The Learning Styles of "Asian" English Language Learners

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Abstract

This paper will begin by considering the question of how to define "Asian Learner." This will be followed by a brief look at language learning styles and strategies and what research has shown regarding people of Asian descent learning English as a foreign, second, or additional language（EFL, ESL, or EAL）. In conclusion, the issue of whether or not it is worthwhile to categorize people by their country of origin is discussed.

Defining Asia

Asia's borders are generally defined as the Ural Mountains and Suez Canal to the West and the Pacific Ocean to the East. With almost 50 countries representing over four billion people and speaking thousands of languages, it is surprising how frequently the term "Asian Learner" is used by researchers to describe learners originating from such diversity. Littlewood（2000）is one researcher who questioned this usage of a blanket term for such a ranging population. Nevertheless, he still needed to resort to the term "Asian" student to refute certain stereotypes.

Even the borders of countries themselves are a cultural artifact, as they have morphed over the centuries as trade routes grew and imperialistic conquerors, both European and Asian, came and went. Schwarz（2008）quotes Oxford Professor Sir Barry Cunliffe, who suggests that even separating Europe from Asia is a questionable division, calling Europe "the western excrescence of the continent of Asia" and that the Great Hungarian Plain provided access to the Atlantic Ocean for the Chinese.

"Asian" is often used to describe a phenotype, yet many ethnicities, such as Arabs and Persians, not to mention people of different races, Blacks and Caucasians, all living in Asia. Furthermore, using race as a classification is problematic and leads to racialization or racism,

a subject Kubota and Lin（2009）have addressed.

Defining Asian Learner

While it is easy to define a "learner" as someone who takes on something and gains some knowledge, there remains the issue of at what point a language is "learned" or "mastered." Fries（1945）questioned what it meant to learn or master a foreign language, especially given that even native speakers are not always considered competent users. He concludes it is first the mastery of the sound system and limited vocabulary, together with a particular grammatical structure（p. 3）. Rampton（1996）also examined the idea of what terms like "native" or "expert" speaker meant, noting that expertise itself is not a fixed quantity（p. 19）.

A more straightforward solution to analyzing the learning strategies of "Asian learners" is to use their country of nationality. However, with this approach, the results tend to favor research on learners from just East Asia, namely China（including Hong Kong and Taiwan）, Japan, and to a lesser extent South Korea. This is understandable, as those countries are responsible for nearly 20% of the world's GDP and population, providing a large enough market to entice language teachers and publishers to become involved, naturally leading to research being published on their experiences. Because of this, the breadth of this review will be limited, with the focus on people of Asian descent whose first language is not English. Asians studying in both EFL and ESL environments are included, and while much of the research focuses on Chinese and Japanese learners, other Asian nationalities are included when possible.

Missing from this calculation is the impact of people from South Asia, namely India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. India, in particular, is a significant exporter of overseas students （Dobinson, 2012）. However, India, in particular, falls into the Outer Circle part of Kachru's model of World Englishes（Kachru, 1992）and is more an exporter of L1 or expert users of English intent on studying at a tertiary level than language learners per se, and for that reason is excluded from this paper.

Another issue beyond the scope of this paper is that within most Asian countries, there are very diverse populations who speak a host of languages and have different cultural backgrounds. In China, for example, Uyghurs in the western part of the country speak a Turkic language as their mother tongue. In contrast, ethnic groups such as the Dai in southern Yunnan speak a language more closely related to Thai. Though the country tries to promote na-

tional cohesion through the teaching of Mandarin, that in itself is not enough to create a homogenous group of people, and it can be expected that their learning styles may vary significantly. Unfortunately, little research is available in English regarding their learning styles.

Of course, "Asian learners" do not only reside in Asia, as many reside overseas, and their experiences differ significantly from those taught in an EFL environment (Clark & Gieve, 2006). As a large amount of the published research involves studies of students already abroad, it is necessary to consider this when coming to conclusions regarding what learning strategies learners prefer. Learners in an EFL environment can be divided into perhaps three main groups. Some are intent on studying at a university overseas in the future or aiming for shorter stays abroad, some may be learning English for a specific/academic purpose (ESP/EAP), and of course, some may be doing it for pleasure or as a hobby.

Approaches to Learning and Learning Styles

Learning theory has passed through several stages, from the behaviorist view of Skinner to the constructivists' view of Piaget. More recently, theories have looked at the differences people express. Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) describes learners as having visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory preferences. Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory suggests people have different levels of abilities; however, there has not been sufficient evidence to support them yet (Harmer, 2007). Theory alone is not the only influence on learning, however, as the commercial interests of publishers often lead to a single approach or method becoming widespread (Harmer, 2007, p. 89).

As to what a "learning style" is, Oxford (2003, p. 3) quotes the definition suggested by Dunn and Griggs (1988): "Learning style is the biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others." Oxford, Hollaway, and Horton-Murillo (1992) identify four main learning styles that encompass cognitive, affective, physiological, and specific behaviors, which they classify as learning strategies (p. 440). Willing (1987), as cited in Harmer Harmer (2007), also uses four categories, at least for adult learners, and explains how each has a preference; convergers who are independent, conformists that prefer authoritarian methods, concrete learners that like games and group work, and finally communicative learners who are happy to take risks and are more social (p. 88).

Learning Styles Found Amongst Asian Learners

Second (or additional) language learning styles are inevitably linked to the teaching methods, as most students are introduced to the formal learning of foreign languages by teachers who have particular teaching methods and encourage specific learning strategies they believe suit the materials. Adamson (2004) points out that publishers drive a particular method because of government directives, commercial objectives, or the desire to promote the newest approach or methodology that is in vogue (p. 611). Such methods may or may not be in the learner's best interest, especially given how much individual variation can exist in learning style preferences (Harmer, 2007).

Research into Japanese foreign language learners has had mixed results. Fujita (2002) attempted to apply the well-known bipolar Learning Style Inventory (LSI) to the Japanese context and had difficulty achieving valid results, suggesting that Kolb's theory did not fit the Japanese learning styles (p. 168). A study of over 400 Japanese students in Japan and New Zealand led Hyland (1994) to conclude that they had no specific learning style preference. However, once they entered the Native English Speaking Teacher's (NEST) class, they made minor adaptations (p. 55). This contrasts with the findings of Joy and Kolb (2009), who compared Singaporeans with Europeans, Americans, and Indians. Their study showed that while culture only had a marginal effect on experimentation and reflective observation, it did influence conceptualization instead of concrete experience (p. 83).

In a study covering 11 countries and thousands of students, Littlewood (2000) found that, for the most part, the students from Asian countries did not desire to be empty vessels by all-knowing teachers but enjoyed engaging with teachers and fellow group members, not unlike students from European countries (p. 34). Watkins, Reghi, and Astilla (1991) found that particular Asian learners, in this case, Filipino and Nepalese, had similar learning processes and that those students who were more achievement-oriented tended to do better. This is interesting since the Philippines has Spanish and American influence via colonial rule and missionaries, whereas Hinduism and India have influenced Nepal in particular (p. 23).

Rote learning, or the memorization of material, is common in many countries. However, the subject matter varies greatly. For logographic writing systems such as Chinese and Japanese, rote learning has been the accepted learning strategy for centuries. Westerners learning these languages resort to the same type of study, copying them thousands of times to

memorize them. The problem, in many English language educators' eyes, is that rote learning is incompatible with learning Western languages, learners of these languages do not rely on the memorization of characters that logographic language learners rely on (Samuelowicz, 1987). While rote learning amongst Asian students is often disparaged as being a strategy incompatible with English language learning, though it can be successful in building vocabulary (Yang, 2011).

Fifty years ago, Noesjirwan (1970) found Southeast Asian students more dependent on authority and memorization and showed less independent thinking. She concluded that students with such traits would do poorly at overseas universities. However, two problems with this study are that it had a very small sample size and the questions were very general.

Noting that much of the American-based research involved Hispanics who display different communication strategies to Asians who prefer rote memorization, Chen (2009) felt it important to study Taiwanese learners in Taiwan. She looked at the effect of grade level on Taiwanese children's learning styles and strategies. She found that their preferences and strengths varied with age and that seventh and eighth graders used memory and cognitive strategies more effectively than those in ninth grade (p. 307).

Suggesting that it might be best to "wean them from rote repetition" and 'help them use Western rhetorical patterns," Oxford et al. (1992) suggested that Japanese students respond better to "a structured but somewhat informal classroom atmosphere" and that it is best to avoid putting too much attention on students in order to avoid embarrassment (p. 452). While recognizing that having an inappropriate strategy may cause difficulty in specific contexts, Ballard and Clanchy (1991) make the critical point that native memorization strategies have served Asian learners well in the past and allowed them to pass the necessary exams to proceed up the educational ladder (p. 21). However, they also claim that Asians will move along the continuum to include analytic approaches.

Bob Adamson (2004) describes the English teaching methodology used in China as running the entire gambit since the Communist Revolution in 1949. He notes that the "indigenous" method of rote learning is similar to Grammar-Translation in that it concentrates on learning vocabulary and grammar (p. 613). Later the Chinese government promoted the audio-lingual method, which gave way to CLT and, more recently, promoted of the task-based approach (p. 615). Given this, it is hard to see where Chinese language learners are all that different from learners in the rest of the world regarding exposure. True experimen-

tal research involving large cohorts has yet to determine if one method is better for a specific group.

No researchers are harsh critics of memorization, however. Despite the existence of a lot of anecdotal evidence from Western educators about the problems with rote learning, there are researchers such as Watkins et al. (1991) who discussed findings that Hong Kong and Nepalese students scored higher on a test of deep strategy thinking than Australian students (p. 23). Ho, Salili, Biggs, and Hau (2006) discovered that Hong Kong Chinese students would choose rote learning, depending on the context. Situations that required the discovery of meaning, or deep learning, would not lead to rote learning (p. 46). In addition, Tinkham (1989) also found that Japanese students had more positive views on rote learning than American students and performed better on short new language word memorization activities.

In a study comparing Chinese pre-service teachers in China with their American counterparts, You and Fenran (2008) were surprised to see that Chinese teachers prefer a deeper understanding of knowledge by reading widely. In contrast, the Americans were focused on meeting instructors' requirements. However, the Americans were more experiential-learning-oriented and preferred learning through hands-on experience (p. 842). You and Fenran (2008) also highlighted the ongoing changes in Chinese education, where free tuition and guaranteed job placement are no longer standard. With few opportunities for loans or grants, parents must invest large sums in their children's education, which puts pressure on the students to perform.

While much of the criticism has originated amongst Western researchers in a university environment, Takeuchi (2003) notes a significant difference in learning strategies between learners in foreign and second language environments. In a study of Good Language Learners (GLL) of various languages in Japan, he found that strategies differed according to the stage of proficiency. The essential metacognitive strategy was to create a maximum amount of exposure and opportunity to use the language, and specific strategies included reading aloud, memorizing vocabulary, and extensive reading (Takeuchi, 2003, p. 389). He suggested that the emphasis on memorization and a focus on foreign sounds/prosody was more critical for the learners in the foreign language context, as those where the language was spoken widely had more opportunities for exposure and practice (p. 398).

A more recent type of learning, ubiquitous learning (u-learning), was tested by Hsieh,

Jang, Hwang, and Chen (2011) in Taiwan. Although not language learning related, the study did show that matching the teaching style to the student's preferences resulted in better reflection. Of note, too, is that the Taiwanese students expressed both active and reflective learning styles, contrary to stereotypes (p. 1200).

Issues (and Stereotypes) of Asian Learners
Passivity and Politeness

Asians are often stereotyped as passive in language classes, which most non-Asian teachers consider a negative feature. However, when the definition of passive is examined, it is easy to see how such characterizations might be appreciated in some contexts, while in others, be thought of as laziness or lack of understanding.

One dictionary definition of passive includes the following:

－tending not to take an active or dominant part

－receiving or enduring without resistance

－receptive to outside impressions or influences

　　　(http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/passive)

A problem with these criticisms is that they may be leveled at students who, while passing a gate-keeping exam, need sufficient proficiency to challenge others in the classroom (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). Other factors influencing participation and confidence are time in the country and support network. Ballard and Clanchy (1991) acknowledge that the education systems of most Asian countries are constantly changing. However, they suggest Confucian influences such as respect for the teacher still influence students and dissuade them from asking questions. Joy and Kolb (2009) mention that students from high power distance cultures are uncomfortable with the American tradition of calling a professor by their first name., and Asians often appear "quiet and reflective" compared to their American classmates (p. 69).

Harshbarger, Ross, Tafoya, and Via (1986) looked at Japanese and Korean students and described them as shy or introverted compared to Hispanics or Arab speakers (who may or may not have been from Asia). In a series of interviews, Ballard and Clanchy (1991) found several stereotypical reactions from Asian students in Australia. A Burmese student said they had been taught to be humble and would avoid showing not to show they know more than their classmates. Furthermore, they would not want to ask questions for fear of

offending the teacher（p. 17）. A Thai student also did not ask questions and said he/she would prefer not to change their behavior to be more like an inquisitive Australian student （p. 16）. Fukushima（1996）looked at approaches to face-threatening acts between the Japanese and British, with the Japanese being more direct in terms of politeness（p. 217）. However, these same acts might be considered unresponsive and undesirable in a Western context.

Although China has been pushing English for about 30 years, there remains a severe disconnect between training and classroom success. Chen and Goh（2011）interviewed teachers in 22 universities. They found their comments regarding the failure to get students to speak in oral communication classes mostly related to a lack of risk-taking on the student's behalf and a lack of proper training on the part of the teachers. These students were not "shy" per se but somewhat reluctant to express themselves due to low proficiency（p. 338）. Cheng（2000）also observed that Asian students show a strong desire to join classroom activities. When they are quiet, it is usually due to the teaching methodology or their lack of target language ability（p. 435）. Cheng criticizes the small-scale studies done overseas but recognizes that there are "some" Asian learners who are quieter than expected, and it is worth researching the causes（p. 445）.

It is problematic to suggest that all learners from a specific country have similar behaviors. Clark and Gieve（2006）differentiate between the 'large culture' type of generalizations and the 'small culture' setting where the class, gender, and origin（rural or urban）of the student might play a prominent role in the classroom dynamics. They suggest it is preferable to emphasize the individual over national stereotypes, especially given that Chinese abroad are not the same as when at home（Clark & Gieve, 2006, pp. 68-69）.

Studying different cultures is complex, and there is a tendency to make sweeping generalizations based on data. Taras and Steel（2009）refer to an "unwritten rule" that in the field of cross-cultural studies, one should "Never Mix National and Individual Levels of Analysis" and warn that Hofestede recommended researchers take great care when trying to make national cultural generalizations（Taras & Steel, 2009, p. 47）.

Although Confucian identity can be seen as submission to the teacher, cooperation is another aspect. In a Hong Kong study of the effect of English classes of a smaller-than-average size（25 vs. 40）, Harfitt（2012）found that students reported a higher level of comfort and security, which led to an improved sense of classroom community（p. 340）.

Issues with Plagiarism and Writing

One of the most significant difficulties Asian students have when learning English is dealing with the large amounts of reading and writing that accompany university education in the West.

Asian traditions of memorizing the writings of famous thinkers have led to teaching styles that require students to reproduce work rather than interpret it. When some Asian students enter the Western classroom, they are sometimes at a loss as to how to critically evaluate a published author, and they respond by summarizing it instead (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). Also, interviews with Thai and Indonesian students revealed that they had done hardly any writing in their university (p. 15).

Regarding learning how to write, there are pronounced differences in some Asian languages. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) note that Japanese, Korean, and Chinese are all organized in a format similar to Chinese poetry, and asking a learner who is experienced in one style to learn a more liner style for English is not easy. Arabic writing is very descriptive and can even be poetic; however, in English, such stylistic writing would not be considered appropriate in most genres and might lead the instructor to grade it harshly (Vardi, 2004).

Problems with Guessing

Asian students often expect the teacher to give them the correct answers to tests beforehand, and it is the student's responsibility to memorize them. Essay questions without clearcut answers can throw students, and multiple-choice questions may be left blank as the student is reluctant to guess even though there is no penalty (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991, p. 24).

Difficulties with English

One reason many consider Asian learners to be "unique" and attract so much attention is that many, if not most, of the languages in Asia are markedly different from English, leading to additional challenges. By not using the Roman alphabet, languages such as Thai, Korean, and Japanese immediately place themselves in a separate category (Vardi, 2004). In addition, languages such as Thai and Chinese are tonal, immediately leading to pronunciation issues. A third factor is that many Asian languages are syllable-timed, unlike English which is stress-timed, and pronunciation issues are significant, especially for older learners (Vardi,

2004, p. 216）.

Differences among Iranian second-language students were evident when their learning styles were studied by Moenikia and Zahed-Babelan（2010）. The researchers found that men preferred working alone more than women, but on the whole, almost 80% of the over-all preferences were split between oral, social, and verbal styles（p. 1171）. Vardi（2004）also remarked that cultural norms regarding interpersonal distance, status, and gender can all play a role in language learning（p. 216）.

Age is known to factor in language learning for any nationality. Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams（2011）describe a study by Jacqueline Johnson and Elissa Newport that tested Chinese and Koreans who had lived in the U. S. for at least five years. The conclusion was that those who had arrived between ages three and eight would perform as well as native speakers, but those arriving after age eight would not（p. 365）. In Australia, Nunan and Burton（Minkov & Hofstede, 2012）recognized that many learners are migrants living under challenging circumstances and may feel isolated and overwhelmed by their initial exposure to English. They also suggested that age, previous schooling, and current employment play prominent roles in how quickly learners can pick up English.

Conclusion

Using geographical boundaries or country-of-citizenship as a parameter has been a common procedure for researchers; in the past, these may have sufficed（Taras & Steel, 2009）. However, in these days of globalization, it is less precise, and it would be better to use groups based on their "socio-economic classes, professions or generational cohorts"（p. 50）.

Although the literature generalizes "Asian" learners, the conclusions vary greatly. For years much of the research only dealt with English as a Second Language（ESL）situations, either as migrants or at the tertiary level.

However, as Asian-born researchers gain access to educational institutions in the West, they can reflect on what has been written and challenge the norms. Rather than general assumptions about ancient philosophy influencing learning styles, it becomes apparent that more modern constructs such as socio-economic situations, gender, and identity play more critical roles. Age is another factor, and studies of different age groups show how attitudes toward learning are malleable and adapt to both the content and the instruction method if given sufficient time.

After over two decades of teaching Japanese, Chinese, and other Asians, I have noticed some commonalities. First, students with the highest proficiency generally talk the most in class, although most do hold back some, trying not to stand out too much and be know-it-alls. Another is that older students tend to be more outspoken. This may be tied to ability, but more often, it results from higher confidence. Overseas students (in the case of Chinese in Japan) or Japanese (who have been on study tours) tend to have a level of maturity that adds to their risk-taking ability in the classroom.

A recent trend, generative artificial intelligence, will undoubtedly play a significant role in English language learning in the near future and beyond. In general, access to technology in Asia and a diligent mindset mean learners will take full advantage of this new tool. There are dangers that in the near term, inaccurate 'hallucinations' may lead to confusion. Those will likely be resolved with time, but learners may have an over-reliance on AI as it becomes easier to use. Another concern is that there will inevitably be a cultural bias, given that the large datasets of text and code do not represent all nations' input.

Contrary to the image that Asian women are passive and weak, the more outspoken students in the classroom tend to be female, in my experience. Comparing nationalities is difficult in my situation, as the Chinese tend to be 2–5 years older than the Japanese. Still, from what I have seen, Chinese people with a so-called respect-for-authority Confucian background are delighted to engage and challenge the instructor when given a chance.

For the student going overseas, there will always be challenges. Entering a foreign culture will introduce opportunities and pressures that are often unexpected. However, with the proper preparation and complete understanding of institutional expectations, students should be able to thrive, no matter what their origin and learning situation. The comment below summarizes the excitement many learners have:

"I look forward to being your student. Although it is my first time to leave my country and my beloved family, I know you will be my father, and the university will soon be my family."

Letter from a prospective Chinese postgraduate student to her supervisor in Ballard and Clanchy (1991, p. 89).

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