What happens in your country? Teacher constructions of adult EAL students' cultural identities

SUMA SUMITHRAN
Deakin University

Abstract: *In a multicultural and settler society such as Australia, perceptions of the cultures and identities of students in the adult EAL classroom may have a significant impact on their language learning experiences. This paper reports on a study investigating how teachers of adult English as an Additional Language (EAL) students in Victoria, Australia, understand their students' cultural identities, how they speak about their students' language learning and how they perceive the challenges and opportunities that their students face in the learning process. Recent literature highlights the complexity of culture and identity in the adult EAL classroom, and has identified normalisation of stereotyped characteristics of language learners. Semi-structured interviews with three experienced EAL teachers were conducted, and a phenomenological framework was applied for the qualitative data analysis. The themes that emerged suggest that the teachers had a limited and even superficial understanding of their students' cultural identities. Cultural stereotyping was evident when describing their students' language learning experiences, and also when describing the challenges and opportunities that students have in their learning. The implications of these for the students' additional language development are discussed.*

Keywords: *EAL, language learner identities, adult migrant programs, AMEP*

Introduction

Migrants to Australia face significant cultural and linguistic challenges. To assist migrants in settling into Australian society and learning English, the Australian Government provides settlement programs and English language programs. The Department of Education and Training funds the AMEP (Adult Migrant English Program), which provides English language education for eligible migrants and refugees (Burns & De Silva

Joyce, 2007). The AMEP provides 510 hours of English classes, which may be delivered through classroom teaching, through home tutors or via distance learning. Private service providers, TAFEs (Technical and Further Education institutes) and AMES (Adult Migrant English Service) deliver the AMEP. The other language program funded by the Australian Government is the SEE (Skills for Education and Employment) (Department of Education and Training, 2016). Students' eligibility for the AMEP is based on their level of English language proficiency (AMES, 2011), which is assessed according to the ISLPR (International Second Language Proficiency Ratings) scale, a competency-based assessment framework. (The AMEP currently uses the ACSF (Australian Core Skills Framework)).

Cultural stereotyping in the classroom
During my work as an adult EAL teacher, I have on numerous occasions observed other teachers anecdotally describing their adult EAL students' cultural and language identities and the pedagogy they require, in sometimes stereotypical ways. By cultural stereotypes, I refer to those such as "the Chinese are passive learners, the Koreans are soft-spoken and the Indians are laid-back".

Stereotypes are generalisations of observations that are applied to an entire group (Lopez-Rocha, 2005). Hall (1997) defines a stereotype as the reduction of a person to a few essential characteristics and says that this generally occurs in situations characterised by unequal power relations. Hall (1997) further says that a defining feature of stereotyping is the normalisation of the characteristics attributed to the marginalised group, which creates a static and 'fixed' picture of difference between the dominant group and the marginalised group; stereotyping also creates a system of binary oppositions wherein what is normal to the dominant group becomes 'us', and what is different to the dominant group becomes 'them'.

In relation to the field of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), Kumaravadivelu (2003) points out that cultural stereotyping is widespread in the TESOL sector, and Ryan and Louie (2005) say that there is a tendency to rapidly stereotype students according to their cultural origin. Teachers also tend to classify students from Asian backgrounds as being identical to each other in aspects such as their cultural origin, approach to learning, passivity in class and supposed absence of critical thinking skills (Chalmers & Violet, 1997). Importantly,

educators explain plagiarism by students of Asian origin in Australian universities through cultural stereotyping, by asserting that plagiarism is cultural (Le Ha, 2004).

The negative effects of cultural stereotyping in the EAL classroom are numerous and concerning. As students generally consider the teacher to be the authority figure in the classroom, there is the danger that they may believe the teacher's cultural generalisations to be true, and to be an accurate picture of their capabilities (Riley, 2015). Teachers' assumptions based on students' cultural origin may also lead to the teacher having correspondingly low or high expectations of student success in language learning (Vollmer, 2000). Cultural stereotyping also creates an environment of cultural otherness, wherein differences between the majority group's culture and the students' cultural backgrounds are accentuated, and students' identities are also thereby restricted to their geographical country of origin, which is constructed on race-based differences (Lee, 2015). There is also the concern that cultural stereotyping by teachers leads them to view their students as mere representatives of their culture, rather than as persons with their own individual identities (Kumaravadivelu, 2002). Another critical point is that cultural stereotyping and the viewing of students' identities as unchanging and even inferior by the teacher may cause students to feel 'othered' and disengaged from classroom processes (Lee, 2008).

Several theorists and practitioners question cultural stereotyping in EAL classrooms. Kumaravadivelu (2003) stresses that several factors such as educational, social and individual factors influence students' classroom behaviour and performance, rather than only cultural factors. An important point to be noted is that although cultures are dynamic, cultural stereotypes are static; also, a student could be considered to have multiple identities, including identities based on age, gender, parenthood, interests and motivation, with culture being just one of these many identities (Ryan & Louie, 2005). Further, Atkinson and Sohn (2013) raise the point of the individual nature of culture and the cultural nature of the individual. This refers to whether popular perceived cultural characteristics represent every student who belongs to the particular culture, and how much of a role culture plays in being part of an individual student's identity. As an example, does a student originating from India necessarily display a liking of supposedly Indian characteristics such as an interest in cricket? Further, other than Indian culture, to what extent do aspects such as parenthood, hobbies or goals form part

of the Indian-origin student's identity?

This project then aimed to investigate how EAL teachers describe their adult students' cultural identities when talking about students' learning. My main research question was: How do EAL teachers understand their adult students' cultural identities?

With two sub-questions:

a. How do EAL teachers speak about their adult students' language learning experiences?

b. What are the challenges and opportunities which EAL teachers perceive that adult students face in their learning?

To situate the research problem in greater depth, I will now consider the literature related to normalisation of characteristics, the complexity of culture and the complexity of language learner identities.

Normalisation of characteristics

Hall (1997) notes that one of the significant features of stereotyping is the reduction of the person to a few essential characteristics by the dominant group, followed by the normalisation of these characteristics. In a study on learning styles of tertiary-level Asian origin students studying in Australia, Tran (2013) questioned widely held generalisations often attributed to the Confucian heritage culture, such as passiveness and rote learning. The students in the study pointed out that the teachers' methodologies and learning requirements influence their classroom behaviour rather than their culture. Some of the students did not consider themselves to be part of the Confucian heritage culture, and many of them strongly disagreed that they were passive in class. Tran (2013) says that these assumptions about Asian origin students are based on generalised perceptions of Confucian philosophy. On this point, Ryan and Louie (2005) highlight the differences in the various interpretations of Confucian philosophy, which brings forth the dangers of stereotyping based on these varying interpretations. Ryan and Louie (2005) further state that other factors than culture such as the students' personal interests and their level of motivation need to be considered in the classroom, and that the assumption that cultures are stable and non-changing over years is disruptive to learning and teaching.

Complexity of notions of culture

Lee (2015) aimed to examine the manner in which culture was conceptualised in an EAL program at a university in Canada.

Observations of classroom processes found that the aims of the curriculum were often implemented through intercultural comparisons resulting in questions such as 'What about your country?' During these processes of comparison, students were asked for their opinions as representatives of their country rather than as individuals. Lee's (2015) study highlights teachers' underlying assumptions of difference between the target language culture and that of the students, thereby creating an arbitrary division between the two. Such dichotomisation does not consider the process of cultural change, and also does not take into account the influences of cultures on each other (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001). Another critical point is that the practice of comparing students' cultures exoticises multiculturalism rather than taking into account the relevance of these topics to students' current life situations (Norton, 2013). On this topic, Atkinson (1999) questions how people can be viewed as only members of static and homogenous cultural groups and how other aspects such as political, educational and religious influences can be left aside. Lee (2015) concludes by saying that the practice of exploring culture in EAL classrooms may end up as a practice of race.

Crucially, when considering academic performance, Vollmer (2000) conducted a study on EAL students and their teachers at a high school in the U.S.A. The EAL students originated from a mix of countries such as Russia, China and Latin American countries. Vollmer (2000) points out that the teachers generalised character traits of the Russian students as being outgoing, and being less diligent and less emotional than the Chinese students. Vollmer (2000) critically points out that by generalising students and especially by generalising students according to their cultural origin, a picture of academic success that was linked only to the student's cultural origin was created. This is also reflected by Kubota (2012), who points out that the reasons for academic success thus shift from being individual to the racial attributes of the person.

The complexity of language learner identities
The complexities of notions of culture discussed above are also of importance when considering the experiences of individual identities in intercultural contexts. Rich and Troudi (2006) analysed the othering of Saudi Arab students in an EAL program at a university in the U.K. The experiences of the participants in terms of the shift in their identities during the course of the

program reflect Norton's (2013) point that identity is an area of struggle. As one participant explained, his initial positioning of himself was as an international student, but this later combined with his identity as an EAL student and further on as a Muslim, and the participant ended up viewing himself primarily as a Muslim. Identity can be considered in terms of both the positioning generated by the individual, and by the positioning that is imposed on the individual (Block, 2014); Rich and Troudi's (2006) study shows how the teachers imposed an identity that was based on the religion of the students. The study concludes by highlighting the need to be aware of how educational practices in EAL may lead to othering and racialisation of students.

Skilton-Sylvester (2002) analysed the language learning experiences of four Cambodian women in an EAL program in the U.S.A. It was found that the manner in which the classroom pedagogy linked to the students' identities influenced their investment in learning English. Norton (2013) defines investment as the connection between a student's identity and their commitment in learning a language, and a student's investment in studying a language is often influenced by the acquisition of symbolic resources such as education, and material resources such as wealth. Skilton-Sylvester (2002) explains how the four students had multiple identities such as sisters, mothers and daughters, but the English program's assumptions about the students' reasons for studying English and the program's depiction of the students as being mere welfare recipients, did not reflect the students' real life situation. This generalisation also failed to capture their imagined community, which included the desire to become workers, imagined communities being students' connections to communities through their imagination (Norton, 2013). The study strongly puts forth the need to connect classroom pedagogy to students' real lives, which are manifested in multiple identities that are dynamic and varied.

The literature considered above highlights issues such as normalisation of characteristics of the marginalised groups, dichotomisation of cultures, the complexity of culture, students' multiple identities and the struggle within, and students' investment in language learning. These issues informed the research design of the study reported here.

Study participants

The study sought to analyse the understandings of teachers of adult EAL (English as An Additional Language) regarding their

students' cultural identities and language learning experiences, along with the challenges and opportunities faced by their students in their language learning process. Therefore, purposive sampling (Yin, 2011) with adult EAL teachers as participants was used to ensure collection of data relevant to the research question and sub-questions. Ethics clearance was obtained from the relevant authority, following which the Senior Educator at a TAFE in Melbourne was contacted. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Senior Educator, after which e-mails were sent to all adult EAL teachers at the institute requesting their participation in the project. The number of participants was fixed at three considering the small-scale nature of the study, and three adult EAL teachers who responded and consented to the request were interviewed. The teachers will be referred to as Claire, Peter and Emma in this paper. Claire had EAL teaching experience of more than 20 years, while Peter and Emma had EAL teaching experience of 15 years and 7 years respectively. Their classes had a mix of students originating from countries such as Vietnam, China, Myanmar, Iran and South Korea. All the teachers were monolingual Australians with Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, and had travelled extensively in Asia and Europe. The interviews lasted for approximately an hour each and were audio recorded and transcribed. The interview questions have been attached in the Appendix.

Research methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted for the study; given the number of participants, rich descriptions from interview data were considered to reveal issues, which, though not generalisable, are resonant in the field of adult EAL as I have observed informally over the years. The choice of phenomenology as a methodology complemented the project's focus on multiple viewpoints in data analysis. Phenomenology can be defined as the study of a phenomenon through the lived experience of participants (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology is characterised by concepts such as lived experience, intentionality, noema-noesis, epoché or bracketing, and co-researchers (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). Lived experience refers to meaningful experiences of the participant with the particular phenomenon, and intentionality is the relationship between the perception of the object and the object itself. In this research project, the phenomenon refers to adult EAL teachers' descriptions of their students' cultural identities,

the lived experience being the participants' experience with these descriptions. Noema refers to the object of the experience and noesis is the act of experiencing the object. Noema in this research project is considered as referring to students' cultural identities, while noesis refers to the adult EAL teachers' understanding of students' cultural identities. In phenomenology, epoché or bracketing refers to the reining in of the researcher's assumptions and presuppositions during the research process so as to not influence it (Kleiman, 2004), and the participants in the research project are referred to as co-researchers. The process of bracketing in the research process could range from bracketing of the concepts underlying the phenomenon to bracketing of the researcher's assumptions, biases, experiences and presuppositions (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010).

As referred to in the literature reviewed above, studies that explore EAL students' identities and cultures link to issues such as race and power, particularly when attempting to define the identities of minority groups (Hall, 1997), as dominant groups could influence the process. There is therefore the need to consider the research data obtained in this project in a subjective manner, as a phenomenological approach in research involves a focus on the variety of meanings that are possible (van Krieken et al., 2000).

Phenomenology can be classified into Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian phenomenology (Touhy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixmith, 2013). Husserlian phenomenology focuses on the description of the phenomenon and emphasizes bracketing, while Heideggerian phenomenology focuses on the description and interpretation of the experience with the phenomenon and questions whether bracketing can be achieved. This study aims to interpret rather than describe or theorise adult EAL teachers' experiences with their students' cultural identities. This project therefore adopts Heideggerian phenomenology, as its subjective approach makes it appropriate to study teachers' understanding of their students' cultural identities. In keeping with a phenomenological approach, data analysis in this research project was initiated by horizonalisation (Creswell, 2007), wherein important quotes that provided more information about the participants' descriptions of their students' cultural identities were focused on. These quotes were then grouped into relevant themes.

Findings

Three major themes emerged from the data analysis. These were: perceived challenges and opportunities for the students, teacher 'descriptions' of students' cultures of origin and how learning might be influenced, and the perceived characteristics of a good language learner. It is important to note that frequent cultural stereotyping was observed in the data, and two of the teachers, Peter and Emma, even displayed awareness that they were doing this. As Emma stated at the end of the interview, "...it's hard to answer those questions without generalising..."

1. Challenges and opportunities for students

All three teachers shared similar views on students who had had no formal education before coming to Australia, in that many of these students had low self-esteem and literacy issues, which impacted their acquisition of English. According to Peter, "...their lack of the learning process, formal learning process, inhibits their ability to now learn English" and speaking about students of Burmese origin, "they're just disadvantaged compared to the well-educated Chinese, well-educated Iranians who move easier (sic) into the high level".

In describing challenges for students who had had some level of prior education before they came to Australia, all the teachers linked the challenges to students' cultural backgrounds. Claire pointed out "Chinese students will bring in... come in with a teacher-led, rote learning... so it depends on what country they come from and what the education style was", and similarly as per Peter, "that's what they would have done in China...you know... (learn) from a book..." As described by the teachers, some of the challenges faced by the students included rote learning and past methods of learning.

In relation to challenges in the EAL classroom, Emma, speaking about her students of Iranian origin said, "I also find a lot of Iranian students will come to school late...I can only assume this is a cultural thing...I don't know but...it's quite obvious that Iranians are not as committed to being in the classroom". Emma's cultural stereotype of her students of Iranian origin raises issues of generalisations based on country of origin, and further, as to how the generalisations that were based on the teacher's experience with her particular students in the classroom were expanded to include all students who originated from the particular country.

The teachers were of the view that their students had opportunities to improve their speaking levels and their level of confidence. When asked about the opportunities that students have in their learning, Peter said, "It might be better to talk about the specific groups..." In explaining further, Peter grouped his students by country of origin and said, "...it's generalising, I'm generalising okay in a big way... "...the Chinese are quite patient, they know they have to put in the years to get better, Iranian students are less patient..." and "...the Burmese, it's a lower expectation... they didn't have professions..."

2. 'Descriptions' of students' cultures

All the participants routinely followed a process of comparison of students' cultures during class discussions and activities, with questions similar to "what happens in your country?" According to Claire, this comparison of cultures was done with the premise that it leads to an interesting class discussion, and according to Emma, that it resolved cultural misunderstandings in the class. As Lee (2015) says, such a process of cultural comparison emphasises differences based on racial origin. Further, it is important to note that the use of the question "what happens in your country?" is a relatively common practice by teachers in adult EAL classrooms to facilitate student discussions. However, Peter used the question "what happens in your country of origin?" during his class discussions. According to Peter, "If I say your country, I don't like to say that because they're now Australians... so I say country of origin" In addition, as per Peter, "Iranians...to me, they're more westernised... I feel like I'm talking to Australians when I talk to them...with the sense of humour, they're not as polite as the Asians..."

All the teachers had the view that students' learning styles and learning preferences were dependent on their country of origin. According to Emma, "I think either being a passive learner or an active learner depends on their culture definitely....". Also, the teachers expressed generalisations of the educational system in students' country of origin when describing their learning styles. As per Emma, "European, South American and Middle Eastern (students) will be more likely to call out answers...", "I think the Asian students are used to teachers standing up in front, one teacher speaking, everyone else listening..."

3. Characteristics of a good language learner

The teachers' descriptions of what makes for a 'good' language learner was similar in that they highlighted characteristics such as a willingness to try new learning approaches and a lack of a fear of making errors. According to Claire, "I think with learning, I think a certain sort of personality, a certain sort of approach regardless of what is your cultural background...will affect as to how successful you are". As per Peter, "I can identify those learners (successful language learners) in all the groups that we teach. I don't think it's confined to one particular group. It's not a cultural (thing)..." These quotes are significant because both Claire and Peter described their successful students as individuals rather than cultural representatives, which is distinct from many of the teachers' other answers that linked students' challenges and opportunities, students' learning styles and their prior educational systems, to students' cultural backgrounds and to cultural generalisations.

Discussion

Critical issues discussed here in the light of these findings are the nuanced notions of culture in the adult EAL classroom, the nature of teachers' cultural stereotyping, and the resultant silencing of students' identities. The exploration of cultures in the teachers' classrooms was mainly done through a process of cultural comparisons with questions such as "what happens in your country?", as a routine classroom discussion. Claire's reasoning for cultural comparisons was that they made for engaging class discussions, while Emma pointed out that cultural comparisons assisted in rectifying cultural misunderstandings. As highlighted in the literature, this practice reflects an exoticisation of students' cultural backgrounds (Norton, 2013) and of multiculturalism in the classroom. Considering that such cultural comparisons tend to accentuate cultural differences (Lee, 2015), this leads to questions about the aim of such discussions, the relevance of these comparisons to students' lives and exactly how these cultural comparisons apparently resolved cultural misunderstandings. It is important here to restate Kumaravadivelu's (2002) point that students thus become cultural representatives rather than individuals. I have also earlier referred to Atkinson's (1999) questions as to how students can be considered to be just members of cultural groups, while other influences can be put aside. Such cultural comparisons do not reflect ongoing changes in cultures,

nor the influence of cultures on each other (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001). Considering the students' migration experiences through a phenomenological lens in terms of the multiplicity of meanings that are possible, these students may have previously been part of more than one culture. It is also possible that they may consider themselves to be Australians or 'becoming Australian', which therefore again raises the issue of the relevance of cultural comparisons based on students' country of origin. This in turn raises the issue of the usage of the question "what happens in your country?" as a method of exploring culture in the EAL classroom. As Lee (2015) suggests, the exploration of culture in the EAL classroom may translate into the practice of race and this is visible in Claire, Peter and Emma's classrooms.

On the meaning of 'culture', Weaver (1994) points out that through the iceberg model of culture, many aspects of culture are hidden, and says that learning about culture therefore needs to consider practices that are much deeper than those visible externally. While the externally visible aspects include those such as religion, music and food, deeper aspects include those such as the managing of emotions, factors influencing status, and societal norms about conversations, and, crucially for this study, deeper attitudes towards teaching and learning. The exploration of culture by the teachers in this study reveals the superficial nature of the practice. In creating cultural awareness in the EAL classroom, Kumaravadivelu (2008) puts forward certain guidelines such as highlighting the interconnectivity of cultures, studying how global, national, social and individual processes interact, and learning about how cultural identities are formed. Dogancay-Aktuna (2005) points out that the teacher's aim in exploring culture in the classroom should not be to highlight the differences between the students' culture and what is normal for the teacher, but for the teacher to undergo a process of self-reflection wherein his or her preconceived notions of the context can be explored. Ajayi (2011) goes further by saying that there is a need for teachers to examine how their past experiences, views and attitudes in areas such as race and culture, that is, how their sociocultural identities (Duff & Uchido, 1997), affect their pedagogy. According to Singh and Doherty (2004), the EAL classroom, particularly in the current era of globalization, is a contact zone characterised by cultural contact, challenges and renegotiation of cultural identities, and that teachers are as much a part of these cultural processes that occur in the classroom as their students, which implies

mutual sharing and discussion of cultural identities between the teacher and students rather than only between the students. The discussion thus highlights how the teachers' practices reflect their limited understanding of their students' cultural identities, that is, a limited noesis. The findings reveal that such limited understandings caused the teachers to express several examples of cultural stereotyping. According to Peter, students of Chinese and Iranian origin were well-educated compared to the Burmese-origin students in his class who had refugee backgrounds. Further, Peter also pointed out that Iranian-origin students progressed rapidly into higher levels. As highlighted in the literature described above, such cultural stereotypes link success in language learning to students' cultural origin (Vollmer, 2000), and this study highlights how the teachers created a categorisation of successful language learners based on country of origin in their classrooms. In addition, Ellis (2016) puts forward the critical point that a teacher's own success in learning an additional language influences his or her beliefs about students' success in the language classroom. As the teachers in this study were monolinguals and lacked the experience of learning the structure as well as cultural underpinnings of another language, it raises the question of how this additionally impacted their perception of students' potential for success.

When queried on the influence of culture on classroom behaviour, Peter expressed cultural generalisations of Iranian-origin students as not being as polite as Asian-origin students, but when queried on characteristics of good language learners, Peter described good language learners as individuals and as separate from their cultural background. What is also evident is Peter and Emma's apparent helplessness in culturally stereotyping their students when queried about cultural influences on language learning. This prompts the question why the teachers put forth cultural stereotypes when talking about how students' cultural backgrounds influenced their language learning, and further: does considering the influence of cultural background on language learning mean to culturally stereotype, and what are the implications for pedagogy?

The teachers also expressed cultural stereotyping of students' learning styles, students' learning behaviours, students' challenges from a lack of education or challenges created by contrasting styles in their prior education, and when describing opportunities for the students; as Pennycook (1994) says, this shows the manner

in which the 'other' is portrayed as culturally accustomed to the stereotyped behaviours. When speaking about challenges in the EAL classroom, Emma perceived her Iranian-origin students as having little regard for punctuality and pointed to cultural influences as the reason. The Chinese-origin students were thus reduced to characteristics such as rote learners and the Iranian-origin students were reduced to 'latecomers', and the normalisation of the characteristics is apparent from the teachers' routine reference to these characteristics when talking about students from particular supposed cultural backgrounds.

A significant point to note is that Peter preferred to ask the question "what happens in your country of origin?" rather than "what happens in your country?" during cultural comparisons in the classroom, as he believed that the students were now Australians. This contrasts with his statement that he equated conversations with his students of Iranian origin to those that he had with Australians, which implies that he did not consider the Iranian-origin students to be Australians. The question then arises as to when he considered which students to be Australians. Analysing the teachers' overall statements in the study, it is disturbing to note that they referred to their students, whether newly arrived or having been in Australia for many years, not as Australians, but as Chinese, Iranians, and Cambodians, and furthermore compared them to 'Australians', even though Australia is a country of settlers. This raises further questions regarding what the teachers considered the attributes of an Australian to be, if and when the students become Australians from the teachers' viewpoint, and 'who' the term 'Australian' favours. If, as Norton (2013) suggests, students have multiple identities, this implies that the students in Claire, Peter and Emma's classes may also consider themselves to be Australians along with other aspects of their identity. Thus, the teachers' use of the term 'Australian' in class discussions and the teachers' comparisons of the students with Australians appears to be routine, but for the students, this highlights the barriers and potential challenges that they may need to overcome if they wished to be considered Australians in the EAL classroom.

Such practices of implied exclusion suggest that teachers are complicit, if unwittingly, in silencing their students' multiple identities. Interview questions that sought the teachers' views on students' identities and how these influenced language learning were mostly answered with reference to students' country of

origin. When queried on the opportunities that students had in their learning, Peter answered by grouping his students based on their country of origin; Claire and Peter also described students' challenges from their prior education in this way. There thus appears to be minimal reference to students as individuals, or to their multiple identities, that is, how aspects such as their daily life experiences, parenthood, interests or other commitments might influence their language learning. Emma believed that being an active or passive learner was related to the student's culture; this reflects an absence of consideration of how the student's individual characteristics influence this aspect of language learning. This also raises the issue of how students' investment in language learning (Norton, 2013) would be affected if the multi-layered nature of their identities was not recognised.

Furthermore, the teachers described examples of classroom incidents in terms of students' cultural backgrounds. As an example, Emma's perception of her Iranian origin students as being latecomers to class was not only generalised, but the very behaviour of some students coming late to class was noticed by her in terms of their country of origin, rather than as individuals. In attributing learner characteristics such as being passive or active in language learning to students' cultures and by linking classroom occurrences to students' cultures wherein students then become cultural symbols (Kumaravadivelu, 2002), the question is also posed as to where and to what extent the students' individuality was considered in the teachers' pedagogy. The eclipsing of students' identities by their country of origin, and the accompanying silencing of their identities is thus highlighted.

The literature on identity reviewed earlier suggests that it needs to be viewed in terms of how the individual views himself or herself, and in terms of how a certain identity is imposed on the individual by others (Block, 2014). The teachers in this study imposed an identity on their students that was predominantly based on country of origin. This was done through observations of student behaviour through the lens of their country of origin, through the teachers' cultural stereotyping, and through classroom cultural comparisons that focused on culture in a superficial manner. Additionally, Norton (2001) points out that it is essential that students' imagined communities and also their imagined identities align with the teacher's pedagogy in order to facilitate language learning. As Claire, Peter and Emma's views of their students' identities was mostly based on country of origin, the

question then arises as to whether the students' views of their own identities as well as their imagined identities aligned with the teachers' views and to the teachers' pedagogy, and what the implications are if they were not.

According to Gao (2012), classroom communication between the teacher and students is a portrayal of the society that students will be part of. The teachers in the study referred to their students as Burmese, Chinese and Iranians. The teachers' representation of their students' cultural identities, that is, the noema, was thus mainly based on their country of origin. This then raises the issue of whether this practice is representative of the students' experiences outside the classroom, that is, as to whether the students are defined or will be defined mostly by their country of origin rather than by other aspects of their identity.

Conclusion
The results from this study emphasised the issues of exoticisation of students' cultures, the viewing of students as cultural representatives, the usage of the question "what happens in your country?", the superficial exploration of culture in the teachers' classrooms, and the need for teachers to reflect on and be a part of classroom discourses on cultural identities. The data analysis revealed cultural stereotyping by the teachers when describing the influence of culture on language learning, and when describing challenges and opportunities for students. Analysis of the teachers' cultural stereotyping demonstrates their categorisation of successful language learners according to students' country of origin. The implications of the use, as well as the manner of usage, of the term 'Australians' by the teachers in the classroom were put forward. The discussion further spotlighted the teachers' lack of focus on students' identities and the implications of this for students' investment in language learning. The silencing of students' identities was highlighted, and the question of whether students' imagined identities were aligned with the teachers' pedagogical approaches was raised. The issue of whether the silencing of students' identity is representative of students' experiences in Australian society was also highlighted. This study was carried out with a small sample size, and no claims are made that results can be generalised; however, the study revealed in this case the teachers' limited understanding of their students' cultural identities, and their cultural stereotyping practices when both describing their students' language learning and when describing

the challenges and opportunities for their students. Perhaps a stronger component in language teacher education courses could explore the multi-layered and fluid nature of identity as well as the manner in which culture is explored in EAL classrooms, in order to present opportunities for all learners to be recognised for what they bring to the classroom.

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Suma Sumithran has worked at various tertiary education institutes in Melbourne as an EAL teacher. She recently completed her Master of Education in TESOL from Deakin University, and is interested in the exploration of students' culture and identity in the adult EAL classroom.

suma.sumithran@gmail.com

Appendix
Interview questions

*Could you tell me about yourself? (Where do you come from? How long have you been teaching? Have you travelled overseas? What is your experience with diverse cultures? Have you experienced any challenges when interacting with other cultures? If you lived in another culture, was there any experience that made you realise how things were done in that culture?)

*Could you tell me about the students in your class? Where do they come from?

*What are the challenges and opportunities that you think they face in their learning?

*How do your students engage in the classroom? (Are they very responsive, what kind of things do they respond to/do they respond to each other/what is your teaching style/what kinds of tasks do you use?)

*Who in your class is a good language learner, and what do they do? (What do you think are the characteristics of a good language learner?)

*How do you think students' life experiences outside the classroom influence their language learning?

*Could you give me examples of how you take into account students' backgrounds in classroom learning?

*How do you think students' backgrounds influence their language learning?

*How do you think classroom activities influence students?

*In what ways do you see a change in students' views or cultural perceptions over time?

*Could you tell me about the cultural background of students in your class? What are the cultural influences on classroom behaviour?

*What is your experience with diverse cultures in the classroom? Do you engage with students' culture in your teaching? If so, how? What are the some of the ways in which your students are given opportunities to talk about or exhibit their culture in the classroom?

*What cultural learning styles do you think students bring to their language learning?

*How do students' cultural identities influence their language learning?

*What cultural aspects do you think add to successful language learning?

*What are some of the challenges you think that students from various cultures encounter when learning English in Australia? How do you compare your students' culture with Australian culture?