school, students enrolled in a four-year diploma programme for International Business Administration were sought to participate in the focus group discussions, probing into their views about English language learning, specifically ESP instruction, and the content-based syllabus of their ESP module. Participant recruitment proved difficult due to the overall time frame of the study, student availability, and not least because of timetabling restrictions. This necessitated adaptations in terms of sampling procedures. The sampling procedures chosen for recruitment thus consisted in a mix of convenience and snowball sampling. Both non-probabilistic sampling procedures have enjoyed wide application in focus group research (e.g., Hall 2020; Galloway 2019).

Convenience or opportunity sampling was used to recruit participants for the first focus group (FG1). Since the inclusion criteria for the focus group participants were rather specific, a small sample (N=5) was originally chosen because of the expected difficulty of obtaining a sufficient number of students who actually met the research criteria and were thus eligible for participation in the present study. Criteria for selecting the participants were as follows: Substantial study and learning experience in both general and ESP language learning contexts; advanced content knowledge (Business Studies) and sufficient English language skills (B2 level or beyond) to be able to lead a discussion. Furthermore, in terms of group composition, a mixed strategy was adopted: While homogeneity was considered primary in terms of the institutional background, that is, that students were enrolled in the same major at the same university, it was

equally important to recruit participants with markedly different forms of experience, language and schooling backgrounds.

As potential participants were selected on the basis of identical study programmes, it was decided to seize the opportunity to gain access to suitable participants through the students registered for advanced specialisation classes of their ESP programme. This class was compulsory in the final year of their four-year study programme. At the time of participating in the focus group discussions, the students had already successfully completed the course. Their participation in the FG discussions was on a voluntary basis and no additional incentives were provided. The class contents were such that, at the time of participating in the focus groups, the students already had some familiarity with the topics raised in the discussions. They had been briefed in class concerning the main purposes of the focus groups and the rationale behind the present research project. While researching your own students can be a challenge to both research design and methodology (see Galloway 2016), it proved advantageous to participant recruitment and the research aim of examining institutional discourse.

While the self-selection of students for participation in the first of the three focus groups was the direct result of convenience sampling, recruiting further participants proved more difficult. As student samples with the target characteristics seemed not easily accessible to the researcher, snowball sampling was considered as a viable option of enhancing data collection and achieving data saturation as quickly as possible. Snowball sampling strategies work on the basis of referral and networking (Hall 2020), and in this case both student and staff networks were used to recruit the participants for the other two focus groups, i.e., FG2 and FG3, in order to reach the intended saturation point.

2.2 Data Description

Data saturation was reached on completion of three rounds of focus group discussions, using the same discussion guide on a pool of participants (N=22) recruited from advanced classes of the ESP module. As shown in Table 1, the three focus groups vary in terms of length, the number of participants, the number of participants' contributions and, to a much lesser degree, in terms of the coverage of the student contributions to the focus group interaction. Coverage means the number of contributions expressed as a ratio of the total running time of the FG discussion.

Table 1. Overview of Focus Group Data

	Duration	Students (=N)	Total # Contributions	Total # Words	Coverage
Focus Group 1	1:28:00.6	5	304	13,028	80.2%
Focus Group 2	0:57:41.0	9	201	7,201	72.6%
Focus Group 3	0:56:50.8	8	302	8,321	80.7%

As regards the length of focus group discussions, the recommended time period allotted to FG meetings is between 60 to 90 minutes in duration (Hennink et al. 2011: 136). As shown, the duration of all three focus group sessions is within this time frame, the longest being FG1 because of its rather long post-discussion session. In terms of focus group size, Loxton's (2021: 5) meta-analysis of focus group methodology yielded a median of approximately five participants. While there is no optimal size for focus groups, it is common for non-commercial groups to comprise five to eight participants (Krueger / Casey 2015: 82). Ultimately, focus group size should be determined by the research topic and purpose, which, in the present study, resulted in a target size of 5-9 participants in order to be able to elicit multiple perspectives on the discussion topics. All in all, the group should be sufficiently large to cover a diversity of opinions,

yet small enough to ensure that members feel comfortable to share their ideas, opinions, and experiences.

What is more, Table 1 compares the transcribed FG data in terms of the participants' contributions, the length of their contributions per number of words, and their coverage. These data serve as an initial indicator of group dynamics in the three FG discussions. The number of contributions suggests that the five participants of FG1 contribute more actively to the discussion than those of FG2 and FG3 respectively: The percentages of coverage indicate that the two moderators together take up ca. 20% of the talk in FG1 and FG3 while this proportion increases to more than a quarter of the discussion in FG2. One possible explanation is group size, hence the slow topic development and comparatively small number of themes emerging from the discussion (see 3.2.1 below). Given that FG2, the largest of the groups, includes as many as nine participants, the moderators were forced to ask more questions to involve all participants in the discussion.

Let us now move on to consider the distribution of speaker variables in more detail in order to find out whether any focus group participants are over- or under-represented, and how the roles between moderators and student participants are defined. Using the data orientation features provided by MAXQDA Analytics Pro (VERBI Software 2021), the speaker variables for all three focus groups were computed and compared in terms of their frequencies and lengths of contributions.

Table 2. Speaker Variables across Focus Groups (Ranked in terms of Contribution Frequencies)

Focus Group 1				Focus Group 2				Focus Group 3						
S	Contrib. %	Words	%	S	Contrib. %	Words	%	S	Contrib. %	Words	%			
P1	82	21.64	3,120	21.38	M2	38	13.72	812	9.24	P1	73	19.52	900	9.10
P5	70	18.47	3,312	22.69	M1	38	13.72	776	8.83	M2	45	12.03	633	6.40
M1	61	16.09	1,118	7.66	P2	27	9.75	1,028	11.70	P2	45	12.03	1,639	16.57
P3	48	12.66	1,741	11.93	OP	26	9.39	79	0.90	P3	30	8.02	2,050	20.73
P4	39	10.29	3,878	26.57	P7	23	8.30	1,050	11.95	P6	29	7.75	810	8.19
P2	24	6.33	867	5.94	P1	23	8.30	623	7.09	P4	28	7.49	828	8.37
OP	23	6.08	69	0.47	P9	20	7.22	861	9.80	M1	27	7.22	937	9.47
AP	18	4.75	41	0.28	P3	19	6.86	985	11.21	P8	25	6.68	974	9.85
M2	14	3.69	449	3.08	AP	17	6.14	52	0.59	OP	24	6.42	109	1.10
					P6	15	5.42	675	7.68	P7	20	5.35	573	5.79
					P5	12	4.33	817	9.30	AP	15	4.01	68	0.69
					P4	12	4.33	603	6.86	P5	13	3.48	370	3.74
					P8	7	2.53	428	4.87					

Table 2 presents the breakdown of speaker variables across focus groups according to the contributions made by individual participants to the overall discussion and the actual length of their contributions, that is, the number of transcribed words per speaker.² The table provides both raw frequencies and percentages; the latter express the number of contributions/words as a proportion of the total number of contributions/words in the FG discussions. By way of explanation, the abbreviations used in the table are as follows: Speaker (S), participants (P 1-9), moderators (M 1-2); Simultaneous talk was coded as either AP or OP, depending on whether the current speaker was joined by another participant (AP) or whether several other participants (OP) were cross-talking.

² The present study adopted the transcription system developed by Kuckartz / Rädiker (2019: 42), including the following main transcription rules: Each speech contribution is transcribed as a separate paragraph; speech is transcribed verbatim; clear, longer pauses are indicated by ellipsis points in brackets (...), depending on the length of the pause in seconds, one, two, or three points are used; intentionally stressed words are underlined; incomprehensible words and sections are identified by (unclear).

Looking at Table 2, it is apparent that there are considerable differences in the speaker variables identified in each of the three focus groups. In order to measure variability in the focus group data, descriptive statistical analysis was performed using MAXQDA Analytics Pro (VERBI Software 2021). Table 3 compares the summary statistics of the data, including mean, median, range and standard deviation (SD). These descriptions indicate central tendencies in each of the three data sets.

Table 3. Summary of Statistics of Contribution Scores across Focus Group Data

	Mean	Median	Range	Standard Deviation
Focus group 1	42.11	38.00	67	23.06
Focus group 2	21.31	20.00	31	9.03
Focus group 3	31.17	27.50	60	15.74

Beginning with the mean scores for speech contributions, there is a marked difference between the peak and low scores, found for FG1 and FG2 respectively, the smallest and largest group. For FG1, the mean score was 42.11 contributions per participant, with a standard deviation of 23.06, which is in stark contrast to the data summarised for FG2 ($M = 21.31$, $SD = 9.03$). In the latter, the data are clustered around the mean while the scores for participants' contributions in FG1 and, to a lesser degree in FG3, are more disperse. This difference in dispersion is confirmed by the range of scores retrieved for the three data sets. The range, that is, the maximum minus the minimum scores, is broadest for FG1 (82–15) and FG3 (73–13). Both mean and median scores help identify over- and/or under-represented speakers in the focus groups as well as pointing to any outliers in the focus group data. What stands out in Table 2 is the similarity in the distribution of scores in FG1 and FG3: In both groups, one speaker, participant 1 (P1), is over-represented and appears to over-talk whereas there are one or two 'silent' speakers at the bottom end. This can be explained by the fact that P1 gets the floor first whenever a new round of questions is raised and a clear sequence of speakers is followed.

The discrepancy between 'talkative' speakers, that is, speakers whose number of speech contributions is above average, is greater for FG1 than FG3. On the other hand, more participants engage in the spoken interaction in FG1, where the scores for the contributions of 4 out of 5 participants are above the median score of 38.00. The dominance of a limited number of speakers is greater in FG3, where only two out of eight participants contribute more than average ($M = 31.17$) to the discussion. A different scenario unfolds in FG2 where the contributions scores of several participants are above the mean ($M = 21.31$), plus those for simultaneous talk (coded OP). While the data for FG2 thus do not suggest overrepresentation of a single speaker, there are two participants, P2 and P7, who stand out both in terms of the frequency and length of their contributions.

The codings of simultaneous talk make up for around 10% of contributions in FG1 and FG3 whereas it amounts to more than 15% in FG2, the largest of the focus groups. This could be taken as an interactivity indicator, implying that, possibly topic-induced, participants become more actively involved in the discussion at specific points in the FG session.

Prior to summarising the data description provided in Tables 2 and 3, the role of the moderators will be briefly addressed. In FG2, which is in sharp contrast to the other groups, the figures of the moderators' contributions shown in Table 2, suggest an expanded role of both moderators, whose contributions together account for more than a quarter of total contributions to the FG discussion. While the number of contributions seems to suggest that both moderators dominate the discussion, this is not confirmed by the length and coverage (ca. 9%) of their contributions. This means that the moderators' frequent but rather short speech contributions result from the fact that the student participants did not get involved as actively, nor did they share their views

and opinions as readily as in the other two groups, hence the moderators' repeated prompts in an attempt to engage them in the discussion.

Turning now to compare the moderator roles in FG1 and FG3, it could be argued that their roles are reversed. Judging by the number of contributions to the discussion, M1 takes the lead role in FG1 while taking a back seat in FG3. However, a different situation presents itself when taking coverage into account as well: even though M2 contributes more frequently to the ongoing discourse, it is in fact M1 whose contributions cover 10% of the entire talking time compared to 6.42% for M2. All in all, a clear pattern of division of labour can be derived from the distribution of their speech contributions. Their contribution scores above the mean are evidence for their predictively more active role in initiating the discussion as well as encouraging participants to contribute. Yet this prominence of moderator involvement is central to the participant design of FG studies and an understanding of focus groups as "collaborative co-discovery sessions" (Loxton 2021: 5), particularly in the context of institutional discourses.

To conclude, all focus groups discussions took as their point of departure the questions from the discussion guide developed for this study, with the moderators paying equal attention to eliciting the views and experiences in a comparable fashion. Nonetheless, the focus groups differ vastly in the momentum built during the discussions, the level of interactivity and the kind and quality of interaction among participants. This means that, while interaction and group dynamics are to be considered as definite aims of FG discussions, both are likely to influence data production and collection and need to be factored in when assessing focus groups as primary data sources. Consequently, the methodological framework for this study will strengthen the argument for the overall constructivist setting of focus group studies. Focus group data are thus "inherently biased" (Galloway 2019: 297), implying that it is the researcher's job to deconstruct this bias when examining focus group data.

2.3 Methodology

There is no such thing as a single method for analysing focus group data. Focus group research has, on the contrary, included a variety of qualitative and/or quantitative approaches, such as content analysis, ethnomethodology or narrative inquiry. While previous accounts have recognised interaction as a defining feature of focus group data, these interaction-based approaches are premised on implicit assumptions about interactivity which, however, need to be questioned. As shown in section 2.2, there is considerable variability in the frequency and distribution of speaker-related variables across the three FGs under investigation while there are also different modes of focus group interaction, some more moderator-led, some more participant-based.

The present analysis, by contrast, is grounded in an understanding of focus group discussions as discourse. Such a view presupposes the recognition of learner data collection as itself socially constructed (Duff 2012: 419). She (*ibid.*) goes on to explain that

data produced by learners—in whatever form—are social constructions, produced in a particular situation, with an intended audience, for particular purposes, and based on the contingencies of the mode and language of production itself. How research participants represent themselves and their histories or experiences may depend to a great extent on their assumptions about what the researcher expects to hear.

Such a constructivist understanding has important implications for collecting learner data from focus groups too. Not only does it necessitate an awareness of, and reflection on, the conditions of data production and collection, it also entails a reconceptualisation of participant roles in the process, particularly regarding the relationship between student participants and moderators. More often than not, the moderator's role during focus group discussions is assumed to consist

in simply listening in and “harvesting people’s ideas” (Edley / Litosseliti 2013: 165), which concurs with the rationale that focus group research aims “to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, idea, product, or service. Focus groups are used to gather opinions” (Krueger / Casey 2015: 2). Participants’ contributions are thus taken as ‘windows to the mind’, from which “the relatively stable ‘cognitions’ (beliefs, attitudes, or opinions) assumed to underlie people’s talk” can be inferred (Wilkinson 2004: 187). An important caveat to this ‘structured eavesdropping’ (Wilkinson *ibid.*) is that focus group methodology is not to be mistaken as mining particular ‘nuggets of truth’ (Edley / Litosseliti 2013: 155).

The essentialist view of “stable cognitions” is a serious methodological concern, which is not easily reconcilable with the discursive construction of participant identities, nor with an understanding of discourse themes as emerging from, as well as being negotiated in, discourse. In addition to its overall constructivist, discourse-theoretical and methodological embedding, the present study draws on work conducted in the discourse-historical tradition as well as being informed by corpus-based approaches to discourse.

In his study of focus group discussions in the discourse-historical tradition, Krzyżanowski (2008) extended the traditional meaning of the word ‘focus’ in ‘focus group’ from describing a topical focus into a more participant-oriented meaning, referring to participants who are focused on some shared activity. He (*ibid.*) proposes several analytical steps of laying bare underlying structures of focus group discourse both in terms of thematic structures and participants’ interactions. His approach is thus based on two levels of textual representation (Krzyżanowski 2008: 169). The first, more general level pertains to identifying key themes emerging from the shared activities in and through focus group discourse. The second, more detailed level of analysis aims to examine the linguistic resources that encode rhetorical patterns in support of the central argumentation underlying discourse. As regards the first level, he furthermore distinguishes between primary discourse topics, the equivalent of the topics elicited through the questions of the discussion guide in this study, and secondary discourse topics, that is, the topics raised by the focus group participants. In a third step, connections are drawn between the primary and secondary topics. This topic-based analysis is however confined to examining select instances of discourse, which results in a bias towards researcher-generated, *etic* topics.

For this reason, the methodological framework developed for the present study also includes frequency-based, statistical features adopted from corpus-based approaches to discourse analysis (e.g., Baker 2006), which offer a system of checks-and-balances to reduce bias. Methodologically, the analysis thus integrated data orientation features derived from Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) and the “commonly employed statistical overview techniques” used in Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) (Partington 2008). Both converge on the idea that recurring multi-word or collocational patterns are signposts to discourse structures, which are typically revealed by means of frequency-based procedures through which large quantities of texts can be examined and recurrent patternings of words and word combinations are displayed. These patterns help detect important topics and themes as well as identifying variance in the data set. As seen from this perspective, discourse is regarded as patterned language, where recurrent multi-word sequences serve as building blocks.

2.4 Procedure

This section details the analytical steps of the present study, moving from recording and transcribing the data to employing the research methodology introduced above. After successfully recruiting a sufficient number of participants, the student participants were invited to take part in the focus group sessions in an ordinary meeting room on campus. The author of this study and a fellow practitioner were involved in conducting the focus group discussions. The division of labour demanded that one of the moderators was in charge of the technical equipment, ensuring that the sessions would be recorded as planned. During the actual discussions, however,

moderators took turns in asking questions and using prompts, without religiously adhering to the script and responding flexibly to participant-generated topics.

The audiotaped focus group discussions were transcribed³ using the transcription guidelines laid down in Kuckartz / Rädiker (2019: 42). According to these recommendations, speech is transcribed verbatim, with each speech contribution transcribed as a separate paragraph. New paragraphs are started when other speakers are seen as interrupting the discussion flow while relatively short interjections made by other speakers are included in brackets in the speech without starting a new paragraph. Cases in point are the codings for simultaneous speech, labelled AP or OP, which are inserted in the contribution in progress. Clear, longer pauses are indicated by ellipsis points in brackets and intentionally stressed words are underlined.

The focus group discussions were transcribed by means of MAXQDA Analytics Pro (VERBI Software 2021), which was also used to gain an overview of the data and to carry out the analyses presented in section 3. As an initial step, the data orientation features available from MAXQDA were used to examine the speaker-related variables, particularly with regard to over- or under-representation of individual participants (see section 2.2). Next, the MAXDictio component, by which corpus-linguistic analyses can be performed, was used to retrieve linguistic resources expressing interpersonal meanings in the focus group discourse (see section 3.1) and to identify recurrent themes in the three FG discussions on the basis of frequency-based, statistical procedures. Keyword-in-Context (KWIC) searches were used to contextualise the uses and disambiguate the meanings of the structures retrieved from the data sets. And finally, MAXQDA was used to perform thematic coding in order to examine the themes and participant identities in their discursive embedding (see section 3.2).

3 Analysis and Results

The section below explores the local and global discourse structures in the focus group data with a view to identifying the features of interactional discourse (sub-section 3.1) as well as the themes evolving from the positioning of discourse participants (sub-section 3.2).

3.1 Interactional discourse in the focus group discussions

This linguistically based analysis of focus group material takes as its point of departure the linguistic realisations of interactional discourse, that is, the use of words that are characteristic of spoken exchange and face-to-face conversation. I will draw on Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse in order to examine the level of interactivity in the three focus groups under investigation. Hyland (2005: 37) defines metadiscourse as "the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community." More importantly, he (ibid.) draws a distinction between 'interactive' and 'interactional' metadiscourse, the former relating to features of text organisation, such as code glosses or transition markers, the latter including resources such as self-mention, boosters, hedges or engagement markers. It is through the use of interactional resources that the interactive nature of focus group discussions is manifested.

The resources that help to perform "[i]nteractivity in spoken discourse require speakers to demonstrate their involvement in the flow of talk and engagement in a shared context [...] by expressing a personal stance to the topic and by referring to themselves and addressees" (Hyland 2013: 205). Cases in point are the use of personal reference on the basis of personal

³ The author would like to thank Emily Reeh and Talia Groß for their support and valuable aid with transcribing the focus group discussions.

pronouns (*I, you, we*), discourse markers (e.g., *you know, like, I mean*), hesitation markers (e.g., *um, uh*) or continuers (e.g., *yeah, hm*) (see Schiffrin 1996; Couper-Kuhlen / Selting 2018). It is understood that interactivity is regarded as a gradient, implying that even in so-called ‘interactive genres’, the level of interactivity will have to be established in each case. From a discourse-analytical perspective, interactive genres can be argued to comprise the following features: personal pronouns, discourse markers, elicitations, questions and negotiations (Morell 2004). In other words, focus group discourses, if found to be interactional, are characterised by personalisation, that is, a modulation of discourse(s) in terms of subjectivity markers and personal alignment as well as transformation of personal experience into discourse. In the sections that follow I examine the linguistic realisations of self-mention and engagement markers employed by the focus group participants.

3.1.1 *Pronominal self-reference*

The use of pronominal self-reference or self-mention is a typical feature of interactional discourse, such as instructional or, more broadly, institutional discourses. For this purpose, all occurrences of the first-person pronouns *I* and *we* were retrieved from the focus group data and their collocational patterns identified. With a rate of occurrence of 1,484 times the pronoun *I* is considerably more frequent than the first-person plural *we* (194 occurrences) and the second-person pronoun *you* (see Figure 3 in section 3.1.2). This marked difference in frequency of use is also reflected in the scaling of Figures 1-3, where the maximum values for the raw frequencies on the y-axis have been adjusted to these frequency variations.

In order to examine more closely how subjectivity and personal alignment are co-constructed in the FG discussions all verbs that co-occurred with the first-person pronouns *I* and *we* at least five times were located through a key-word-in-context (KWIC) search using the MAXDictio component in MAXQDA Analytics Pro (VERBI Software 2021). In order to account for all word forms, including inflected forms and different tenses, a lemmatised list was produced. The final list comprised as many as 43 verbs, with the following ten verbs, listed in alphabetical order, being the most pervasive across focus groups: *be, do, have, have to, know, learn, mean, speak, start, think*. These can be classified into four broad categories: verbs relating to discourse acts (*mean, speak*), verbs expressing cognition acts (*know, learn, think*), a mixed category of verbs (*be, do, have, have to*) that may be used as lexical, grammatical or modal verbs, and one verb, *to start*, with a referential meaning similar to others in the so-called “begin group” (Hunston / Francis 2000), which have the pattern *V to-inf* and are concerned with starting, continuing, or discontinuing an action.

This provisional categorisation of pronoun-verb collocations was refined on the basis of additional criteria, such as frequency and discourse function. Beginning with the frequency criterion, Figure 1 shows the breakdown of the distribution of verb collocates of *I* per focus group.

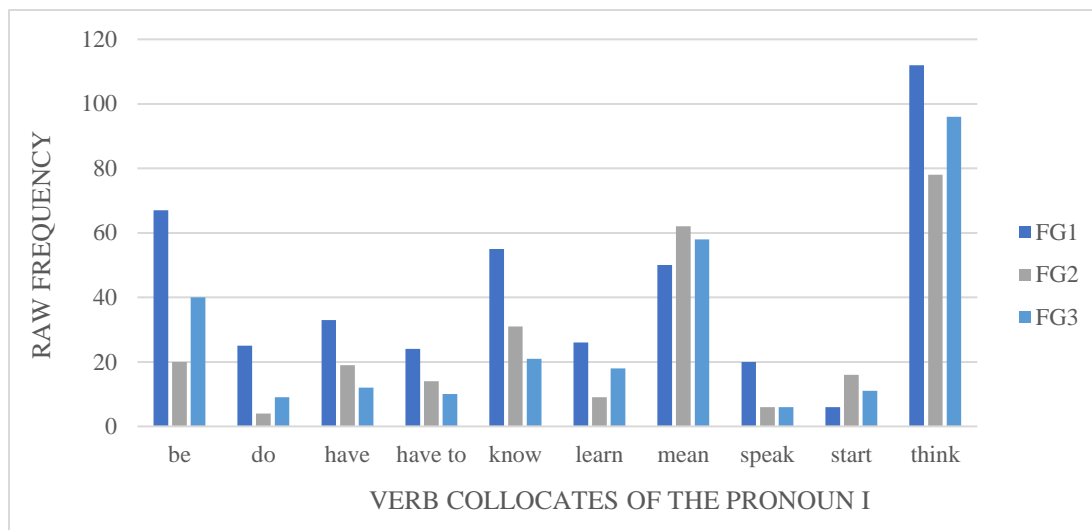


Figure 1. Distribution of Verb Collocates of the First-Person Pronoun *I* across Focus Groups

Across focus group data, the most frequent collocates of the first-person singular pronoun *I* are the verbs *think*, *mean* and *know*, all of which serve important stance-taking functions in discourse. Cases in point are the phrases *I think*, *I mean* and *I don't know*, which are high-frequency collocations in spoken discourse. Beginning with the phrases *I think* and *I mean*, both serve as stance markers, that is, linguistic resources used by speakers to convey their personal feelings and assessments (see Biber 2006), albeit with different discourse functions. In the case of *I think*, the pronoun-verb collocation occurs both with *that* complementizer (“I think that’s” or “I think that”) and without (“I think it’s”) (see also Table 4) and may be used either to add another point (“and I think”) or to contradict somebody else’s position (“but I think”), which may involve a topic shift. In addition to its core meaning as a verb of cognition, *I think* has several epistemic meanings, expressing belief, opinion and subjective evaluation (Aijmer 1998). The phrase *I mean*, by contrast, is typically used when explaining or giving an example of something, or when pausing to think about what you are going to say next. The following examples from the focus group data illustrate this difference:

- (6) **I think** we’d have to limit the size of the classes (.) that’s the main issue (.) they offer so many topics you could talk about (.) and if you have a room full of students who just sit there and wait until the lesson is over yo you know it just i it just doesn’t happen (FG3, Pos. 211, Speaker: P6)
- (7) But it’s (.) really really impossible **I mean** you need years and years to (.) get rid of it but uh here in [GERMAN-SPEAKING COUNTRY] it’s okay I I can live with it but uh if I moved to the US, I would try to get rid of it as soon as I could but (..) (FG1, Pos. 155, Speaker: P3)

In (6), which is extracted from a passage in which the focus group discussion revolved around the lack of interaction during Business English classes, P6 articulates what they consider as the best solution, namely to limit class size in order to encourage spoken interaction. In this case, the epistemic use of *I think* expresses the speaker’s subjective evaluation of the problem by linking class size to the lack of communicative interaction in class. In (7) the role of accents is discussed, specifically whether or not the business students participating in the focus groups are anxious to lose them. Talking about this issue, P3 begins by invoking the futility of the even attempting to lose one’s accent, just to rectify the problem by using *I mean* to specify the circumstances under which accents might be acceptable. This use of *I mean* encodes the discourse marker’s basic meaning of flagging upcoming adjustments (Fox Tree / Schrock 2002).

As shown in (8) and (9) below, both markers are combined in the FG discussions, where *I mean* is used to announce a repair that immediately follows, as in (8) “I mean you choose your studies

according to your interests”. In this passage, the FG discussion centred on the role played by motivation in Higher Education and strategies developed for independent learning. P2 admits that the initial motivational boost provided by transitioning from secondary to tertiary education did not prove sustainable. In (9), *I mean* is adjacent to *I think*, a positioning which results in different discourse functions. Where the phrase *I mean* fulfils an important interpersonal function of glossing over hesitation and/or disfluency in the speech of speaker P1, the use of *I think* can be described in terms of one of the interactive functions identified by Kärkkäinen (2003). She (ibid.) found that the collocation *I think* serves as a point of departure for the verbalisation of the speaker’s personal perspective, which in the example below consists in invoking the risk of language attrition as expressed by P1.

- (8) Yeah, than earlier. I guess the motivation was bigger at the beginning. Yeah, and of course at university, **I mean** you choose your studies according to your interests as well (.) and so (.) **I think** it’s easier to motivate yourself and it’s all exciting and new that is [laughing] (FG2, Pos. 84, Speaker: P2)
- (9) Yeah, because I don’t want not I don’t want to lose my vocabulary **I mean I think** if I will not use uhm English I’ll lose all my skills (.) or not all my skills but (..) (FG2, Pos. 208, Speaker: P1)

On closer inspection, the frequent rate of occurrence of the verb *know* as a collocate of the pronoun *I* can be explained by a rather specific usage pattern (see also Table 4). In the three focus groups, in less than a quarter (25 out of 107) of the occurrences *know* is used as a cognition verb, describing what students know, particularly knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. In more than 75% of cases, by contrast, the verb is integral to the phrase *I don’t know*, which is a common marker either expressing uncertainty, a knowledge gap or the speaker’s inability to provide the required information (Baumgarten / House 2010: 1194). While all three prototypical meanings find expression in the FG discussions, most participants employ *I don’t know* to articulate their inability or unwillingness to supply specific information on the current discussion topic, which in examples 10-12 concerns the participants’ preference for a particular variety of English, including the issue of native-like pronunciation. Whereas P1 of FG3 feels rather strongly about imitating native-like pronunciation, the other speakers are not as outspoken about native speaker accents.

- (10) It’s like an ape (.) [OP chuckling] I feel like an idiot (.) it’s not I’m not natural [OP laughing] more like you say like cheers, cheers mate [imitating British accent] (.) I feel, **I don’t know**, uncomfortable. (FG3, Pos. 108, Speaker: P1)
- (11) No (.) I just prefer the sound of British English **I don’t know** just (.) my preference. (FG2, Pos. 170, Speaker: P1)
- (12) Yes, in the classes yeah and (.) I think it’s it’s easier or maybe it’s just easier for me because I I hear it more often so **I don’t know** for me it’s British English (..) (FG2, Pos. 182, Speaker: P6)

These comments illustrate the overall non-committal stance expressed by the discourse marker *I don’t know*. More precisely, the business students, who are L2 speakers of English, construct a stance out of the core meaning of *I don’t know*, that is, using *know* as a verb of cognition and conceiving of the negated form as a discourse marker pointing to the inability to provide the required information and/or a reluctance to commit to a specific message. In addition to expressing this type of speaker-oriented meaning, the marker *I don’t know* may also be regarded as L2 specific use in that it serves to gloss over disfluent speech. This is consistent with the findings of a study proposed by Baumgarten / House (2010: 1198), who showed that, in contrast to L1 speakers of English, L2 speakers use *I don’t know* “as a marker of insufficient knowledge, and they use the expression to verbalise and to overcome on-line planning difficulties.”

Prior to moving on to the mixed category of verbs that may either be used as lexical or grammatical verbs, let us briefly consider the verbs *learn* and *start*, both of which have been

identified as frequent right collocates of the pronoun *I*. Both verbs are chiefly used in the past tense to describe their language learning personal narratives, that is, “stories based on the speakers’ personal knowledge and experiences with learning languages” (Todeva / Cenoz 2009: 1).

- (13) Yes but the problem (.) sometimes as I mentioned before was that the content of the [NAME OF BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES] were further than the content of my studies (.) So I had (.) I had to **learn** content of (.) of the concepts in English in in the [NAME OF BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES] courses but but **I didn’t learn** it before in in the German normal (.) courses (AP: Yes) For example uhm I can’t remember what it (.) what it was (FG1, Pos. 251, Speaker: P5)
- (14) I’ve been studying English uhh for something about also ten years uh I attended high school and there **I learned** uhm German and French uh yeah hmm my (uncl.) my experience with English I started on Malta I attended a language school (.) uh I was there one month I think uhhh II (..) then I could uh well III **I learned** also in a language school uhm **learned** English I studied uhm I studied English uhm and then I continued uhm, well I’ve been continuing studying English here (FG1, Pos. 26, Speaker: P4)
- (15) Uhm learning English for more than fourteen years, quite easily, uhm in a playful way in the primary school (.) then I had in high school Latin for six years which is really hard to learn because you can’t speak it it’s just reading and translate, I had French with the same (.) procedure uhm [OP laughing] learning vocabulary grammar and things like this. At university **I started to learn** Spanish and I went half a year to Spain, which helped me a lot in communicating and I think it’s a very important thing if you want to learn a language you have to (.) go in this country and to communicate with the native speaker (.) to learn this language (.) (FG2, Pos. 32, Speaker: P8)

These examples illustrate inconsistencies and contradictions articulated by the participants with regard to the discussion topics, highlighting the subjectivity and personal alignment of their contributions. At the same time, they are a good illustration of how several of the discourse markers discussed this far are put to specific uses in the learner data. More often than not, the high frequency collocations serve to gloss over disfluency issues rather than performing discourse-pragmatic functions. This result may also explain the fact that several of the features of interactional discourse identified cluster together in particular passages. A possible explanation for this might be the positive self-presentation attempted by individual focus group participants.

Turning now to discuss the final category of collocates of the pronoun *I*, the mixed category of verbs including *be*, *do*, *have* and *have to*, there is an expected partial overlap of their uses in combination of all three personal pronouns. As can be derived from the frequencies provided in Figures 1-3, the collocations are more frequent in combination with the personal pronoun *I*, which is itself the most frequently used personal pronoun. The overall pervasiveness of the lemmas *be*, *do*, *have* can be explained by their dual uses as lexical verbs and auxiliaries. In their co-occurrence with *I*, the following usage patterns can be distinguished. The verb *to be* is predominantly used as a copular verb in contracted form or to describe a past state of affairs as shown in 16 and 17:

- (16) All the [NAME OF BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES] classes, it was just vocabular which is important (.) so **I’m sure** that I’ve benefited from that (FG2, Pos. 139, Speaker: P6)
- (17) Uhh no, I **was** in a tourism school. Yeah (FG1, Pos. 20, Speaker: P1)

To a similar extent as with *be*, the lemmatised word forms identified for *have* tend to be used as full, lexical verbs rather than auxiliaries. The forms of *have* are used to describe interactions with the learning environment or refer to communicative situations involving the use of English, for example.

- (18) Well, I do use it outside [NAME OF UNIVERSITY] because I talk to my friends who live abroad of course and **I have** some friends [chuckles] who live abroad and I also work for [NAME OF ORGANISATION] (.) which is an international organisation. Our common language in [NAME OF ORGANISATION] is English, whenever we have team meetings it’s just English so yeah (.) (FG2, Pos. 126, Speaker: P3)

- (19) Bec I **I had** a very good e education I mean I started to learn German I don't know when [laughing] yeah both uhm I was l watching a lot of TV (.) and uh I mean German (FG1, Pos. 162, Speaker: P1)

As shown on Figure 1, another pervasive verb-pronoun combination is the phrasal modal *I have to*. In part, its frequency of occurrence can be explained by the fact that *have to* is extremely common in conversation, where it serves to express obligation or necessity (Biber et al. 1999: 488–489). Interestingly, Biber et al. (1999: 494–495) found that *have to* is used in conversation chiefly to mark personal obligation rather than logical necessity, that is, expressing an intrinsic meaning of personal obligation rather than, as would be expected, an extrinsic meaning of logical necessity. The intrinsic meaning of *have to* also prevails in the lexical bundles retrieved from the focus group data (see Table 4).

Two main usage patterns could be identified for the phrasal modal *I have to*: The meaning coded as personal obligation predominates in co-occurrences with verbal groups such as *I have to + improve my English/study grammar/prepare every lesson/study technical words/learn for some exam/work with different cultures and people*. The other pattern suggests personal involvement while providing a concessive, somewhat hedged, expression of necessity in forming a verbal group of *I have to + admit/mention/say/agree*.

Before proceeding to examine pronominal reference to other discourse participants, it is important to consider the first-person plural pronoun *we*, given that it fulfils the important discourse function of co-constructing community. The pronoun occurs 194 times across all three focus groups and is thus considerably less frequent than the pronoun *I*. The steps performed in the analysis were analogous to those with the first person singular: First, all occurrences of the pronoun were retrieved from the focus group data, followed by locating its most frequent verb collocates with a minimum frequency of five occurrences. The final list includes only nine verbs, which are (in alphabetical order): *be, do, have, have to, learn, need, should, speak, start*.

As shown in Figure 2, there is considerable overlap between the verb collocates of *I* and the verbs that collocate with *we*. As these are used in a comparable way, I will only report the findings that add to the preceding discussion. As regards the verbs that were not accounted for in combination with the pronoun *I*, for example the modals *should* and *need*, they were excluded due to their infrequency.

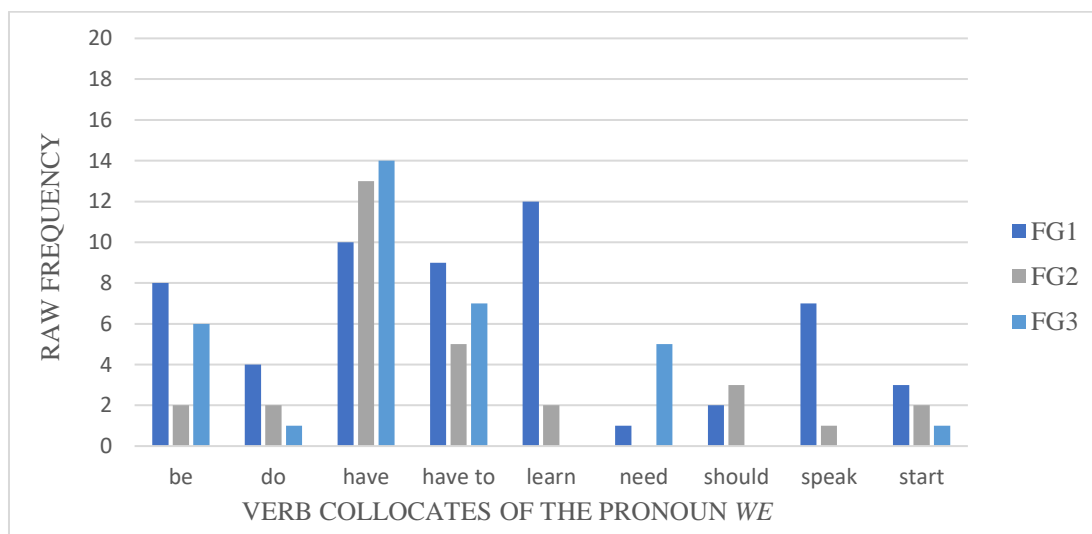


Figure 2. Distribution of Verb Collocates of the First-Person Pronoun *we* across Focus Groups

Previous research (e.g., Harwood 2005) has established inclusive and exclusive uses of *we*, implying that the pronoun may signal belonging or may be used to produce othering. The uses of *we* + verb collocates are therefore pivotal in constructing discourse boundaries between in-group and out-group members or in establishing different communities of practice in local discourse structures. With regard to the co-construction of learner identities, the pronoun *we* is thus of particular interest as it may be used inclusively to build a community of speaker(s) and addressee(s), or may be used to exclude other discourse participants from such a community.

However, the uses of *we* during the focus group discussions do not necessarily point to peer community among the student participants. Instead, the inclusive uses of *we* on behalf of the moderators help to establish a community of practice among all focus group participants, including practitioners and students. About one third of the occurrences of *we* are part of the moderators' questions or comments exemplified below. Witness the different uses of *we* in the examples. Whereas in (20) *we* is used to include the student participants while excluding the moderators, M1 uses *we* to refer to all participants in the focus group discussion in (21).

- (20) (...) I mean I'm generally impressed with the the level of (.) English **we have** in this room. (.) Uhm so I was wondering (.) I mean how did you actually get this far? And also, what motivates you perhaps in the future to actually even improve, if it's necessary, your English? How do you do that? (FG1, Pos. 122, Speaker: M2)
- (21) Uhm okay (.) can **we** just ask one more specific question now (.) uhm when you were faced with studying for the exams in your [NAME OF BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES]. How did you actually go about studying? What did you do? (FG3, Pos. 294, Speaker: M1)

As regards the uses of *we* by the student participants, it can be argued that the pronoun is used to perform a variety of discourse functions. For example, P3's contribution in (22) illustrates a rather crude form of othering, constructing an 'us vs them' scenario promoting the in-group's qualities while demoting those of the out-group.

- (22) I think in general one can say that uh in [GERMAN SPEAKING COUNTRY] knowing a foreign language is considered (.) something excellent (.) something very good, important (.) whereas in in France, Spain, in Italy (.) they don't (.) care about (.) other languages (..) as much as **we do** (FG1, Pos. 57, Speaker: P3)
- (23) But I can remember one uhm incident because **we were** in Italy (.) on a students' exchange (.) and uhm yeah **we were** in class there and I I think (.) it was almost the final class at high school (.) and the the pupils were learning how to say "My name is" and yeah that was a bit I don't know [laughing] but at the age of seventeen or eighteen (.) and the teacher focused on (.) that the students have to say in spoken language "My name's" instead of "My name is" which yeah seemed to be really important to her but yeah, I guess if you learn things like that I don't know it's really hard (FG2, Pos. 65, Speaker: P2)
- (24) The same goes for me (.) I think **we can** all effectively work in an English setting so if you want to be a lawyer of course sort of a (..) special fields then you have to learn all this (..) vocabulary but (.) (uncl.) efficient (FG3, Pos. 100, Speaker: P6)

Other uses of *we* include, as shown in (23) and (24), instances in which the student participants report their collective experiences as learners in different learning environments, particularly language classes. Interestingly, the contribution in (24) made by P6, draws the discourse boundary in way to exclude the moderators and to close ranks among the students. To contextualise, this contribution is made in response to a moderator prompt which tried to investigate what motivates students to (further) improve their English language skills. As the discussion unfolds, it becomes ever more evident that the participants show little interest in pushing themselves to the limit in order to gain native-like proficiency, for example. The move made by P6 thus serves a distancing function.

As regards the phrase *we have to*, verbs referring to learning-related activities, such as *study*, *learn*, *read* or *write*, are the most frequent co-occurrences. Invoking their previous learning experiences, *we had to* in the past tense also comes up several times:

- (25) Yeah, in [NAME OF BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES] **we had to talk** about financial markets and options, futures and (.) I didn't have any clue (.) I couldn't speak (FG3, Pos. 311, Speaker: P7)
- (26) Uhm I think also that it depends also on the teacher (.) uhm (..) during my high school all my English teachers concentrate just on writing skills (.) **we had** al always **to write** something and uhm the the oral skills were neglected. So for me it's uh it at the moment for me it's really difficult to communicate flu fluently (FG2, Pos. 16, Speaker: P5)
- (27) And they're afraid of speaking (AP: Yeah) I think that's a big point cause when I was uhhm **we had** uhhh **we had to present** uhm uhh the result of the seminar which was only one week (.) so we prepared the presentation one day and **had to present** it next day (.) (FG1, Pos. 58, Speaker: P5)

While the uses documented in (25)-(27) too are indicative of a newly formed community of practice, they express obligation in a mitigated way by using *we* rather than *I* as the subject. The use of phrasal *we have to* is clearly used to discuss shared experiences of expectations and course requirements, comparable to similar discussions in study groups, for example (Biber / Barbieri 2007: 275).

3.1.2 Referring to others

Another way of marking interactivity in discourse is by addressing other discourse participants, either directly or indirectly. As mentioned above, the pronoun *you* occurs 841 times across focus group discussions and collocates with as many as 28 verbs, the 10 most frequent of which are the following: *be*, *know*, *have*, *can*, *do*, *have to*, *say*, *think*, *learn*, *need*. Again, there is considerable overlap in the collocates and their uses with the other two personal pronouns investigated.

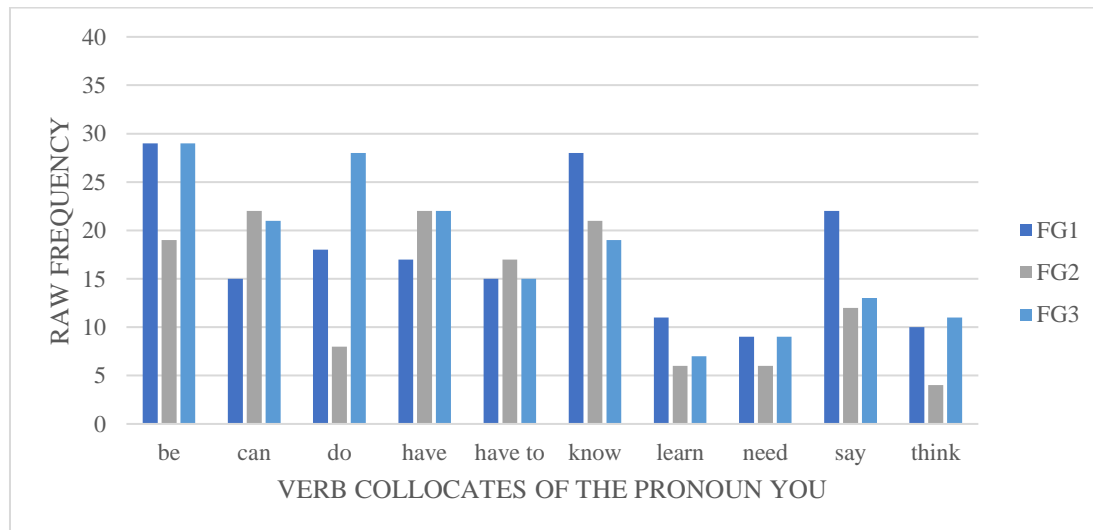


Figure 3. Distribution of Verb Collocates of the Personal Pronoun *you* across Focus Groups

In the focus group data, several ways of addressing other discourse participants are attested, either in form of direct address using the personal pronoun *you* or, in the absence of direct addressees, the pronoun *you* may also be used generically. As a direct form of address, the pronoun *you* is mostly used by the moderators to either build on previous exchanges or to refer back to another speaker's contribution to the discussion, as shown by the following examples:

- (28) Can I just go back to something **you said**, and **you said** uhm (.) **you said** in the States uh (.) in your exchange semester (.) most pe very international uhm most people had a lower level of English than you did, and **you mentioned** the CEO whose pronunciation was so bad that (.) everybody knew immediately they were German, so (.) how important how would **you assess** good level of English (.) how important is pronunciation how important is vocabulary how important is grammatical correctness? (FG1, Pos. 129, Speaker: M1)
- (29) So, is that something **you are aiming for** to speak like a native speaker? (FG2, Pos. 140, Speaker: M1)
- (30) Like like **you said** it's pulling you (FG3, Pos. 333, Speaker: M1)

As shown in Figure 3, the verb *to know* is also pervasive in collocates with the pronoun *you*. Most occurrences are part of the discourse marker *you know*, whose basic meaning is to invite inferences on behalf of the addressee(s) (see Fox Tree / Schrock 2002). There is however a marked difference in moderator and student uses of *you know*, on two levels. Syntactically, the moderator's use in (31) is embedded in the utterance structure while, in the student's utterance in (32), the markers occur in clause-initial position, adjacent to conjunctions. Functionally, *you know* can be argued to operate on the metacommunicative level, where it serves as a monitoring proposal to ensure comprehensibility of what is being discussed (Fox Tree / Schrock 2002: 734-735). This discourse pragmatic function is frequently performed in classroom interaction. In the examples below, both moderator and student uses are clearly informed by instructional discourse, albeit from different perspectives. The moderator, who engages in the dual role of practitioner-cum-researcher, aims to establish cognition by way of an explanation, whereas the student's uses of *you know* in (32) point to learner-related specifics, such as planning what to say next, avoiding a fluency break, or as a means of positive self-presentation.

- (31) No, no it's also a matter of size **you know** (.) how many students there are and how many students have to take how many English classes yeah (.) of course we as teachers would prefer to have small classes and small groups (.) and (.) do other stuff as well (.) yeah? (FG3, Pos. 278, Speaker: M1)
- (32) But I agree that it really depends on the teacher as well [laughing] (AP: yeah) **you know** because I had the same problem with French too and **you know** I still don't like it too much either (FG2, Pos. 27, Speaker: P3)

To a degree, *you know* and *I mean* can be argued to perform similar discourse functions in that they announce repairs or upcoming adjustments. On the other hand, they also fulfil important interpersonal functions, which particularly applies to *you know*. This phrase “may be used between disjoint utterances to give a veneer of continuity or to counteract the negative effects of a pause” (Fox Tree / Schrock 2002: 730).

Moving on to consider the co-occurrence of *you* with the lemma *do*, the combination of pronoun + *do* is more frequent than with *be* and *have*, the reason being that *do* is mostly used as an auxiliary, either to form interrogatives (chiefly moderator questions or comments) or to negate statements.

- (33) So, what what do you do now to to keep up your English (.) outside university? (.) I mean you you mentioned yeah of course now you go and see movies etcetera (.) **do you read, do you watch** television in English, **do you** (.) (FG1II, Pos. 47, Speaker: M1)
- (34) But if **you don't have** a good accent, I think (.) it doesn't look competent either if you (.) speak correctly but with an accent that's completely (.) yeah (FG1I, Pos. 237, Speaker: P6)

When examining the phrase *you have to*, it is interesting to note that the pronoun *you* assumes a generic meaning in cases where the speaker mainly refers to his or her own experiences. A case in point is the pattern *you have to* + know/speak/learn/pass/practise/attend.

- (35) I try [laughing] yes but (.) there are really many that (.) it seems like they are speaking English but you **you have to think about** the words and then ah yeah that's that means that but but they pron pronounce that completely differently from (.) yeah from (FG2, Pos. 143, Speaker: P6)
- (36) I also think so because [clears her throat] I think the most important thing is that at one point **you have to lose** this (.) fear of speaking in the foreign language (.) that's the point **you you really have to (.) uhm reach** somehow and I think the best solution is to only go abroad or that people maybe also some people (.) in school can come or something like an exchange that first the British children come and then the [German speaking country] children go there and I think then you are confronted the first time now I have to and it's a good experience (.) (FG3, Pos. 45, Speaker: P3)
- (37) uhm (.) yes I've slightly benefitted from [NAME OF BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES] but uh I I did some interviews job interviews in the US and uh I think (.) without doing any additional stuff it's (.) not enough that you learn here to to pass (.) an interview for investment banking for example (.) in New York (OP: Uh huh) (.) **You have to have** a (.) higher level (FG1, Pos. 309, Speaker: P3)

As mentioned above, the phrasal modal *have to* is common in conversation to express obligation or necessity. In the combination *we have to* and its variant forms, this obligation is abstracted away from the individual and conceptualised as a requirement independent of specific learners. In other words, the necessity is expressed as a universally valid statement which has generic reference. The genericity encoded by the pronoun *you* derives from uses in which no specific addressee is present. The learner uses of generic *you* in the focus group data could also be an interesting feature of cross-linguistic transfer from German L1. The German equivalent of *you* can be used as a non-addressee deictic for generic statements as well as for articulating subjective utterances which exclusively draw on the experiential basis of a single speaker (Auer / Stukenbrock 2018: 281-283).

3.2 Interaction in the Focus Group Discussions

The methodological framework of this study (see section 2.3) is based on an understanding of focus group discussions as discourse and the data-driven identification of themes emerging from these discussions. Therefore, and in contrast to other discourse-analytical accounts of FG data, the present analysis will not begin by locating pre-existent, researcher-generated topics in the data; what follows instead is a data-driven analysis which, on the basis of frequency-related criteria, seeks to identify the discussion topics that were actually focused on during the FG sessions and to infer emergent themes from these building blocks of discourse. The analysis will be completed by the close analysis of an FG excerpt in section 3.2.2.

3.2.1 Themes emerging from interaction

The goal of this analytical stage consisted in laying bare the patterning of discourse in the three focus group discussions, paying particular attention to the topics emerging from unfolding discourse. The results obtained from the analysis of multi-word patterns are displayed in Table 4. For ease of comparison, the columns labelled % indicate the relative frequencies for the 3-word bundles, that is, their frequencies expressed as a percentage of all running words in the focus group transcripts.

Table 4. The 15 Most Frequent 3-Word Bundles across Focus Groups (Frequency ≥ 5)

Focus Group 1				Focus Group 2			Focus Group 3		
Rank	3-word bundle	Freq	%	3-word bundle	Freq	%	3-word bundle	Freq	%
01	i don't know	35	0.35	i don't know	25	0.38	a lot of	21	0.29
02	a lot of	19	0.19	i think it's	17	0.26	i don't know	17	0.24
03	but i think	15	0.15	you have to	13	0.20	in english and	13	0.18
04	and then i	13	0.13	and i think	12	0.18	and i think	10	0.14
05	i think it's	12	0.12	i mean i	12	0.18	you have to	10	0.14
06	and so on	11	0.11	i think it	11	0.17	i think that	9	0.13
07	the key words	11	0.11	i have to	10	0.15	and so on	8	0.11
08	i have to	10	0.10	i mean you	10	0.15	but i think	8	0.11
09	i mean i	9	0.09	you want to	10	0.15	i think it's	8	0.11
10	i think that's	9	0.09	i think that	8	0.12	you don't have	8	0.11
11	or something like	9	0.09	it depends on	8	0.12	don't have to	7	0.10
12	something like that	9	0.09	depends on the	7	0.11	my name is	7	0.10
13	to speak english	9	0.09	a little bit	6	0.09	do you think	5	0.07
14	you have to	9	0.09	a native speaker	6	0.09	i mean it	5	0.07
15	level of english	8	0.08	and it was	6	0.09	i mean you	5	0.07

In line with corpus linguistic terminology, the multi-word patterns are labelled 'lexical bundles', "defined simply as the most frequently recurring sequences of words [...]. Lexical bundles are usually not structurally complete and not idiomatic in meaning, but they serve important discourse functions in both spoken and written texts" (Biber / Barbieri 2007: 264). Lexical bundles may thus be considered as important building blocks of discourse, comparable to the phraseological profiles of texts (Chen / Baker 2010: 30).

While only the 15 most frequently occurring 3-word bundles are displayed in Table 4, the total number of bundles retrieved from the focus group data is much higher, with the largest number of bundles (N=38) occurring in FG1, compared to 31 bundles in FG2 and as few as 22 bundles in FG3. Despite the apparent similarities in the patterning of the language used in the three focus group discussions, there is great variability in the interactional discourse features and the topics covered. The issue of interactional discourse and interpersonal meaning will be resumed in section 4, in which the results obtained for interactional discourse features and functions will be drawn together.

As regards the pervasiveness of bundles in all three focus group discussions, there are only three bundles, *I don't know*, *I think it's* and *you have to*, that are attested in the top 15 of frequently used bundles in all three focus groups. Their uses can be directly related to the preceding discussion of verb collocates in further support of the evidence of the collocational analysis. What is striking about the structural properties of the bundles listed in Table 4 is the proportion of clausal bundles, such as *but I think*, *I mean you* or *I think it*, which are verb clause fragments including the personal pronoun *I*. These amount to about 50% of the bundles listed in this table. Bundles including the pronoun *you*, by contrast, are rather infrequent in the other focus groups (FG1 = N1, FG2 = N2, FG3 = N4). All of them have a generic meaning, except for *do you think* in FG3, which is a fragment of a moderator question directly addressing the focus group participants. This finding is consistent with those presented in section 3.1.2.

The next analytical step consisted in examining the discourse functions of the lexical bundles extracted from the focus group data. The functional categorisation was adapted from Biber / Barbieri's (2007) taxonomy. Biber / Barbieri (2007: 270) distinguish between three main

discourse functions, namely bundles used as discourse organisers, stance bundles and referential bundles. Discourse organisers (e.g., *and so on*, *in order to*) highlight textual relations, establish links between portions of text or label stages in discourse. Stance bundles (e.g. *I think that's*, *it's very important*) express interpersonal meanings, such as a speaker's attitudes to, or evaluations of, the propositional meaning encoded in discourse. Finally, referential bundles (e.g., *the majority of*, *a lot of*), as noted by Biber / Barbieri (ibid.) "make direct reference to physical or abstract entities, or to the textual context itself, either to identify an entity or to single out some particular attribute of the entity as especially important." Unlike most bundle studies, a fourth functional category was included in the present analysis in order to account for the topical focus in each of the FG discussions. These context-dependent bundles are related to the contents that are addressed in the group discussions. As shown in Figure 4, these topic-related bundles account for approximately a third of all bundles in FG1 and FG3 while making up less than a quarter in FG2.

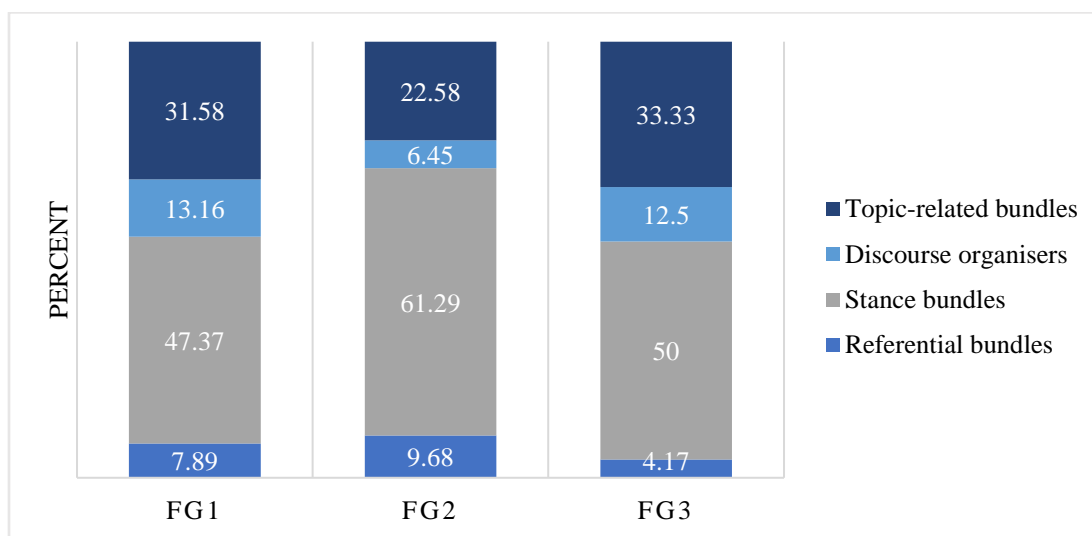


Figure 4. Functional Distribution of 3-Word Bundles across Focus Groups

Biber et al. (1999: 994–995) found that, in conversation, about 30% of the words occur in recurrent lexical bundles. Several of the bundles retrieved from the focus group discussions and listed in the table above belong to the most common three-word lexical bundles in conversation. Cases in point are *I don't know*, *I don't think*, *I want to*, *you have to* or *I mean I*.

In accordance with the present results, previous studies have demonstrated that stance bundles are pervasive in spoken discourse (Biber et al. 1999), including spoken university registers, in which stance bundles have been shown to make up over 60% of all bundles used. This means that the student participants are deeply immersed into this stance-taking interaction typical of instructional or, more broadly, institutional discourses. The overall smaller rate of occurrence of the other two functional types, referential bundles and bundles used as discourse organisers, is also consistent with the findings from other studies (e.g., Biber et al. 1999).

Let us now briefly consider the themes that can be inferred from the lexical bundles. While the same discussion guide was used for all focus groups, individual group dynamics were such that participants highlighted different aspects of the research topic, for example by foregrounding particular aspects of their learning environment and language learning experience. The following is a complete list of all topic-related bundles:

Focus group 1 (Total N=12)	the key words, to speak english, level of english, when i was, at the university, i was in, in german and, my name is, lot of people, of the people, to improve my, was living there
Focus group 2 (Total N=7)	it depends on, depends on the, a native speaker, and it was, do you use, i had a, level of english
Focus group 3 (Total N=8)	in english and, my name is, improved my english, in [GERMAN-SPEAKING COUNTRY] and, in touch with, it's the same, learn a lot, the key words

As suggested by the different patterns of interactional discourse discussed in section 3.1, the interaction in the three focus groups takes off in fairly different directions. The expected result is that the number and type of themes that can be inferred from the topic-related bundles will also be subject to considerable variation. FG1 can be argued to be the most productive group in terms of the total number of topic-related bundles (N=12). As regards the emergent themes, there is a predictable overlap between the groups given that identical researcher-generated topics were used to elicit the participants' responses. The following eight themes can be derived from the discussions: the learning context, English language proficiency, language learning personal narratives, focus group procedures, a contrastive view of languages, focus group interaction, language-using communities and local contexts of language use.

Many of the themes thus relate to English language education in its global, yet localised institutional context. The activities that the FG participants appear to be focused on during the discussions indicate that the focus group discourse is situated in, as well as being informed by, institutional discourses. The institutionality of discourse is manifested in the way "the participants engage in and accomplish institutionally relevant activities [...] and in doing so, orient to the relevance of their institutional identities for the interaction" (Drew / Sorjonen 2011: 193).

3.2.2 *Discursive construction of themes and identities*

The final stage of the comprehensive analysis of focus group discourse is concerned with describing the online co-construction of themes and the discursive embedding of learner identities. The extract from FG2 shown in Figure 5 represents the participants' responses to the question raised by M1 (see example 38). The latter aims to elicit information about the context or communicative situations, in which the participants typically use English. The rather complex question opens up several researcher-generated, etic topics, such as the global omnipresence of English, English as a daily resource, the relationship of English to other languages and the target proficiency required for English.

- (38) In that question, I mean you you said uhm when Moderator 2 asked what do you use English for, is that so much part of the daily life or anybody's daily life nowadays? (.) So is English (.) the more important the most important language to learn? (.) Do you think it's important to learn English well and other languages (.) are less important? (.) (FG2, Pos. 198, Speaker: M1)

01	P 9:	Yeah (.) I think it's quite expected (.) to know English I mean it depends on the job you're doing some (.) people seek for someone who talks Croatian or whatever of course then it would be good but (..) I think that English in general is (.) kind of (.) yeah expected (..)
02	P 2:	I think it is important (.) because (.) yeah there are so many places where you can only communicate in English so in order to communicate I guess it's important to know it
03	P 1:	But I I think it depends where you want to work because (.) uhm all over the world maybe it is the most important language but for example if you want to work in Spain I think it's pretty important to always to also speak Spanish (.) or in or in France I mean (..) because I think the level of English is not that high (.) in Spain or France (..)
04	P 3:	But then I think it is better uh for you if you are the one who knows it well (.) because still (AP: yeah) they need people there who speak [OP laughing] (...)
05	P 5:	I think also English is very important (.) so I think it's most the most important language (.) but I don't think that so many peoples learn French or Italian and primary or secondary school (.) but I think that'll change it will change into more Slavic languages so Czech or Slovak or Russian (.) I think that gets more and more important but not too important as English
06	P 1:	Maybe Chinese too (AP: that's no guar)
07	OP:	[talking across each other] The the pro (AP: hard to learn) [OP laughing] yeah like there are so many different
08	P 7:	Uh English is is a necessity so it is (.) no question about that uhm still it's (.) quite easy to stand out through quality or through higher skills in English for (.) uh (.) by knowing some more languages and even exotic languages I think that is yeah so

Figure 5. Extract from Focus Group 2: Participants' Responses to Moderator Question in (38)

As shown in Figure 5, there are multiple responses to the moderator's question, coming from six different participants, each offering their insider's, emic perspective on the following themes: English language proficiency, language learning personal narratives and their representation of what participants think focus group interaction involves in terms of argumentation. The extract is a good illustration of the pervasiveness of interactional resources, such as the collocate *I think*. Almost every student contribution begins by the phrase *I think* or its variants (*but I think, but then I think*).

As regards English language proficiency, the participants fully concur with the idea that English is a commodity, used as a communicative resource in everyday life, whether for social, academic or professional purposes. These perceptions are validated by their shared experiences with the exigencies of diverse learning or working contexts in which English is seen as a requirement or necessity. Whether or not their views derive from first-hand experience, hearsay or other sources does not influence the co-construction of a narrative, informed by personal views. While there is an awareness of global and local differences in English language proficiency, the participants successfully negotiate identities in which they are empowered as competent and proficient users of English. This narrative rests on self-assessed language skills and feeds on their prior learning experiences, for example during their exchange semesters or internships in multi-national corporations, which put them in a position which enabled them to compare their own command of English with that of students from other L1 backgrounds. In consequence, these business students appear to have adopted a complacent attitude towards English language users in other parts of the world. Needless to say, there is a proficiency gap between their self-assessed language skills and the assessment of their skills in the context of formal instruction.

Interestingly, the responses seem to suggest that, despite assuming that their command of English enables them to effectively work in an English-speaking environment, the participants are aware of the limits of their English language skills and, in principle, recognise that there is room for improvement. In their construal of language learning personal narratives, however, they are content with their present command of English as long as it does not prevent employment and does not interfere with work-related aspirations either. Only then would they be motivated to aim for a higher-than-average proficiency in English or, in the case of enhanced career prospects, they would be willing to learn local and/or lesser-known languages, such as Czech, Russian or Chinese.

All in all, this brief discussion has shown that the business students who participated in the focus group discussions show awareness of the global spread of English and its importance as a main foreign language in education and the workplace. They are not oblivious either towards a hierarchy of languages in terms of their usefulness, particularly in terms of work-related

communicative purposes. While there is no obvious clash between etic and emic perspectives on the themes emerging from the discussion in focus group 2, the gap opens when language proficiency is concerned. The students adopt strategies of self-presentation on the basis of othering, which helps them construe identities as proficient users of English while preventing them from improving their current language skills.

4 Conclusion

This study set out to examine the ways in which ESP students interact with a challenging learning environment and how this interaction impacts on their development of effective identities as L2 learners. The main goal of the current study was to obtain data which provide access to both emic and etic perspectives on the institutional discourses prevalent in the ESP setting of a business school. The second aim of this study was to devise a research methodology that is apt for contextualised accounts of learner identities, particularly their discursive embedding. Another research goal was to describe the business students' identities as English language learners on the basis of interactional resources in the focus group discourse.

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is the variability inherent in the focus group data. Not only is there considerable variation in speaker-related features, such as the number and length of their contributions, but also in the level of interactivity between FG participants. An implication of this is that, while interaction and group dynamics are to be considered as definite aims of focus group methodology, both are likely to influence data production and collection. The relevance of an overall constructivist approach to examining focus groups is thus clearly supported by the current findings.

The argument for conceiving of focus group data as inherently biased was further strengthened by creating a methodological framework based on an understanding of FG discussions as discourse. This important reconceptualisation is premised on an understanding of learner data collection as itself socially constructed, which is an often-neglected factor in focus group research. More important still, the enlarged understanding of focus groups as discourse has been shown to help reveal the discursive character of learner identities while highlighting the embeddedness of focus group interaction in the specific situation in which learner data are being collected. In order to address the discursive construction of interaction in focus group discussions, the methodological approach taken was sensitive to the potential bias inherent in identifying pre-existing, researcher-generated topics in focus group data. Instead, the linguistically based analysis set out to first determine the level of interaction in the FG discussions before inferring any emergent themes as their topical focus.

The study of interactional discourse in the FG discussions has shown that the student participants use several pronouns to express interpersonal meanings and to perform stance-marking in discourse. In terms of pronominal self-reference, the first-person singular pronoun *I* was found to be considerably more frequent than its first-person plural counterpart *we*. The analysis of the collocational patterns of the personal pronouns, particularly the pronoun-verb collocations, revealed that these tend to collocate with a similar set of verbs, all of which are highly pervasive in spoken, conversational English. Cases in point are the discourse markers *I think*, *I mean*, *I don't know*. One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study of interactional resources is that the learner uses differ in their pragmatic functions from L1 uses. The investigation of the student uses in the FG discussions has shown that these markers may be used to avoid a break in fluency or to stall for time as speakers are completing the speech production process. This finding highlights the need for a critical reflection of the strength of the claims made by student participants in focus group discussions, which is further corroborated by the overall non-committal stance expressed by the discourse marker *I don't know*. The focus group participants appear to construct a stance out of the core meaning of the verb *to know*, that

is, using *know* as a verb of cognition and regarding the negated form as an indicator of a knowledge gap.

The research has also revealed the pervasiveness of modal phrases, such as *I have to*, *you have to* and *we have to*, expressing an intrinsic meaning of personal obligation. This sense of obligation or necessity chiefly applies to exigencies of the study programme, for example course requirements and learning strategies. Interestingly, as shown in the analysis of *you have to*, the obligation may be expressed as a universally valid statement with generic reference or, alternatively, to articulate a subjective view that exclusively draws on the experiences of a single speaker.

The investigation of lexical bundles as the building blocks of discourse has confirmed that the interactivity of focus group discourse is predominantly encoded by phrases including the first-person pronoun *I* rather than, as would be expected, being based on communal uses of *we* or forms of direct address by means of the personal pronoun *you*. This could be taken to assume that interaction in the focus group discourse mainly consists in exchanging individual views and ideas, without however building on each other's contributions in the ongoing discourse. The finding that at least half, but up to, 60% of the bundles identified in the FG discussions are so-called stance bundles provides clear evidence of this pattern of use. The inclusion of topic-related bundles in the analysis of focus group discourse emerged as a reliable instrument for identifying themes that emerged from the discussions. The textual representations that surfaced as topic-related bundles were cast into eight themes, which shaped each of the FG discussions in a distinctive way. Many themes bear direct thematic links to English language education in its global and localised institutional context.

The findings of this study suggest that the business students' interaction with their learning environment is mediated by institutional structures that benefit localised language learning ideologies. The current focus group data highlight these ideological discourse structures and the discourse strategies of self-presentation employed by the participants. There is, therefore, a definite need for encouraging students to use the multiple options available for identification with a more globalised take on learning English. The principal methodological implication of this study is that focus group discussions, in addition to being conceived of as social constructions, should increasingly be regarded as learner data, collected and produced in a particular instructional context. While the moderators succeeded in creating an informal atmosphere, as demonstrated by their use of the same discourse markers as the student participants, the overall casual, conversational style of the FG discussions identified by the analysis of interactional discourse belies the fact that, to a degree, students are aware of the instructional context and their responses may be based on their assumptions about what the practitioner-cum-researcher expects to hear.

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