

Study on Learning Styles and Confucian Culture

Asuncion Perez and Myeong-Hee Shin*

Department of General English, Hannam University, South Korea;
asperez68@gmail.com, scindy@hnu.kr

Abstract

Background/Objectives: The purpose of this study is to identify the effect of acknowledging learning styles and Confucian culture in English classes. **Methods/Statistical Analysis:** Data were collected from the questionnaires, and interviews, and collected from the questionnaires, interview, and peer evaluations. **Findings:** The research focuses on effect of having noticed cultural differences between Asian students and a Canadian teacher, and how these differences reveal themselves in the classroom. Perhaps gaining more knowledge about learning style theories and the Confucian beliefs that are so prevalent in their culture will help understanding the reasons for their behavior with a better sense of the connection between what they believe and how they learn, practices as it can be maximized students' learning experience. **Improvements/Applications:** This study is somewhat limited in its generalizations. There will be many kinds of methods for applying to learning but it depends partly on several research theories and the small amount of research data surveyed.

Keywords: Confucian Culture, Confucian Beliefs, Cultural Differences, Learning Style Theories, Learning Experience

1. Introduction

According to¹, cultural stereotypes regarding Asian students abound, suggesting there are differences between Asians and non-Asians in how information is processed, and in their attitudes towards and education. These differences even seem to indicate a predisposition to careers in particular fields, such as science, engineering, and technology². But what is the basis for such stereotypes and statistics? What is the reason why Asians dominate honor rolls?³ Perhaps the answer lies in what differentiates Asians from other learners: Their culture. If so, how can teachers deal with these cultural differences and use them to help students learn more effectively?

The main purpose of this study is to describe the effect of acknowledging learning style and Confucian culture in English classes. Since 'Asians' encompasses a very broad group of people and 'learning styles' can refer numerous theories, this paper will narrow its focus by concentrating on a particular group of Asians: Those in Confucian

Heritage Cultures (CHC), and learning styles will be analyzed within the framework of Kolb's experiential learning theory. Finally, some practical applications for the classroom will be discussed, ones that can maximize the learning experience for students who are products of a Confucian society.

The cultures, of China, Japan and Korea, and even Vietnam, although vastly different in some ways, all contain a strong element of Confucianism, a way of thought that has held influence over these cultures for over two thousand years⁴ and continues to be a presence in the modern day lives of citizens from those countries.

Confucianism principles are based on three H's: Humanism, hierarchy, and harmony⁵. As a humanist, Confucius believed that a good moral character which included the five virtues (benevolence, righteousness, wisdom, loyalty and altruism) was necessary for a civilized, peaceful society, and such a goal could be achieved through education⁵. Along with respect for education comes respect for the authority of the teacher, which

*Author for correspondence

relates to the second H, hierarchy. In Confucian society, people are very conscious of their place in society, and relationship boundaries are clearly defined. Familial relationships are prioritized above all others, with teachers being seen as second parents because they are sources of guidance and support⁶.

Finally, the concept of Harmony, the third H, was interrelated with humanism, for it meant avoiding conflict and compromising, "...aiming for the middle way"⁵. Harmony also meant acting collectively in order to keep the peace and achieve balance on a personal and societal level¹.

Another H, not mentioned by literature but still prevalent in today's Confucian society, is the value of hard work. This value, along with self-sacrifice and little expectation of personal rewards are characteristics of workplace environments in Confucian culture-based countries⁷. Indeed, innate ability is not considered as important as effort and a strong work ethic: "Failure to learn is seen as the result of lack of application rather than lack of ability"⁶.

When discussing classifications regarding culture, Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions⁸ becomes useful. He proposes five specific dimensional scales on which analyze cultures:

- Power/Distance (PDI)- The inequality that exists in a culture and the degree to which people accept that distribution of power. Confucian cultures would be considered high PDI⁹.
- Individualism (IDV)- Refers to how strongly the culture reinforces individual or collective achievement. Confucian cultures, with their emphasis on the group, would be labeled as low IDV societies.
- Masculinity (MAS)- Focuses on the degree to which the society enforces the traditional male roles regarding control, achievement, and power⁴. High MAS societies are patriarchal, and CHC societies reflect this.
- Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)- Is used to measure how much a culture tries to avoid uncertainty and unpredictability by creating rigid laws and rituals⁹. CHC's would be considered high UAI.
- Long-Term Orientation (LTO)- Assesses how strongly a culture holds on to its traditions and values¹⁰. Confucian cultures possess a high LTO rating.

These dimensions, cross-referenced with learning style inventory scores, may make it possible to see corre-

lations between cultural beliefs and learning styles.

2. Methods

2.1 Subjects

During the spring semester of 2014, a survey sample of 80 students was chosen for this study. These 80 students took the 2 hour course of Practical English as required course.

2.2 Methods and Instrument

A student questionnaire was used to survey the students' current ideas and notions using a standardized self-administrated questionnaire. The statistical analyses were conducted by interview in person.

3. Results

Since 'Asians' encompasses a very broad group of people and 'learning styles' can refer to numerous theories, this paper will narrow its focus by concentrating on a particular group of Asians: Those in Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC), and learning styles will be analyzed within the framework of Kolb's experiential learning theory. After a brief overview of theories regarding learning styles and culture, the basic concepts of Confucian thought as it relates to education will be covered, as well as some empirical research on the connection between learning styles and cultural differences. Finally, some practical applications for the classroom will be discussed, ones that can maximize the learning experience for students who are products of a Confucian society.

3.1 Learning Style Theory: Classifications and Examples

For the past four decades, there has been a widespread belief that the way people approach a learning opportunity has an effect on their performance and achievement of educational objectives¹¹. In an effort to measure the different approaches that people have towards educational experiences, numerous learning style theories have emerged. In turn, those theories have been categorized in order to distinguish layers of learning. In¹² proposes a stratified classification system, with the top or outermost layer being the least stable (where learners have the least

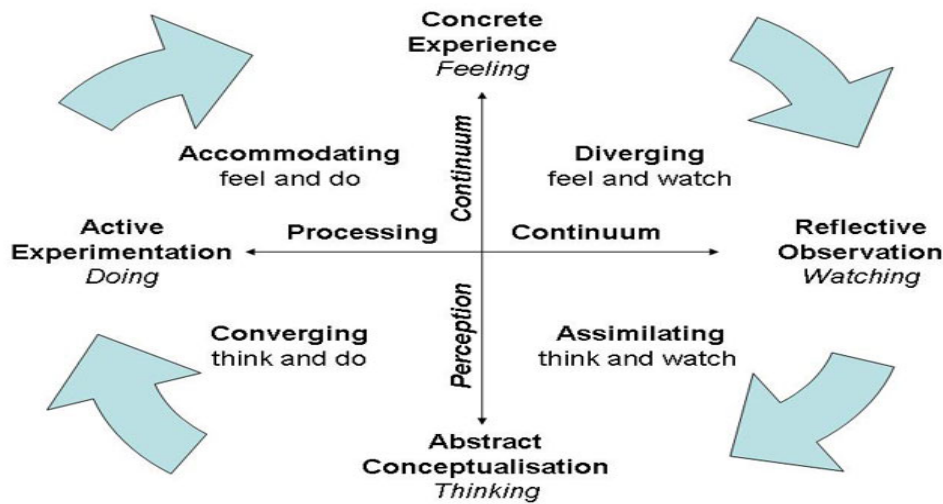


Figure 1. Kolb's cycle of Experiential Learning¹².

amount of control), and the innermost layer being the most resistant to change.

According to¹², Kolb's learning style inventory is an example of information processing learning style theory. The Information Processing learning style theories deal with how students process information intellectually, and are less susceptible to change⁸. Tests measure how strongly students display different learning styles⁹. According to⁹ model of experiential learning, students undergo a four stage cycle when encountering a learning situation. First, the learner experiences something new (Concrete Experience). Then they reflect on it (Reflective Observation), which creates a new idea or a modification of an old one (Abstract Conceptualization), which in turn leads to application of the idea (Active Experimentation), and new experiences, and the cycle begins again.

Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC) represent one axis, and Active Experimentation (AE) and Reflective Observation (RO) represent another.

Each quadrant represents one of four learning styles. Those with accommodating styles prefer hands-on work whereas assimilating learners prefer to observe and plan. Diverging learners enjoy gathering information and

working with people, whereas converging styles focus on problem solving and are very practical (Figure 1).

These and many other learning style theories are all attempts to understand how humans learn: How they accept, approach, and process information. Yet, regardless of their foundation or method of assessment, all theories must take into account the influence of cultural beliefs on a learner. Social traditions and mores are very powerful forces: "...culture has the ability to shape the ways in which its members receive, process and act on information and experience, shaping the particular way they learn from experience"⁹.

3.2 The Connection between the 3 H's and Learning Styles

With the convergence of learning style theory and Confucian beliefs, it is possible to draw some conclusions regarding learning styles of Asians from Confucian societies. In⁹ mentions^{13,14} meta-analysis that summarizes the results of Kolb Learning Style Inventory (KLSI) done on teachers, students and managers from different countries and found that Chinese students were much more within the AC-RO quadrant, meaning they displayed assimilating learning styles. Another study⁹ found that Confucian

Asian students showed the highest preference for abstraction. In other words, they preferred to think rather than feel, and watch rather than do. This conforms quite closely to the Confucian style of educational delivery, where the teacher is the dispenser of knowledge and the students are the receivers.

Perhaps another reason of CHC students may prefer to take a seemingly passive approach of reflection rather than action could be related to the Confucian principle of harmony, since expressing individual concerns and opinions can cause group discord. A study conducted by¹⁵ which contrasted the learning styles of Australian, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese accounting students found that the collectivist nature of the latter two groups influenced their learning preferences on the KLI. That is, the latter group preferred real world experience and doing, whereas the former preferred observing and conceptualizing.

The tendency for CHC students to be less interactive in their learning can be seen as a direct result of the Confucian belief in hierarchical relationships (seeing the teacher as the font of knowledge) and harmony (allowing group concerns to supersede their own). In a sense, the element of humanism is present as well. As mentioned earlier, the ultimate objective in Confucian teaching is moral and character development by means of education. In Confucian society, learning involves 'imitation of the sages'¹⁰, and teachers are seen as examples of moral virtue as well as intelligence. Therefore, not only are teachers

imparting valuable knowledge, they are also modeling it as well. Face-to-face teaching is considered most effective by Chinese students¹, since it is the best way to receive information and learn by example at the same time.

3.3 Practical Applications

Table 1 show that strategies which can help instructors inform their teaching with an awareness of Confucian culture.

In the case of hierarchy, Chinese university students ranked knowledge as the most desired trait in a teacher, followed by personality characteristics¹⁶. In an effort to preserve group harmony, many CHC students display learning styles conducive to collaborative learning¹⁷. Techniques such as mentoring, peer review, and group presentations can help them feel safe while learning, especially in a subject that can cause great intimidation, such as English language learning. Finally, since the Confucian work ethic and sense of sacrifice is so well-known that it has become a stereotype¹⁸, such values of hard work and delayed gratification can be addressed by giving students the opposite: Opportunities for fun and instant gratification. Underpinning all these suggested practices is the element of humanism, the philosophical foundation for all Confucian beliefs. The moral development of students may not be the sole responsibility of teachers anymore, but instructors can still help bring about self-actualization by fostering mutual respect in the classroom.

Table 1. Practical applications

Practical Applications	
Hierarchy	The hierarchy of relationships throughout the learning process is essential.
Harmony	In an effort to preserve group harmony, CHC students display learning styles conducive to collaborative learning
Hard Work	The Confucian work ethic and sense of sacrifice is so well-known that it has become a stereotype
Humanism	Instructors can still help bring about self-actualization by fostering mutual respect in the classroom

4. Discussion

Learning style theories and cultural dimension value scales can help quantifiably measure what all of us internalize and take for granted. Yet assessment tools such as these are useful for dealing with the differences when we encounter them, which is a given in today's globalized society. Confucianism plays an important part in the lives of over a billion people, and therefore its influence cannot be ignored, whether it is in the workplace or the classroom. Acknowledging our differences and accommodating them in learning situations will no doubt be beneficial to all stakeholders, but what must underpin all the techniques and strategies is a respect for each other's unique backgrounds and an awareness of our places in society, as individuals and as a group.

The current study is somewhat limited in its generalizations. There will be many kinds of methods for applying to learning, but it depends partly on several research theories and the small amount of research data surveyed.

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