

Cultural Differences between China and the West in Learning Styles

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Abstract

Learning styles are seemingly individual behavior, in fact, influenced by many external factors such as: culture, family, education situation, etc. The strong link between culture and learning is evidenced by research indicating that culture and ethnicity have a great influence on cognitive style. This paper aims to analyze the cultural difference between China and the West in learning styles in general so that teachers pay more attention to all factors influencing learners' learning styles and adopt the strategies accordingly.

Key words: learning style, cultural difference, China, the West

1. Introduction

Here is a story extracted from “Careful Preparation of Lectures”, which clearly illustrates cultural difference in learning styles: Robert was invited to spend four weeks on the island of Kauai in Hawaii training four groups of young farm workers (average age of 20 years) for one week each in the use and maintenance of some new farm machinery they had purchased. According to his learning experience, he made the most explicit diagrams of the machinery (both internal and external view) and extensive diagrams explaining use of the machines and maintenance of their parts. He was especially pleased with the diagrams he made that explained possible problems and actions one should take when a problem occurs. This media, combined with his extensive lecture notes, company operating manuals, films, books, and audio materials would assure a most successful program. Much to his surprise, his teaching experience was an extreme struggle, for both himself and his students. His students often complained about a lack of understanding and felt restless, uninterested in what Robert had to offer. What causes this phenomenon? The difference in learning styles. What affects this difference Culture?.

2. Theoretical Ground

Learning styles has been defined as “cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicator of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment” (Keefe, 1979:4) or “preferred or habitual patterns of mental functioning and dealing with new information” (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990: 311). Learning styles are different individually. They are seemingly individual behavior, in fact, influenced by many external factors such as: culture, family, education situation, etc. Culture refers to “the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterized a given group of people in a given period of time” (Brown, 2002:164). Learning styles vary from culture to culture. “The strong link between culture and learning is evidenced by research indicating that culture and ethnicity have a greater influence on cognitive style than does social class” (Samovar, 2000: 205).

Different cultures influence different nations, so they have different beliefs and thought patterns. The core of Chinese belief is collectivism. “A ‘we’ consciousness prevails: identity is based on the social system; the individual is emotionally dependent on organizations and institutions; the culture emphasizes belonging to organizations; organizations invade private life and clans to which individuals belong; and individuals trust group decisions” (Samovar, 2000:68).

Influenced by collectivism, Chinese thinking pattern is: People like imaginary thinking, direct experiences and global thinking. They like thinking wholly. The core of western belief is individualism. “An ‘I’ consciousness prevails: competition rather than cooperation is encouraged; personal goals take precedence over group goals; people tend not to be emotionally dependent on organizations and institutions; and every individual has the right to his or her private property, thoughts, and opinions. These cultures stress individual initiative and achievement, and they value individual decision making.”(Samovar, 2000:68). On thinking pattern, westerners prefer deductive analytic thinking. In thinking activity, they like dividing the whole into parts to research one by one. They emphasize on individual thinking. The difference in learning styles represents vividly the difference in beliefs and thinking patterns.

3. Cultural Difference between China and the West in Learning Styles

3.1 Competition and cooperation

In western culture, individual achievement, not collective achievement, is one of the virtues glorified and canonized. So competition is part of westerners' life from early childhood. In studying students learn through competition with each other. In U.S.A. in order to encourage students to chase the first, all schools prescribe that each excellent student should be honored by Excellent Graduate Certificate. And these students will be registered in famous university easily, also be easy to gain the scholarship. Accordingly westerners are field-independent learners. They tend to handle things analytically, are impersonally oriented and less aware of others' interests. In U.S.A. people are taught to be independent from childhood. In possible case, parents usually try to give enough right to their children and never violate their freedom. Their aim is to make the children dependent in society and able to responsible to their behaviors.

Chinese culture stresses importance of harmony between human and nature, society and human himself; objecting to individual's enterprising. In learning style, students prefer cooperation and field-dependence. Field-dependence is "the tendency to be dependent on the total field such that the parts embedded within the field are not easily perceived, though the total field is perceived more clearly as a unified whole"(Wang Lifei 2000,139). In class, students tend to be more interested in obtaining teachers' direction and feedback. Cooperation means that students should learn by working for the common good, by supporting each other, and by not elevating themselves above others. Students are taught to love family, love class. In Chinese classroom, there are forty to fifty students, even seventy to eighty. They often form many studying groups, help each other and maintain the same level of achievement to "maintain the relationships that constitute the group, to maintain cohesion and group harmony among the group members" (Carson & Nelson, 1994, p.20).

3.2 Global and analytic

"Research on global versus analytic learners is still speculative (Scarcella, 1990), but it appears that global learners prefer to begin the whole picture, whereas analytic learners begin with the separate parts and piece them together to make a whole" (Reid, 2002). The western pattern of thinking is analytic. Westerners assume that an effective way to understanding the whole is to first understand all of its parts, so they often begin with facts and then proceed to ideas. This is even evident in their writing. Usually westerners begin the articles with demonstrating facts, and then conclude with an idea. On the contrary, the Chinese pattern of thinking is global. This pattern "strives for unity between events and objects."(Scarcella, 1990). "Chinese do not analyze a topic divisively by breaking it down into parts" (Stewart, 1972). They are more likely to think by means of analogies, metaphor and similes in drawing conclusions. In writing, Chinese prefer an idea to begin their articles, and then prove this idea step by step. In grammar studying, students like the way in which teachers give the general forms first, then many examples so that they can understand it, otherwise they will be confused.

3.3 Reflective and impulsive

This pair of concepts has more to do with decision-making in the problems. Related to the learning style, dimension of reflective and impulsive is the systematic and intuitive dimension. An intuitive style refers to

“an approach in which a person makes a number of different gambles on the basis of ‘hunches,’ with possibly several successive gambles before a solution is achieved.” “Systematic thinkers tend to weigh all the consideration in a problem, work out all the loopholes, then, after extensive reflection, carefully venture a solution” (Brown, 2002). Individualists are generally concerned about the process of decision-making. Studies of western family life have shown that parents encourage, approve, and reward aggressive behavior. In the United States, students are taught to make quick responses to questions. They respond to the task rapidly; they are the first ones to raise their hands to answer the teachers’ question and the first ones to complete a test. Western belief stresses that people should pursue the success in his life in the largest extent, and only the first ones can gain the success, that is, people must compete with each other. People who succeed in competition are respected in society; people who fail not because of competition will be looked down on. So in the classroom, students like saying out their ideas and making quick decisions in the task. This impulsive learning style is also related to extraverted temperament. Usually Westerners seem to be talkative and aggressive in studying. In contrast, in Chinese culture, saving face is important. We can find this belief in some sayings “The mouth is the cause of calamity” “Look before you leap” Influenced by face-saving, foreign language learners (especially, adults) are afraid of losing face for mistake because of anxiety. So before preparing carefully they are often silent with their lips sealed because they think that other students may laugh at their mistakes. In task, they make slower decisions than westerns.

3.4 Tolerance of ambiguity

Some people are relatively open-minded in accepting ideologies and events and facts that contradict their own view, they are more content than others to entertain and even internalize contradictory proposition. This tolerance of ambiguity is related to Chinese pattern of thinking in that it emphasizes the whole and the unity. Because of the belief of the unity between human and nature, Chinese stress the harmony between people, so they are not constrained in the ethical pattern of “yes” or “no” and believe the doctrine of the mean. They disagree with the extremities. This ambiguous attitude, in westerners’ eyes, is lack of certainty and accuracy. In classroom, students seldom ask questions and never regard truth in absolute terms. Others, more closed-mind, more dogmatic, tend to reject items that are contradictory or slightly incongruent with their existing system; they wish to see every proposition that fit into an acceptable place in their cognitive organization, and if it does not fit, it is rejected. This intolerance of ambiguity is related to western pattern of thinking in that it divides the world into two opposite parts. They don't think that human and nature is the unity and they stress individuals. So they make certain of work and leisure, good and bad, right and wrong and success and failure. In the classroom, there is low tolerance, such as, the school day is highly structured and students move from subject to subject based on the clock. Westerners’ learning style is also regarded as explorative style.

3.5 Learning style of modeling

Chinese students memorize model texts as examples of good writing. They also learn information by memorizing pages of chapters of textbooks. We can see this phenomenon in many schools: students recite the chosen chapters or textbook in front of the teachers after class. If they can not finish this work in time, they will be forced to stay at school for a long time. This practice of memorization is linked to the Confucian

tradition of reverence for authority. Confucian orthodoxy maintains that the world is explained through the Confucian classics as interpreted by Confucian scholars. In past the persons who could say out the word from Four Books and Five Classics were regarded as scholars. Reversely, this practice of producing memorized materials is often perceived for western as cheating and /or plagiarism. This is related to western value of equality. Westerners believe that all people have a right to succeed in life and study. They tend to advance equality rather than hierarchy. So western culture emphasizes the interests of individual and the interests ought to be paramount. From western art and history, the message is the same: individual achievement, sovereign, and freedom are virtues most glorified and canonized. Influenced by this belief, students can understand the texts by themselves. Teachers usually respect students' understanding and do not force them to catch the so-called authority's ideas.

4. Conclusion

The research on Learning styles affected by cultural difference can help us move from the ethnocentric point of view that others learn as we do, or make us know about the positive and negative sides in our learning, so we can change our learning styles consciously sometimes to remedy our deficiency in learning. Research on cultural difference in learning styles can also offer some suggestions to teachers who may go abroad that they should adapt their teaching styles to the students' learning styles. On the other hand, we should first know that a cultural belief is impossible for all people in a given group and second, learning styles are also influenced by intrinsic domain such as personality, cognitive characteristic, and language proficiency and so on. So learning styles in a culture may be not represented on all learners. Learning style is a complicated subject. Teachers should pay more attention to all factors influencing learners' learning styles and adopt the strategies accordingly.

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