

# English Learning Styles of Students from East Asian Countries: A Focus on Reading Strategies

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## Abstract

Little research has been done to investigate the influence of cultural differences on students' second/foreign language learning styles, with a focus on comparing between East and West classroom cultures. This study investigates the differences that East Asian students may encounter when studying in the English-medium academic environment. By interviewing 20 graduate students pursuing degree in the US, some differences between East and West classroom cultures are revealed and the pedagogical implications for both teachers and researchers are provided.

**Keywords:** Learning styles, Teaching diversity, Classroom culture

## 1. Introduction

With the increasing number of international students going to the United States and the growing number of domestic students studying abroad, it is necessary to be aware of cultural differences in order to avoid any misunderstandings. It has been reported that diverse cultural background influences second/foreign learners' learning styles (Sheorey, 1998; Abbott, 2006; Oxford et. al, 1991). However, there seems only minimal research conducted pertaining to the learning styles of students from East Asian with different cultures in the classroom. The goal of this project is to gain insights and help researchers or teachers understand more about the cultural influences on East Asian classrooms and students. With the knowledge in hand, it is hopefully that teaching method could be improved to care for ethnic and diverse cultural groups who study abroad.

## 2. Literature Review

By the 1970s, learner-centeredness had become more and more prominent in the field of second language teaching. As Murray (1996) observed, learners in the language classroom can no longer be treated as homogeneous. The focus has been shifted from problems of teaching to the problems of learning (Benson, 2005), and this can be demonstrated by a rebellion against behaviourist theories and grammar translation approaches, as we see the rise of suggestopedia and communicative language learning. In his article, Benson argued that "diversity is perhaps most apparent in classrooms where the learners come from varied socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds"(2005, p.5).

### 2.1 *Learning Styles of Learners from Different Cultural Background*

Learning styles, which has been defined as "the preferences students exhibit in their learning" (Hlebowitsh, 2005, p.40), receive more and more attention recently. Nunan (1988) concluded that four different types of learners exist: concrete learners who preferred learning with playing games, watching videos; communicative learners who preferred learning by talking with native speakers, use English in their daily communication; authority-oriented learners who preferred learning from teachers, who serve the role as knowledge provider; and analytical learners who preferred learning by finding the language structures or mistakes on their own. Besides, the learner-led syllabus is popular, as is the case with the category of process-oriented syllabi (Breen, 1984). In curriculum design, it is necessary for teachers to be responsible to the learners and their different learning styles.

### 2.2 *Second/Foreign Language Reading Strategies*

It has been pointed out that cultural background influences L2 reading strategy selection (Abbott, 2006; Bedell & Oxford, 1996; Parry, 1996; Reid, 1995). Thus, ESL or EFL learners who are from different orthography backgrounds and learning experiences may use dramatically different reading strategies and comprehend differently when reading English texts. As Grabe and Stoller (2002) discussed, Asian readers prefer visual processing more than do native

English speaking readers because of their L1 orthography. As for readers of Asian background reading English text, some additional difficulty may encounter due to linguistic and writing style differences.

### 3. Method and Participants

The sample consisted of 20 graduate students from East Asian countries including China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. All of them received their formal education in their home countries until attending graduate school in the United States. The survey questions on preferred learning styles and reading strategies aimed at understanding their experiences in Asian classrooms.

#### 3.1 The Interview Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted 20 questions with five response categories: 5=Always, 4=Usually, 3=Sometimes, 2=Rarely, 1=Never (Sasaki, 1995). At the end of the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview was conducted for the participants to provide reasons for their responses and descriptions of their school life and classroom interaction.

### 4. Results

The data from both the questionnaire and interview revealed the difference between East and West classroom cultures. Important findings are as follows.

#### 4.1 East Asian Cultures as Collectivist Culture

All East Asian students interviewed said they usually work cooperatively with their classmates, and they generally view themselves as appendages of their group. This statement reflects that students from East Asia belong to a collectivist culture. Collectivist culture “promotes interdependence, respect for authority, hierarchical roles and relationships, and group consensus” (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004, p.54). Members of a collective generally promote a sense of group consciousness and see themselves as a part of the group. The group orientation binds members to obligations and equal responsibilities and they must work together to achieve an ultimate goal. Therefore, under such a culture, it is common for the teacher to divide students into groups to work together in order to finish their project or presentation.

#### 4.2 The Concept of Face

Chinese and Japanese students said they seldom volunteered to answer the teachers’ questions. When in class, it is usually the specific one or two classmates would take the initiatives while others students just keep silent. But if the question was really controversial which would led to the discussion of the whole class. Except for the particular situation, students usually wait until the teacher calls on them. And it is usually the same case with Korean students. They said they usually don’t speak spontaneously in class. The concept of “face” is related to this phenomenon. Face is a difficult concept for Westerners to grasp. It is the embodiment of pride, dignity, honor and self-esteem (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004). In a learning environment such as classroom, students of lower ability are afraid of losing face in class if they provide a wrong answer to a question; excellent students are afraid of being considered as showing-offs if they respond to too many questions in class; mediocre students think their answers are nothing worth sharing with classmates (Wenzhong & Grove, 1999). That’s why students are often reluctant to answer the questions, and don’t express their opinions freely in class. Under such concepts, students said now the teacher always encourages them to risk making mistakes by giving them extra one or two points in the final exams in order to make more question and answer interaction with the teacher and the students.

Also, 17 out of 20 students I interviewed answered that they rarely ask questions on the spot in class. That is to say, most of the participants are reluctant to tell their teachers in front of the entire class that they don’t understand something. Students would rather wait after until the class and then first approach other students to see if a classmate knows the answer. If no classmate can solve a particular problem, they would then ask the teacher. Students’ reaction is relevant to face, too. It is related to the social status and prestige one has. In most collectivistic cultures, maintaining harmony is important in order to avoid “losing face” (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004). Therefore, if a student asks too many questions in class, it may be regarded as losing face because it indicates that only he/she can’t follow the instruction. By the same token, if the teacher does not know the answer to the question, it would cause an embarrassing and disconcerting situation for both the teacher and students. Students don’t want to cause their teacher to lose face, so they usually avoid asking questions in class. Also, asking too many questions may be viewed as threatening or challenging the authority of the teacher. In most of the classrooms in Asian countries, the teacher is the only one who talks during the whole class. Students usually sit with their eyes downcast, taking notes.

#### 4.3 The Hierarchical Relationship between Teachers and Students

Students usually listen quietly when the teacher talks. Eastern cultures follow the Confucian thought that people should pay respect to teachers and elders. The teacher not only transfers knowledge but also represents the authority

in the classroom, so students are supposed to pay respect to their teachers by listening attentively to the teachers' instruction. Talking to classmates in class or asking too many questions may be regarded as disturbing the teacher's lecturer or wasting other classmates' time. Keeping silence is necessary in class.

Students never address a teacher by name in East Asian countries. Students should always address their teachers as "Teacher" or by surname. They should use the respectful form of "you" (nin) when talking to teachers. A Chinese saying goes that, "Once your teacher, your father for life". For we Chinese, it's very rude to address them by their given names if we are talking to someone who is older than us, and this is especially so for a teacher.

Although students regarded teachers as authority figures, students said teachers are still easy to talk to after class. Besides regular office hours, Chinese teachers frequently give students their cell phone numbers and other contact information. And it is usually before the exam students call their teachers.

#### *4.4 High-context Classroom Culture*

Students said their silence responds when a teacher asks students if any one has questions can be understood to mean that they have no questions to ask. Asian cultures are considered to be high-context. That is, they place more emphasis on the use of subtle nonverbal behavior to convey a message (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004). Thus, instead of saying they understand, students usually nod their heads without speaking.

#### *4.5 Perceptions of Learning English Reading*

With the large educational context provided by the information mentioned above, East Asian students' reading strategies are influenced under such unique circumstances. In terms of teaching reading, English teachers in these East Asian countries use very similar methods in the reading instructions. Our participants reported that teachers assumed students would be able to understand the reading materials once they know the meanings of every word. In other words, English teachers did not really teach students how to read; instead, they taught students the more vocabulary they have, the better reading comprehension they would have.

##### *4.5.1. Recognizing text structure*

What interesting is that teachers in all schools teach students to identify the structure of each article before they read. The purpose of reading class in college is still to enhance students' reading speed and comprehension in limited time. Therefore, when facing short articles, teachers would ask students to identify the structure and read questions first. From my interviews, identification of structure is the most common reading strategy taught by English teachers. Students also mentioned they would start from reading the questions after identifying the structure of the article, because what are mentioned in the questions are usually important points and it can save their time of reading as well. Teachers do not really teach reading strategies either before or when students are in college no matter in which country. This reveals that English teachers East Asian countries use very similar way to teach reading as in other East Asian countries.

##### *4.5.2. Understanding vocabulary*

Through interviews with East Asian students, I realized that English teachers use similar ways to teach reading basically; students are all taught if they can know every word, they can certainly understand the whole article. Most local English teachers in East Asian countries assume that students should be able to understand reading materials if the vocabulary is not new to students. What is in common is that students in both groups revealed they read for test, not for their own interest. I understood students' viewpoints of English reading and how they are taught in school more through this research and I am not surprised at this result since China and Taiwan share the same cultural background and education system. With this result, I know that teaching various reading strategies is still not common in China as well as in other East Asian countries and foreign English teachers need to be aware of this when they assign large amount of reading materials to local students.

#### *4.6 Reading Strategies and Comprehension*

Then I asked interviewees to list several other reading strategies they know. They gave some common but useful strategies, such as skip words they do not know and continue reading, if there are any illustrations with the article, they would try to relate it to the context, try to relate the title to the context, and so on. They learned these strategies through test experiences and practice. Some students mentioned several strategies listed by the other group; I think these two groups of students did not show much difference on this topic.

I also asked students how they improve their reading comprehension and what materials they often use. All students told me by continuous practice one can master reading one day. One student from Korea mentioned he usually had to look for professional information and sometimes the information is only written in English; in the situation like this, he had no choice but try to read English information and gradually, he found out that his reading ability was

getting better.

In addition, students shared their opinions on what are the characteristics of a successful reader with me. Similar to how they improve their own reading ability, most students emphasized continuous practice is absolutely essential to foreign students if they want to master English reading. To keep the habit of continuous practice, students also mentioned one must have strong perseverance. It was easier for students to practice continuously when they were in junior high or senior high school since teachers usually asked them to finish certain amount of reading materials a week. In other words, students did not keep the habit of continuous practice by themselves; they were forced to read continuously.

#### 4.7. *The Influence of the High-stakes Entrance Exam*

In the following part of my questions, I tried to find out how students think about English reading. From the interviews of students from these four East Asian countries, I realized that all students in these countries suffer from entrance exam and it is the strongest motivation to study and get high scores in school. The effect of entrance exam is so strong that even after this exam it can still affect how teachers teach in college. Just like students mentioned in Japan, their reading class still focuses on how to finish articles and choose correct answers in limited time.

English reading, as a sub-category of English, plays an important role since junior high and senior high because reading comprehension is an important part in entrance exam in East Asian countries. Students are asked to do reading comprehension of short articles several times a week to enhance their reading ability. Most East Asian students can do very well in reading comprehension in tests; however, when they face long reading materials without questions, they often feel bewildered and do not know where to start. Therefore, I asked students if they agree that learning reading strategies would be helpful for them while reading. All students agreed that reading strategies can be helpful for them; however, two students mentioned that reading strategies do not necessarily have to be taught by teachers in school. I had students checking their reading habits in the last part of my questionnaire and not surprisingly, though English teachers in their schools did not teach reading strategies, all students know more than one strategy and use them often. This proves that students themselves can learn strategies through tons of practice eventually but it takes too much time to try and figure out right strategies. On this question, Taiwanese and Chinese students showed same opinions.

#### 4.8 *The Importance and the High Value of Education*

Both Chinese and Taiwanese students said their parents pay attention to their studies in school and they usually do homework as directed. In Asian countries, education is highly valued. From as early as the Imperial exam of the Tang Dynasty, it was believed that those who studied hard and excelled on exams would be rewarded with a high-ranking job in the civil service. Especially for the common people, studying served as the only way for them to rise from their initial social and economic status and join the elite class. Doing so brought honor and power to their families. Even today, students and their parents believe that scoring high on important exams will allow them to achieve greater goals and climb upward on the socioeconomic ladder. Thus, parents pay a lot attention to their children's education and test scores, especially for the parents in Mainland China. Due to the one-child policy from the government, parents in China put all their efforts in educating their child. Sometimes students are not allowed to have boyfriends or girlfriends which may distract them from concentration on their studies.

#### 4.9 *Conclusion*

In conclusion, from our survey results, we know that the learning behavior of the Chinese students is nearly the same as those of Taiwanese students. They rarely ask questions in class, but they do ask questions after class. Although teachers play the role of absolute authority, based on what we gathered from our participants, we learn that teachers are easy to talk to after class. The manifestation of classroom procedures is a result of cultural influences. In East Asia, Confucian traditions and collectivistic values are visible. They affect how students behave in school and how teachers and students interact. We hope that we have provided you with some useful information on understanding both Chinese and Taiwanese students and their classroom culture.

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#### Appendix A: Sample of Questionnaire

Country of origin:

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1. Students work cooperatively with their classmates.					
2. Students volunteered to answer the teacher's questions.					
3. Students say their opinions freely in class.					
4. Teachers ask students to express their opinions.					
5. Students speak only when the teacher calls on them.					
6. Students tell the teacher in class when they don't understand.					
7. Students listen quietly when the teacher talks.					
8. Students listen quietly when classmates talk.					
9. Students speak loud enough for the whole class to hear.					
10. Class is arranged in rows.					
11. Students are afraid to make mistakes.					
12. Teachers encourage students to risk making mistakes.					
13. Students are allowed to sit anywhere they would like.					

Can you provide us some reasons for your responses?

How would you describe the typical school life in your country?

How would you describe the interaction between teacher and students?

#### Appendix B: Reading Strategy Questionnaire

Mark the letter of the answer that best describes how you read. Mark only one letter for each statement and complete every statement.

1. When I read, I pay most attention to

A. what individual words mean.

B. what the reading passage means.

C. what the form or grammatical function of the words are.

- D. what the structure of the passage is.
2. When I read English, I
- A. read the whole passage once and then reread it.
  - B. read part of the passage, then reread that part before going on.
  - C. reread only the difficult sections.
  - D. read straight through or reread, depending on the passage.
  - E. read straight through the passage and do not reread.
3. When I begin reading a English passage, I
- A. don't usually consider how it relates to what I already know.
  - B. think about what I know about the topic or source of the passage.
  - C. think about what I know about the author's style or point of view.
  - D. simply begin reading the text itself.
4. When I read in English, I find that I hypothesize about what might come next
- A. often.
  - B. sometimes.
  - C. hardly ever.
  - D. never.
5. When I read in English, I
- A. can't tell what the structure of the reading passage is.
  - B. expect certain things because of the reading passage structure.
  - C. read each paragraph by itself.
  - D. look for a logical structure.
  - E. try to relate the points or ideas mentioned together.
6. When a English reading passage has a title, I
- A. read the title but don't consider it as I read the passage.
  - B. read it first and imagine what the passage might be about.
  - C. think about what I already know and how it might relate to the title.
  - D. read the title but don't think much about it.
7. When a English reading passage has illustrations with it, I
- A. imagine what the reading passage might be about, considering what the illustrations are.
  - B. look at the illustrations without relating them to the reading passage.
  - C. look at the illustrations but don't think much about them.
  - D. expect the reading passage to reflect what is in the illustrations.
  - E. compare what is in the illustrations to what I read.
8. When I read in English, I think that
- A. all the words are important.
  - B. I can skip some words and still understand.
  - C. I don't know which words I can skip.
  - D. it is a mistake to skip any words.
  - E. I need to look in the dictionary for the words I don't know.
9. When I read in English, I
- A. feel uneasy if I don't know what most of the words mean.

- B. look up most of the words I don't know.
- C. want to know exactly what is in the passage.
- D. am willing to guess what some words mean.
10. If I come to a word I don't know, I
- A. skip the word and come back to it later.
- B. guess what the word might mean and go on.
- C. guess what the word might mean and reread the sentence.
- D. look the word up in a glossary or dictionary and reread the sentence.
- E. look the word up in a glossary or dictionary and write the English meaning on the page.
11. If a paragraph contains several words I don't know, I
- A. guess what they all mean.
- B. look up the ones that seem most important and guess the others.
- C. look them all up in a glossary or dictionary.
- D. skip that paragraph.
- E. feel frustrated and stop reading for a while.
12. To figure out what an unfamiliar word might mean, I
- A. consider what the rest of the sentence or paragraph says.
- B. analyze the grammatical form of the word.
- C. consider any illustrations.
- D. don't do any of the above.
13. When I figure out what new words mean, I find that my guesses are
- A. usually correct.
- B. sometimes correct.
- C. usually incorrect.
- D. untrustworthy.
14. When I read in English, I
- A. am often confused by what I read.
- B. expect to be confused by what I'm reading.
- C. don't often make much sense of what I read.
- D. expect what I read to make sense.
- E. find that what I'm reading makes sense.