

Characteristics of Chinese Students' Learning Styles

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Abstract. There has been a growing awareness that understanding students' learning styles and characteristics have an impact on learning and teaching. More negative typical learning styles of Chinese students studying in English speaking countries have been challenged as rote, silent and passive. This paper critically reviews the widespread views about these Chinese students' learning styles and characteristics observed in Western countries. It is argued that the learning styles of Chinese students are more complicated than what some Western observers have described. The review should provide academics involving in teaching Chinese overseas student cohort with new insights into the paradox of the Chinese learner.

Keywords: Classroom, Learning Styles and Characteristics, Cross-cultural Teaching and Learning

1. Introduction

As a result of growth of internationalisation in higher education and the rapid economic development in China, a large number of Chinese students are studying in English-speaking countries. There have been studies examining Chinese students' overseas learning experiences. In the USA, Chinese students' performance in American universities has drawn great attentions from university academics (e.g. Gieve & Clark, 2005; Shaw, *et al.*, 1994). In the United Kingdom, researchers have dealt with the same issue (e.g., Chan, 1999; Richards, 2004). In Australia, studies have examined Chinese students' learning experiences in the host universities (e.g., Chen, 2007; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). Similar research has also been conducted in New Zealand (Skyrme, 2007). There is current literature focusing on the adaptation of overseas Chinese students and their learning strategies (Chen, 2007; Zeng, 2006). This paper attempts to review three common characteristics of the Chinese learning style as it has been observed by scholars in Western countries.

2. Characteristics of Learning Styles

According to some Western academics, Chinese students are modest and diligent (Park, 2000). They highly value education and greatly respect elder people, teachers and scholars (McInerney, 2005; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). At the same time, some of their typical learning characteristics are described negatively such as rote, silent and passive style of learning. It is essential to examine these characteristics in depth.

2.1. Rote Learning

First, it is argued that Chinese background students' learning relies heavily on repetitive rote-learning and memorisation (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). As this widespread view describes "Students from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong appear to be much more inclined to rote learning. Such an approach does not help problem solving." (Dentistry) (quoted in Samuelowicz, 1987, p. 123). Regarding various Chinese-background students as a homogenous group without considering specific sub-cultures is a problematic starting point. Literature identifies two approaches to learning: a deep approach of learning is characterised by a focus on the meaning or message underlying the study materials, whereas a surface approach is characterised by a focus on the learning material itself, that is, its superficial meaning (Marton, *et al.*, 1996). Watkins and Biggs (1996) claim that repetition/reproduction which signifies rote learning is regarded as a surface approach to learning. However, Bond (1992) argues that compared to Western learning which seeks for the technology, Chinese style of learning prefers pursuing for the essentials. In accordance with Western literature, a good learning is usually linked to students' use of deep approaches to learning, and active

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participations in classroom activities. Chinese students' surface rote learning style within a large class and highly authoritarian teaching context are easily assumed to produce poor learning achievement.

Historically China's traditional education is examination-oriented. Learning for exams is still dependent on memorization. Researchers argue that such exams promote surface learning. Students develop the ability merely to repeat information without a real understanding of meaning or of how the new information relates to previous knowledge (Kennedy, 2002). Nevertheless, it is a paradox of the Chinese learner (Watkins & Biggs, 1996). Though Chinese students are assumed to demonstrate poor learning motivations and strategies, they flourish academically and achieve considerably higher levels than their Western counterparts, especially in mathematics and science (Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005). This fact demonstrates that Chinese students are not simply memorizing through rote learning. Memorization is regarded as a significant strategy of learning in the Confucian tradition and should not be equated with rote learning (Chan, 1999; Lee, 1996). In fact, "memorizing lines or already understood facts may be required to ensure success and is considered to be a deep approach" (Ho *et al.*, 1999, p. 48). In other words, learning through memorisation and learning through understanding can be intertwined.

2.2. Silent Learning

The second characteristic of Chinese students' learning styles in classroom is that teachers are authoritarian and students are quiet and obedient to keep silent learning, as Ballard (1991) illustrates "...a very strange feeling at first...All those watching silent faces, I suppose...they certainly do work hard...I've got no complaints about that. They do all the assignments and any extra work I suggest...they are good students, but you don't get much reaction out of them..." (Economics lecture) (quoted in Ballard, 1991, p. 2). Such a view is not new in Western literature. Although Chinese students' hard work is acknowledged, they are still considered as passive-obedient-learners who never question the knowledge transmitted during lectures.

Cortazzi and Jin (2001) explain two conceptions of teaching and learning. One conception resembles a hierarchical line where students regard teachers as all-knowing and accept knowledge transmitted by teachers. Chinese classroom activities are typically seen as dominated by teachers with limited questioning or discussion (Chan, 1999). The other conception resembles a horizontal line where students are considered to be acquiring knowledge through participating in activities and sharing their independent thinking. Thus the relationship between teachers and students is more egalitarian. The latter is usually associated with Western learning contexts that stress equalitarianism, individual development, independent and critical thinking, and cooperation. Chinese learning culture inclines to the first conception of teaching and learning. Chinese educational philosophy and learning traditions have been profoundly influenced by Confucianism (Bush & Qiang, 2000). People with Confucian heritage cultural background tend to be modest and diligent, emphasize the importance of order, respect for authorities, and value pragmatic acquisition of knowledge.

The feature of "silent learning" can be traced back to the Confucian tradition which encourages the Chinese to respect hierarchical relationships in the society. Knowledgeable people like scholars and teachers are greatly respected as good role models. To keep order and harmony, students are usually permitted to speak up until being called upon. Listening attentively throughout the class is kept as a virtue for generations and generations. Nevertheless, keeping silent in class does not mean students do not actively engage in thinking or class activities. As Hofstede (2001) argues, when the understanding on authority is transferred to an educational setting, the role-pair is teacher and student, the order of importance relationship is also emerged between teachers and students by Confucians. Chinese students rarely question or challenge knowledge transmitted by teachers is still common. In Confucianism, besides organising effective teaching and learning activities and delivering knowledge to the class, which are also emphasised in Western academic cultures, teachers are particularly expected to have deep knowledge, be able to answer questions, and to be good models of morality. A famous saying in China goes "A high building, a low foundation". This reflects what Pratt *et al.*'s (1999) view that it is necessary to master fundamental knowledge before the development of ability and creativity. Teachers are expected to structure knowledge step by step so that students are able to build knowledge in a systematic and consolidated manner.

2.3. Passive Learning

In addition to the two characteristics discussed above, the third feature of Chinese learners' learning style is their passive learning, as appraised by Ballard (1989a) "...diligent, obedient, hardworking, passive and assessment-centred. They are anxious to cover the syllabus and they want to be sure of the correct answers..." (p. 41). This also gives rise to the paradox that the teacher-student interaction is restricted in class where there is usually a dull and authoritarian studying atmosphere. With respect to this misconception, studies (Chen, 2007; Zeng, 2006) have argued that Chinese students not only absorb knowledge transmitted by teachers, but also seek closer interaction with teachers. Most of them wait until after class to ask unknown questions rather than question directly in class. This is because the Chinese teacher-student relationship is casual beyond class. For example, it is common for teachers to visit students' parents to understand their students' needs and learning difficulties in class. Teachers can invite parents to have formal regular meetings in school to let them know students' learning progress and performance. Students are encouraged to approach their teachers outside class to clarify what they have not fully understood in class. The family-like interaction pattern between teachers and students is not limited to the academic learning context. Pratt *et al.* (1999) notes this "liang shi yi you" (good teacher and helpful friend) interactive pattern in Chinese culture indicates that the relationships are made up of responsibility, authority, and morality (heart).

Interestingly, the Chinese term "xue wen" (knowledge) can be divided into two words with different meanings: "xue" (to learn or to get to know) and "wen" (to ask or to enquiry) (Cheng, 2000). It stresses the importance of questioning and enquiring, so Chinese students also employ a deep approach to learning. As Cortazzi and Jin (2001) suggest "Chinese students are not passive but reflective...Chinese students value thoughtful questions which they ask after sound reflection..." (p.191), the misconceptions of obedient passive Chinese students and non-participative-rote-learners are over-simplistic.

3. Conclusion

This paper has generally reviewed the widespread views about Chinese students' learning styles observed in Western countries. The review should provide academics involving in teaching Chinese overseas student cohort with insights into the paradox of the Chinese learner. It is noted that the learning styles of Chinese students are more complicated than what some Western observers have described. Snider (2005) also studied the Chinese learners originally from Malaysia, Singapore, Mainland China and Hong Kong as a big single group, but conceptions of learning and teaching are assumed to be social-cultural context dependent. In other words, learning conceptions among the sub-groups of Chinese students should be consistent across social, cultural and educational contexts. Hence, it would be helpful to explore students' learning perceptions and experience from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds.

For example, Hong Kong shares Confucian heritage culture with Mainland China, but the strong influence of British colonisation makes its culture and educational system relatively different from that of Mainland China. Instead, it has still maintained a more Western-style education. To some extent, the prior educational experiences of these two sub-cultural groups of Chinese learners may impact their perceptions of learning and teaching in Western countries such as Australia. There are substantial studies on the Chinese students' overseas learning experiences in Australia as indicated earlier. However, there is limited literature on the comparison of the two sub-cultural groups of Chinese students studying in Australian universities. This is an investigation that the writer intends to do, with a new research question of "How do social, cultural and educational backgrounds affect the learning styles and preferences of the Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Chinese in Australian universities?"

4. References

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