

On Learning Styles from the Cross-cultural Perspective

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Abstract: Learning styles, as a key element of individual differences, have engaged more and more attention for it is found that awareness and appropriate manipulation of language learners' learning styles can result in effectiveness in both teaching and learning. And judging from the cross-cultural perspective, culture or ethnicity exerts a great influence on learning styles. Thus, it is advocated that language learners' learning styles should be respected in order to achieve effectiveness in teaching and learning as well.

1. Introduction

As one principal factor of individual differences language learners' learning styles make much difference in the process and outcome of their learning, which has drawn much attention from both instructors and researchers. It is claimed that language learners' knowledge of their own learning styles plays a fundamental role in "learning to learn", helping them develop a more versatile approach to learning (Kinsella, 2002). And research conducted on learning styles has contributed a lot to the understanding and reform of EFL teaching by attempting to achieve effectiveness in teaching and learning as well. To this end, many researchers and educators advocate identifying or helping language learners themselves gain awareness of their preferred learning styles in order to diversify and manipulate their learning-style repertoire, which is intended to maximize effective learning (e.g., Reid, 1987; Kinsella, 2002; Oxford, 2002; Stebbins, 2002).

2. Learning Styles

Researchers and educators have examined and elaborated on learning styles from a variety of dimensions, the consequence being a fragmented field with little agreement on an agreed-upon definitional concept.

Jim Keefe (1979: 86), director of research for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, defines learning styles as being: "the composite of characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment. Learning style is a consistent way of functioning, which reflects underlying causes of behavior".

Later the Dunns (1990: 224) refine learning-styles as "the way each learner begins to concentrate, process, and retain new and difficult information, as a result of heredity and environment".

Kinsella (2002: 171) states that "a learning style refers to an individual's natural, habitual and preferred ways of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills which persist regardless of teaching methods or content area".

Prior to the mid-70s, researchers mainly experimented with cognitive styles (Dunn, 1984), thus, the above definitions are all nearly concerned with how the mind actually processes information or is affected by individuals' perceptions. Besides, the above definitions describe learning-styles construct either in a general or a concrete fashion by focusing on one or more dimensions. Learning style itself, is a composite of both internal and external characteristics based in neurobiology, personality, and human development and reflected in learner behaviors.

3. Cross-cultural Perspective of Learning Styles

Studying from the cross-cultural communication perspective, Samovar and Porter (2004: 32) defined culture as "a shared learned behavior which is transmitted from one generation to another for purpose of promoting individual and social survival, adaptation, and growth and development. Culture has both external and internal representations". According to them, culture can be regarded as a kind of common behavior learned and passed on from generation to generation to bring about both individual and collective advances in a certain ethnic group. Such common behaviors represent themselves, both internally and externally, as the five essential components shared by all cultures: history, religion, values, social organization and language, which mark a collection of people as a culture.

As for the relationship between culture and learning, Samovar and Porter (2004) believe that culture influences the way people learn, pointing out a strong link existing between cultures and learning styles. They say that learning styles vary from culture to culture, which is verified by empirical research, indicating that culture and ethnicity have great influences on learning styles. People of different cultures approach and process information differently, so there exist varied learning styles, affecting people's learning process. Also, there are significant differences in people's learning-styles preferences, which vary from culture to culture. And there are no good or bad learning styles, thus, neutrality being characteristic of learning styles of different cultures. Most important of all, conscious identification of learners' preferred learning styles can help to bring about improved academic achievement, especially when instruction accords with learners' preferred learning styles.

4. Studies on Learning Styles

4.1 Studies Abroad

Cultural learning-style studies largely began with ethnographic research on ethnic groups during the 1960s and later accompanied by EFL populations in the United States (e.g., Reid, 1987; Stebbins, 2002; Rossi-le, 2002), which suggested that ethnicity or cultural background played a significant role in deciding L2 learners' learning-styles modalities. Vogt, Jordan & Tharp (1987) and Philip (1983) confirmed the existence of cultural learning styles through their large-scale ethnographic studies involving native Hawaiian children and Warm Spring Indian children (Nelson, 2002: 8). Castaneda and Gray (1974) studied some bicultural children and came to the findings that children who could operate effectively in two social-cultural systems tended to be bi-cognitive and were able to use both field-independent and field-dependent orientations and greatly flexible in thought (Yu, 1997).

Chinese EFL learners' style tendencies have been investigated in general under the influence of Confucianism. It was Reid who pioneered the study of learning-style preferences of international EFL students, whose research findings and the work of other learning-style research indicate that ethnicity or language background is an important factor influencing the learning-style preferences of college-level international students (Stebbins, 2002: 108-110).

4.2 Studies in China

Compared with the proliferation of western research on cultural learning styles, there are a few domestic studies. Only recently have there appeared a few studies on Chinese college students' cultural learning styles for the purpose of understanding Chinese EFL learners better and achieving effectiveness in teaching and learning (e.g., Chen, 2004; Luo, 2005; Fan & Li, 2006; Li & Su, 2006), among which there are very a few studies exploring minority college students' learning style preferences.

5. Respecting Cultural Learning Styles

With people deepening their understanding of language itself and the language learning process, a host of educators and researchers realize that learning is a complicated process, which involves such interrelated factors as learner factors and culture. Just as Brown (2001: 165) points out "A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language". Language learning is closely related to cultural background, exerting certain influence on the learner's learning process. In line with this perspective, many educators emphasize the importance of culture study, which calls on L2 learners and teachers to perceive, appreciate and understand, above all, to respect cultural differences in the learning process (Brown, 2001; Oxford, 1992). As culture consists of such factors as values, beliefs, and means of perception, and furthermore, EFL learners differ greatly in terms of their cultural and educational backgrounds, some instructors or educators postulate that cultural differences in L2 learners' learning styles may develop through their early experiences and traditional lifestyle (e.g., Hayes & Allinson, 1988; Katz, 1988; Hofstede, 1997, in Yamazaki, 2005). As a result, teachers' failure in recognizing the cultural differences of their students may lead to the latter's poor learning results and negative reactions to the instruction. In order to achieve learning effectiveness, it is necessary for teachers to understand students' learning styles and their cultural backgrounds (Barmeyer, 2004; Brown, 2001). Generally speaking, respecting EFL learners' cultural learning styles starts with an assessment of their learning-style preferences and an understanding of their native cultures.

6. Conclusion

Synthesizing the cross-cultural perspective of learning styles and second language learning research findings, we come to the conclusion that culture plays an important role in determining L2 learners' learning styles. And this kind of cultural learning styles are learned in families prior to children's formal schooling, possibly generating inefficiency in their learning process. As L2 learners sometimes come from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, it is necessary to attach importance to their learning styles and cultural backgrounds in order to maximize their learning outcomes.

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