

The Effects of Culture on Students' Learning Styles

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Abstract

Most teaching instruction at tertiary level is given in an auditory and visual mode where students have to listen to lectures, class discussions and presentations besides reading texts. This would be quite taxing for students who are not strong in these two modes of learning. A study was conducted to find out whether the low proficient students of the Bachelor of Arts programme in English Language Studies (BA ELS) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia could "stretch" or adapt to the visual and auditory learning styles by using the following tools in collecting data: The Perceptual Learning Style Preference questionnaire (PLSP), journal writing, projection techniques, and a semi-structured interview. Findings show that they had difficulties expanding their normal cultural learning styles, namely tactile and kineasthetic, to cope and adapt to the visual and auditory styles. This is because they were acculturated to conventional classroom roles and norms. This can also be attributed to the cultural background where they have been educated in a comparatively traditional, hierarchical system. Since learning styles may not be malleable, teachers can enhance student learning by introducing them to various learning styles at a very young age because this study has shown that students have difficulties adjusting to new learning styles at a later age.

Introduction

Learning style has been defined as "cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment" (Keefe, 1979, p.4). This notion of learning style implies individual differences. As Reid (1987, p.89) points out, learning style is a "pervasive quality in the learning strategies or the learning behavior of an individual". According to her, the development of learning style instruments distinguish one kind of learner from another. If all students learned in the same manner, learning style inventories would be unnecessary.

"Culture" on the other hand, refers not to what is individual but to what is shared by a group of individuals. The key word here is shared. The concepts of "learning style" and "culture" seem to be contradictory because culture refers to what is common to members of a group. It relates to similarities and not differences.

If learning styles differ from person to person, can cultural learning styles exist? The answer to that question is 'yes' because culture is not just shared but also learned. Individuals are most likely not born with genetic predisposition to learn visually, auditorily or kinesthetically. Instead, they learn how to learn all the way through the socialization process that transpires in families and friends. Singleton (1991, p.120) explains:

They are, in every society, unstated assumptions about people and how they learn, which act as a set of self-fulfilling prophecies that invisibly guide whatever educational process may occur there. They act as a kind of unintentional hidden curriculum, or what an anthropologist might call a cultural theory of learning.

Literature Review

The following two large-scale ethnographic studies illustrate the importance of acknowledging students' cultural learning styles. The first study has to do with Native Hawaiian children (Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987) and the second with Warm Springs Native American Indian children in Oregon (Philips, 1983). In the former, the native Hawaiian children were not successful in the traditional public schools with a phonics reading programme included in the curriculum. Positive reinforcement techniques to reward individual student achievement were used by the teachers. Student achievement was measured by standardized tests after 3 years and no significant gains were found to have occurred.

Consequently, changes were made to reflect the socialization patterns of Hawaiian children at home. Instead of the students sitting alone at their own desks, the classroom was reorganized into a system of teacher-independent centers with heterogeneous leveled groups where students are free to interact, work together, and help each other. This was parallel to the patterns in the children's home where they were often assisted by their peers or siblings rather than by adults. They also stopped using the phonics program. As an alternative, students read segments of a text and relate events in the text to their own lives. After reading all the parts, they put the sections of the text together and talked about it as a whole.

Placing the emphasis on the meaning of a text is appropriate for Hawaiian children because "learning at home is nearly always bound in an immediately meaningful context, usually involving joint participation" (Vogt et al., 1987, p.279). Teachers no longer use praise to reinforce individual students. Instead, they praised the student indirectly or they praised the group. Here, the teachers were actually encouraging actions which are consistent with the children's social community. As a result of these changes, the students' results on standardized exams improved. The findings suggest that cultural learning styles do exist, that cultural learning styles are learned in families and through other social relationships such as friends

or neighbors before the children attend school, that learning styles may not be malleable, and most significantly is the fact that through instructional practices and classroom organization which match the students' learning styles, teachers can definitely enhance student learning.

In the second study (Philips, 1983), the Warm Springs Indian children in the public schools were also not doing well academically. Again, the socialization patterns of the Indian children at home were not congruent with the pattern of social interaction in the schools. In discussing the dissimilarities between the Indian children's at-home communication behaviors and the communication behaviors which were common in schools, Philips writes, "Indian children have already acquired culturally distinctive ways of communicating or conveying information that are different from the teachers' ways of conveying information" (p. 39).

In particular, the communication and learning patterns of the Warm Springs children differed from those of their teachers and schools in the following ways. Firstly, the children learned through the visual channel, by watching someone doing something (modeling). Secondly, the modeling was followed by little verbal explanation. Thirdly, compared to the Anglo children, the Warm Springs children spent more time with their peers and less with adults. Finally, the culture expected the children to be self-sufficient at a relatively early age. These cultural patterns are often in conflict with the norms of traditional schools in which oral participation is highly valued. Students were also expected to function as individuals and individual achievement was rewarded. Similar to the Hawaiian American study, the Warm Springs study too supports the fact that there exists a cultural learning style which is learned in families and also from other social relationships before children begin their formal schooling. It provides further support for the transfer of early-learned models from the home and community to the school and for the stumbling blocks students face if their learning styles are incongruent with the dominant learning/teaching style of the school. It also suggests that teachers can enhance their students learning by adjusting their teaching styles to match their students' learning styles.

The learning-centred approach to style assumes that "learner characteristics" and "learning style" are not relatively stable and subject to change. They are seen as factors relating to an active process of learning which is "activity-based". It is also felt that effective learning involves a continuous development of learning styles over time. However, it has also been suggested that style is stable over time and is likely to show little change.

Through socialization experiences in the family, school, and work, learners tend to emphasize some learning abilities over others. Each of us has a unique way of developing a learning style that has some weak and strong points (Kolb & Fry,

1975). As teachers, we sometimes wonder why some students can easily learn what is taught in class whereas some find it difficult. We also question why some students can learn certain skills but not others, and why is it they cannot learn all other skills equally well. We also always wonder why some students do not excel in class as well as others even though all of them receive the same input from their teachers.

Kinsella (1995) said that teachers seldom acknowledge nor understand that students with an auditory orientation, for example, often react poorly to comprehensive written comments, questions and corrections on a writing draft, regardless of how sound they may be because such information is more suited for visual students. She furthered said that these teachers do not recognize that in such a writing class, strong auditory learners do better, or have better grasp with input in the form of spoken rather than the printed words.

Higher education in Malaysia places emphasis on auditory and visual modes of learning. Since most of the teaching instruction at the tertiary level in Malaysia is given in auditory manner mostly through lectures and in class discussions, students who have auditory as their strongest learning modality would be the ones who benefit most from such instruction. This is because the teaching and learning style are matched. Dunn and Dunn (1978) said that various studies have shown that when students are exposed to a teaching style compatible with the ways they believe they learn, they score higher in tests, factual knowledge, attitude, and efficiency than those taught in a manner discordant with their style.

The Study

The purpose of this study is to find out whether low proficient students could "stretch" or adapt to other learning styles. The students involved in this study were sixteen first year Bachelor of Arts in English Language Studies (BA ELS) students from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia who received less satisfactory results in the English Placement Test. The students were categorized as modest language users meaning that they are fairly proficient in the language with very noticeable inaccuracies in the usage of language particularly in their writing as well as in their reading.

A Perceptual Learning Style Preference (PLSP) questionnaire was also administered to determine the preferred learning styles of the students. Journal writing, projection questions and interviews were also used to collect data. Journal writing was carried out on a regular basis on four focal students immediately after a task involving the use of the visual or auditory mode. The students were asked to write about the way they usually learn, why they prefer to learn in certain ways, and how they would like their teachers to present new materials to them and other related issues. They were also asked to write what they liked and did not like about the visual and

auditory methods used and also the problems they encountered in adapting to the different styles. In addition, they also recorded events, comments, frustrations, thoughts and feelings that they experienced during the lessons using the approaches mentioned. Information gathered from the journals helped the teacher-researcher discover how the students felt when coping and adapting to the visual and auditory styles of presenting materials which were not their preferred styles of studying. This allowed the teacher-researcher to provide appropriate strategies for students to try out in coping with the problems they encountered as they went through the practices of adapting or "stretching" to the different styles.

Projection technique using incomplete sentences was also employed to gain feedback. An incomplete sentence was given just after a visual or an auditory teaching technique was used to present new materials to the students, to get feedback. Students projected themselves by completing open-ended sentences such as "I like/dislike working on the exercise alone because _____." Through this technique, the researcher hoped to discover and explore students' attitudes, comments, values and emotions in relation to their effort in "stretching" or adapting to the sensory techniques used in class. Projection questions were used in place of journal writing to break the monotony.

Information gathered from the journals and projection questions were used to construct the interview questions. Among others, the questions focused on issues arising from the students' description of how they felt adapting to the visual and auditory methods of teaching in an attempt to "stretch" their learning styles.

The students were taught for 2 hours every week for 8 weeks by the teacher-researcher during the teaching of English Grammar course that the students were undergoing. The students were taught through mainly the visual and auditory modes. The aim was to give the students practice in adapting to these modes of teaching which were not their major preference modes of learning, and to make them more visual and auditory; the skills most needed in learning at the tertiary level. The exercises given were specifically chosen and adapted by the researcher from various English grammar books because they were deemed appropriate to be presented for auditory and visual learning practices. Some of the auditory exercises involved having the students listen to tape-recorded instructions and exercises such as identifying grammatical errors in sentences. As for visual learning, they were asked to create images and draw concept maps.

The researcher provided the students with appropriate learning style strategies suggested by Kinsella (1993) in relation to the teaching style or task at hand. For instance, if the instruction was given visually and the students' learning style preference was tactile, then the teacher-researcher would give them learning style strategies that could help them enhance or develop the visual learning style.

Data from the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaires were analysed quantitatively while data from the other sources used were analysed qualitatively and triangulated for validation.

Discussion of Findings

The results of the PLSP indicate that the majority of the students had multiple learning styles with at least kinesthetic or tactile as their major learning style preference. In comparison, American students are less kinesthetic and prefer auditory learning. The American culture encourages children to express their thoughts freely which cultivate the auditory learning style at an early stage.

American culture differs from many Asian cultures. When Shamim (1996) wrote that in a traditional classroom in Pakistan, learner-talk is a sign of unruly behavior and also a lack of control on the teacher's part and that pupils should remain quiet and speak only minimally or when the teacher tells them to do so, it sounds similar to the Malaysian school culture in which students are usually ordered to keep quiet in class.

Cortazzi and Jin (1996) said that children were socialized into a culture of learning in their pre-school and early years in school. This persists into secondary school. It is possible that previous school experience does have an effect in moulding a person's learning style. With regard to the Malaysian students in this study, their preferences may be the effects of early cultural experiences in kindergarten, primary and secondary schools that focused on tactile and kinaesthetic activities besides reading instead of cultivating the auditory learning style. It should not be overlooked that writing is in fact a tactile activity too.

In Malaysia, tactile and kinesthetic activities are used a lot more in kindergarten. Besides that, most students would inevitably do writing and cut-and-paste activities, especially in kindergarten and primary schools and this indirectly enhance tactile style. Moving into secondary schools, they are further involved with many instructional activities that are geared more towards group and action-oriented activities such as working on science, history and living skills class projects which entail them to be actively tactile and kinesthetic. Thus, coming from such a cultural background and being fed with the requirements of the school syllabus may be some of the reasons why Malaysian students are more tactile and kinesthetic in nature.

Therefore, when taught using visual and auditory teaching style in the study, the common comments voiced by learners were the fact that they found it difficult to follow and adapt to the styles in higher education because they were not used to such styles. They also felt uncomfortable, confused, stressed, frustrated, angry, upset and bored with the lesson and gave up easily as can be seen in the data below.

- Teacher Researcher : *Apa perasaan Watie bila ada guru yang mengajar bertentangan dengan cara yang kita suka belajar. (How do you feel when a teacher employs a teaching style which is conflicting with your style of learning?)*
- Watie : *Emm...mula-mula tu susahlah nak...nak terima, kan...pembelajaran cikgu tu. Err...rasa tak faham. Lepas tu...err...kadang-kadang tu rasa emm...rasa give-up jugak... Sebab ah lah kita tak ...tak faham kan...err...cara cikgu tu ajar...aaa...susahlah sikit nak terima.*
(Emm... at first it was difficult to... to digest... the lesson presented by the teacher. Err... difficult to understand. Then... err... sometimes it feels like emm... giving up... because ah we don't... comprehend it... Thus, I just don't bother to learn... err... the teacher's teaching method... aaa... a bit difficult to follow).
- Teacher Researcher : *Susah nak terima... bila susah nak terima, apa perasaan kita dalam kelas tu?*
(Difficult to follow... when it was difficult to follow, what did you feel at that moment in the class?)
- Watie : *Emm...keliru, lepas tu...errr...kecewa pun ada...emm...marah pun ada...emm...marah pun ada, sedih pun ada. Aaa...lepas tu...err...rasa takut pun ada, nanti dia soal soalan...*
(Emm... confused, then... err... frustrated even... emm... angry also... angry, a bit sad. Aaa... then... err... afraid too, he/she might ask me questions.)

Felder and Henriques (as cited in Reid, 1995) said that if a learning style conflict occurs, the affected students might become bored, inattentive, discouraged and do poorly on tests. Such stress and anxiety can affect students' learning and this is something teachers should be aware of because when students are anxious, it can become a barrier to learning (Krashen 1981). If teachers teach in a manner which is actually incongruent with a student's preferred learning style, it could also inhibit learning.

Students also realized that the visual aids helped make reading and understanding easier, and they were motivated by the workability of the techniques. They were optimistic and motivated to try the new styles of learning on their own later when they realized that those new visual and auditory methods worked well for them

when practised in class. In terms of taking the initiative to adapt to the new learning styles, the students said that they were optimistic and motivated to try the new styles of learning on their own later when they realized that those methods worked well for them. However, they were not used to the new styles and they finally resorted back to their usual ways of learning. It was because these new styles “did not cross their mind” as they were not used to them.

As Claxton and Murrell (1987) pointed out, personality traits and information-processing strengths have been said to be the most stable components of an individual learning style and the least one to change even if intervened by the teacher. This may explain why these students found it difficult to change their learning culture. They are fixed upon a particular learning approach simply because it is the most familiar to them and they may go back to their comfortable methods even after being introduced to particular methods that have worked well for them (Kinsella, 1995). This is stated by one of the students below:

Indra: *Saya tidak menggunakan cara begini kerana saya memang tak biasa guna cara ini. Sebab saya tak berapa faham guna cara imagine dan melukis timeline. Saya tak suka menggambarakan sesuatu dan saya rasa lebih faham kalau benda tu ada di depan mata saya. Saya lebih suka menyalin nota dan memahaminya sebab saya dah biasa dengan cara itu. Saya rasa lebih mudah mengingatinya kalau guna cara imagine tu, susah sikit sebab apa yang digambarkan tu boleh hilang serta-merta ataupun tak kekal...*

Translation: I didn't employ this method because I'm not used to this method. Because I didn't really understand the imagine method and timeline drawing method. I don't like to imagine something and I think I would understand more if that something is right in front of me. I prefer writing down notes and understand them because I'm used to the method. It's much easier for me to remember. If I were to use the imagine method, it would be a bit difficult because what we have imagined can just disappear or will not last long.

Students also shared similar ways of studying: reading, underlining important points, taking or writing notes and referring to the dictionary. They used the same ways of studying regardless of the subject matter and whether the subjects were taught in English or Malay. This seems to be the normal way that students in Malaysia study because the culture of the education system here is strongly examination-oriented. That is why teachers place emphasis on memory, imitation and drilling. Students would read the text and underline important points and then re-read or write the notes so that they can reproduce them during the exam.

The examination-oriented education system could partly explain why the students were more tactile and kinaesthetic in nature since taking notes is a tactile activity. The student's typical ways of learning is identified in the following group discussion:

- Mayang : ...err...my...I....when I want to study, firstly I read the material.... And then I read loud. After that....emm...underline what I want...what the thing I don't know...
- Mas : After you read....you underline that....
- Mayang : Yes....after I underline that...err...those words that I...I don't understand. I find it from dic...dic... dictionary to understand.

Generally, the students shared the same views on many aspects of learning. It was not easy for these students to expand their normal learning styles to cope and adapt to the teacher's teaching. Again, this can be attributed to the cultural background where they have been educated in a comparatively traditional, hierarchical system.

This is further supported by Kinsella and Sherak (1998), who argues that individual learning styles were ingrained and affirmed by years of conventional classroom roles and norms. That explained why the students felt that teachers should teach according to the way they had been learning, the way they were accustomed to, instead of trying to adjust to the teacher's new teaching style, as depicted in the following interview:

- Teacher Researcher : *Pada pendapat Indra, cikgu tu kena mengajar ikut Indra belajar ataupun Indra ikut...kena ikut cara cikgu tu ajar? Yang mana lebih Indra suka?*
(In your opinion, the teacher should teach according to your style or you have to follow the teacher's teaching style? Which one would you prefer?)

Indra : *Mungkin ikut cara saya sendiri lah. Cara saya belajar...ikut cara saya sendiri.*

(Maybe I prefer my own style. The way I study... follows my own style.)

It is definitely not easy for some students to expand their normal learning styles to cope and adapt to the teacher's teaching. In fact, even though all of the students in the study found the new visual and auditory strategies introduced to them worked well it did not necessarily mean they would adopt them later.

Implications

Based on the findings, most of the students' major learning style preference is tactile and kinesthetic. They have difficulties shifting from the school to the university culture of learning which required them to stretch their comfort zones learning styles to be more auditory.

The Malaysian education system needs to teach students study skills including listening skills and note-taking skills because throughout this research, I realised that students do not have note-taking skills when listening to lectures or discussions. Teachers in schools should start coaching students study skills at an early stage and provide them with enough practice in all the four skills namely listening and speaking (auditory skills), reading (auditory and visual skills), and writing skills so that they will be well-prepared when they enter university.

This is important because in research concerning learning style and academic achievement, Horwood (1991) reported that Asian students did not perform well when the primary mode of instruction was auditory. Heikinheimo and Shute (1986) reported that Asian students attending a Canadian University had serious problems in understanding lectures, taking notes, answering questions and writing essays.

In Malaysia, lectures remain the major part of university studies and it may serve as a challenge for students (non-native speakers of English) to listen in English. O'Brien (1989) who assessed 6000 native English and ESOL speakers revealed that 80% of instruction is conducted in an auditory manner even though less than 10% of the population indicates this as their strongest learning mode. Hodges' (1982) research in the U.S secondary school confirms once more that roughly 90% of traditional classroom teaching caters for proficient auditory learners.

According to Ballard (1996), listening skill is one of the first skills that should be emphasised in a language classroom because whether students are listening to the teacher, to tapes or to each other, they are actually training their auditory sense. During lectures and tutorials at the university, students have to listen carefully to get the specific information or understand certain arguments. According to him further, foreign language students bring to lectures inappropriate listening skills. These students try to "hear" and then write a full record of everything word by word. They also complain that the lecturers and other students "talk too fast" and they cannot keep up with the lesson. They plead to be allowed to tape lectures so that they can write every single thing that is said. Their aim was to achieve total recall and they would quote their lecturers verbatim in their essays.

Again, the difficulties they had in coping with the visual and auditory styles can be traced back to their early learning background.

Therefore, understanding that cultural socialization plays a role in moulding one's learning style, children from kindergarten to primary schools should be introduced to more visual and auditory activities so that visual and auditory styles can be developed during the early stage. This would prepare them to cope with the new culture of university teaching and learning.

To prepare students for the shift, I feel that critical thinking tasks, such as asking students to give opinions and argue out their reasons, is something that the schools should start implementing and not wait for them to enter university to encounter the culture shock of learning in a style they are not familiar with. Teachers in school should no longer spoon-feed students and be the only source of knowledge, but to also act as a guide and challenge students to come up with their own ideas. Teachers should encourage students to also support their arguments and views. According to Ballard (1996), in an undergraduate education, knowledge is not fixed anymore instead it is open to question and criticism. It is supposed to develop independent and analytical style of learning. It is this shift that many Malaysian students are less able to make because no such demands have been made on them previously.

Since individual learning styles were ingrained and affirmed from young by years of conventional classroom roles and norms (Kinsella and Sherak, 1998), and the study has shown the students' difficulties attending to the changes of learning culture from school to university, the Ministry of Education should implement the use of various learning styles in their curriculum for students to become more empowered in their learning.

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