International Students' English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learning Styles: Socratic and Confucianistic

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning styles of East Asian as well as Middle Eastern undergraduates in a Malaysian university. Socratic values as opposed to Confucian traditions in the classroom call for teachers to be facilitator and organizer while assisting students to develop creativity and independence in language learning. Many Western studies have claimed that East Asian students are reticent and embedded in their "Confucianistic" learning styles where teachers dominate the learning process and students are expected to be passive in class and speak only by invitation. Likewise, studies have also found that Middle Eastern students come from a culture of rote learning and predictable examinations, impairing their ability to adapt to independent learning. Using focus group interviews and an analysis of the undergraduates' performances in the English proficiency courses, the findings of this qualitative study found that EFL teachers can incorporate more Socratic learning styles to further enhance students' EFL performances.

Keywords: EFL learning styles, Socratic learning style, Confucian learning style, East Asian students, Middle Eastern students

INTRODUCTION

The enrolment of international students into Malaysian institutes of higher learning has been increasing remarkably over the past few years (Pandian, 2008). With this influx, there exists an incongruity in terms of the learning styles of international students (Kingston & Forland, 2008), which may be a predicament for these learners to acclimatise to the host country's education style of learning – a learning discord so to speak. Having said that, this inconsistency, in the way how both learning and teaching styles are approached can be especially challenging for learners and host teachers alike in finding a complementary, parallel solution (Popov, Brinkman, Biemans, Mulder, Kuznetsov & Noroozi, 2011). Moreover, as evident with the many East Asian students enrolling in Malaysian universities such as that at Universiti Sains Malaysia (Institute of Graduate Studies Handbook, USM, 2008), the Confucian values instilled (Huang, 2012) in them could pose a problem for these students to properly adapt with the different teaching styles prevalent in the host institutions of higher learning. Likewise for Middle Eastern students, a similar learning expectation was reported in a study by Gauntlett (2005) on Gulf National students where a "comparatively high focus on religious and moral education, together with a culture of rote learning and predictable examinations, impair the ability of Gulf Nationals to adapt to Australian tertiary education".

Research (Gieve & Clark, 2005; Kingston & Forland, 2008) has also shown that the majority of East Asian students rely heavily on Confucius' teachings which contributed to their perceived notion that rote learning is fundamental in achieving academic success. The same can also be said of Middle Eastern students who tend to apply the "Confucian style" of

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learning into their studies (Coopamah & Khan, 2011) and that means a profound dependence on both rote learning and memorising.

Consequently, this dependency on the Confucian philosophy would serve as a hindrance for students to actually be at ease in the learning methods advocated by Socratic-oriented learning which involves overt questioning, private questioning, consideration of personal hypotheses, and a desire for self-directed tasks (Tweed, 2000). Socrates values private and public questioning of widely accepted knowledge and expects students to evaluate others' beliefs and to generate and consider their own hypotheses while Confucius values effortful and pragmatic acquisition of essential knowledge (Tweed, 2000). From a similar viewpoint, Cheng and Guan (2012) postulates that the complacency of specific leanings in cognitive reasoning can be credited to the acceptance of a particular learning style either being Confucian or Socratic by students.

In the learning of EFL for instance, it has been observed that students who are non-native English speakers seemed to be facing obstacles with the language itself (Evans & Green, 2007) which may coerce them to memorise instead of learning in a more critical manner. To put it simply, EFL functions as a preparatory course for non-native English users to better understand the basics of the language (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). As such with the heterogeneous approaches being applied in the learning and teaching of English, challenges will inadvertently arise for both students and teachers (Moore & Morton, 2005). Moreover, the lack of comprehension in the purpose of amalgamating learning cultures from both Eastern and Western traditions have often times instigated a difference of opinions (Kingston & Forland, 2008).

Hence, as pointed out by Zhu, Valcke and Schellens (2008), it is important to take into deliberation the different styles of learning be it Confucian or Socratic ideology as they are inextricably linked with the learning contexts being put forward. For this reason, within the perspective of the teaching of EFL, host teachers can pinpoint the challenges faced by international students in adapting to the varied learning norms without distancing both local and international students (Campbell & Li, 2008). In the end, all concerned factions involved will be mutually agreeable on the standing congruence of didactic style that can be adapted to suit the needs of students.

PROBLEM

Looking at the internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia with particular emphasis on the learning styles of EFL of East Asian and Middle Eastern international students, it can be viewed that the dissimilarity of learning approaches of these students in contrast to the host teachers' method of teaching may create a conflict in the classroom thereby posing a challenge for host teachers to teach effectively and satisfactorily. The same can be said for these international students who might face an uphill battle when trying to pick up the English language which might be foreign to them. Peacock (2001) stressed that this mismatch in teaching and learning styles between host teachers and international students may result in students' demotivation, depression and poor grades.

In academia, there have been many researches exploring the learning methods of East Asian students (Campbell & Li, 2008; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Zhou & Todman, 2009) as well as Middle Eastern students (Gauntlett, 2006; Pandian, 2008) that substantiate the incidence of a disproportionate learning style which probably disregards the needs of non-native English users in learning the language. Nevertheless, it is vital to be aware of the different learning styles used be it Socratic or Confucian to improve the overall education environment.

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PURPOSE OF STUDY

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the learning styles of East Asian and Middle Eastern undergraduates in the context of EFL learning. Be it the Confucian or Socratic philosophy, host teachers would be able to assist international students in learning the English language both creatively and independently when the learning perspective of these students are better understood. Moreover, an understanding on the learning styles of international students can help host teachers to utilise a more perceptible and effectual style in teaching EFL to international students, especially East Asian and Middle Eastern students. In short, this study is instrumental in asserting a progressive teaching and learning model that can enhance the academic performance of international students in learning English.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

In view of the rapid internationalisation of the Malaysian higher education system, the rise in the number of international students enrolling into the country's universities and colleges have brought about the need to have a more heightened awareness on the different learning styles utilised by international students. Accordingly, in the teaching of EFL to foreign students in particular, a more comprehensive and exhaustive plan of action**s** can be determined to identify the needs of these international students in learning English. Furthermore, the findings from this research can help host teachers to be more proactive in synergising, if possible Socratic and Confucianistic styles of teaching and learning in higher education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to investigate the core subject matter in greater detail, the following research questions were proposed:

1. What are the EFL learning styles of East Asian students?

2. What are the EFL learning styles of Middle Eastern students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

At the outset, East Asian students (Campbell & Li, 2008; Cheng & Guan, 2012; Coopamah & Khan, 2011; Gieve & Clark, 2005; Ho & Hau, 2010; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Mok, 2010; Zhou & Todman, 2009; Zhu et al., 2008) and Middle Eastern students (Gauntlett, 2006; Pandian, 2008;) have been found to be more inclined to follow Confucian values of learning. The Confucian paradigm places a heavy emphasis on rote learning and employs reasoning in comprehending a particular subject matter (Zhu et al., 2008). What this entails is students who follow the Confucian ideology would favour memorisation over critical thinking in their pursuit towards academic success. Henceforth, these students would be for the lack of a better word, handicapped in being both analytical and judicious in their approach towards learning.

Since pragmatism in learning is the primary antecedent in the Confucian philosophy, learners are taught to understand topics by committing them to memory (Kingston & Forland, 2008). This would bring about a skewed learning approach for students which may differ greatly with the pedagogical methods of teachers (Popov et al., 2011). Such act of rote learning has caused students to be pigeonholed as being reticent and reserved (Zhou & Todman, 2009). Not only would this impede on the student's academic prowess, it would diminish active participation in class. As further explained by Zhu et al. (2008), in the Confucian ideology, students are expected to place a high regard for their teachers which may result in their reluctance and apprehension to voice out their opinions or questions in class.

Ho and Hau (2010) as well as Mok (2010) believed that Asian students who have deep rooted beliefs in the Confucian ideology are ostensibly too rigid in their mentality and learning methods. This could be a problem for the aforementioned students to adapt with the different education systems that may incorporate both Eastern and Western styles of teaching. Another drawback of the Confucian philosophy is that students tend to exhibit similar behavioural traits such as the heavy dependence on their teachers and the lack of active critical discussion with their peers in class (Cheng & Guan, 2012).

When Socratic ideals are introduced to students who are more familiar with the Confucian principles, the possibility of a misalliance in the learning and teaching styles may occur (Kingston & Forland, 2008). Campbell and Li (2008) corroborated this notion when they observed that students who are ingrained in the Confucian style of learning would encounter difficulties when introduced to the Socratic ideology as the Socratic ideology encourages students to be more inquisitive by applying existing knowhow in understanding a particular problem or situation (Chang, Lin and Chen, 1998). In doing so, they would be able to come up with a creative solution or a logical explanation in that particular context.

Moreover, as espoused in the Socratic philosophy, critical reasoning and independent learning are among the fundamental thrusts being promulgated (Coopamah & Khan, 2011; Knezic et al., 2010; Chang, Lin & Chen, 1998). In a way, the Socratic ideal exhorts individuals to gain knowledge by utilising critical thinking skills and goes beyond rote learning that can be seemingly habitual. The virtue of implementing the Socratic dogma in learning is that students will wittingly stimulate their creative and critical thinking abilities through active participation during discussions (Coopamah & Khan, 2011; Knezic et al., 2010). In comparing Socratic and Confucian styles of learning, Cheng and Guan (2012) found that students from Socratic backgrounds tend to be independent learners compared to learners from Confucian backgrounds who are more passive.

The ubiquity of different learning styles is indubitable yet it is important to take into account these varying approaches to learning (Zhu et. al., 2008). In order to ensure a fair and equitable education environment, both students and educators need to find a mutually agreeable solution that can accommodate all parties to ensure academic success and positive personal growth (Kingston & Forland, 2008).

Thus, in order to establish a mutual understanding between international students and host teachers, Cortazzi and Jin (1997) opined that both parties need to be able to identify and be acquainted with the distinctive learning approaches that may be prevalent in a particular circumstance. For instance, host teachers can encourage international students to be more participatory in the classrooms by voicing out their opinions or even asking pertinent questions.

In a study on East Asian learning styles, McKinney (2004) recommends a few techniques to match teachers' teaching styles and students' learning styles. The techniques involved administering varying forms of assessments (quizzes, individual presentations, group work, projects etc.); general knowledge tests (pretests); use of visual/multimedia aids and out-of-class learning experiences.

METHODOLOGY

Using the qualitative method, a total of 20 international students were randomly selected based on their enrolment at advanced levels of English proficiency courses in Universiti Sains Malaysia. At the time of the research, the samples for the study were enrolled in the advanced courses of Spoken English and English Pronunciation Skills. One-to-one interviews were conducted with 12 Middle Eastern and 8 East Asian students. The Middle Eastern

students were from Saudi Arabia while the East Asian students were mainly from China. The ages of the students ranged between 19-22 years old.

The questions posed to the students were categorised into two sub-headings, namely, Learning styles and Teaching styles. These questions were adapted from the research conducted by McKinney (2004). The following questions were used as a guide for the one-to-one interviews:

1. Do you memorize your notes?

2. Do you feel that everything the teacher says is right?

3. How do you remember what you have learned?

4. Do you like homework and lots of practices in class?

5. Do you like other classroom activities like drama, role plays, singing and etc?

6. How do you participate (active, not so active or passive)?

7. Do you pose questions to your teachers?

8. Do you expect answers from your teachers?

9. Do your teachers encourage you to think and look for your own answers?

FINDINGS

The interviews conducted with the international students were recorded, transcribed and analysed manually.

Classroom Learning Styles

Six students from the Middle East found memorizing a difficult task for them. They would read through their notes or they would read it over and over again trying to ensure they understand the meaning. However, all eight of the East Asian students would repeatedly write the new vocabulary as they believe practice makes perfect. They forced themselves to like it as they perceive that it might be the only way to memorize it in a short time. Most of them memorized the vocabulary and grammar. For the individual oral presentations, they also memorized the texts and read them out loud. More than half of the respondents even conceded that they memorized the job interview questions for the assessments.

All the respondents mentioned that they receive homework for their English language course relatively every week. Nine Middle Eastern students mentioned that they were not happy to be given homework as they were occupied with other assignments and it was more important to learn the communication skills in the classroom from the teachers. Similarly, three East Asian students did not like homework but they thought it was necessary. Another East Asian student thought it was not a big deal as long as it added to his knowledge.

All Middle Eastern students showed more interest in unconventional classroom learning (for example, role plays, movies, songs and etc.) compared to East Asian learners. The Middle Eastern students stressed that they learned better and it helped them in remembering the language items better with such a method. Some cited that this helped in expressing themselves in English better and more effectively and they thought 'fun' was an important element in learning English. East Asian students showed less enthusiasm as some felt that their classmates were better than them while a few students explained that they were not exposed to it or they were shy. Nevertheless, more than half of all the respondents enjoyed participating actively in the classroom activities.

Learning Experience with EFL Teachers

Majority of East Asian students conceded that they did not pose questions frequently to the teachers whereas for the Middle Eastern students, it was commonly practiced among them. The East Asian respondents stated that when they are determined to know the reason of their mistakes that caused them to lose marks in the examinations, that they would ask the teacher questions. Another reason is when they are not sure about the lesson. However, when asked if they want the teachers to provide them the answers, it was clear that the Middle Eastern students preferred to look for their own answers as they opined that in English language there was no definite answer. They would revert back to the teacher if they were not able to get the answers. All East Asian learners, on the other hand, expected the teacher to provide them answers. After the answers were provided, nearly all East Asian and Middle Eastern students did not agree with the answers given, at least not totally, as they did not think teachers are always right.

Generally, all the students agreed that host teachers encouraged them to think analytically (Socratically): *"She gave us the opportunity to think about the subject we are going to talk about."*

Independent Learning Experiences

Some of the respondents used a dictionary to check the meaning while slightly less than half of both East Asian and Middle Eastern students would read the sentence repeatedly to derive the meanings when they encountered difficulties in comprehending and trying to master the use of some words.

Majority of the students would do some readings after class, but mostly it would involve referencing of their major subjects as they stressed that EFL was too much for them to do apart from their busy schedules.

DISCUSSION & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In this study, East Asian students are not bold enough to ask questions as they have higher respect for authority (Zhu et al., 2008). They tend to shy away in order to avoid confrontation as this is part of the Confucian-heritage culture which they had grown up with.

Findings of East Asian students' learning styles confirmed Campbell and Li's (2008) notion that students who are ingrained in the Confucian dogma will encounter obstacles when introduced to the Socratic ideology. They do not prefer unconventional styles of learning.

However, findings of Middle Eastern learning styles in the Malaysian context were contradictory to the study of Coopamah and Khan (2011), who had postulated that majority of Middle Eastern students tend to apply the Confucian style of learning into their studies which focuses on both rote learning and memorising.

To conclude, Middle Eastern students are more inclined towards the Socratic style of learning while East Asian students are quite steadfast in the Confucian learning style. Although generalizations made about East Asian students are not representative of all East Asian countries, understanding and accommodating such differences should be the task of a host teacher.

CONCLUSION

It is important to take into consideration the different styles of learning, be it Confucian or Socratic in orientation, as both are inextricably linked with effective learning contexts as explicated in the foregoing sections.

Within the context of EFL teaching, this necessitates host teachers pinpointing the challenges faced by international students when adapting to varied learning norms without discriminating between East Asian and Middle Eastern learners. Future directions of research could plausibly focus on the EFL performance outcomes of international students resulting from their exposure to a hybridized teaching style that combines both Confucian and Socratic approaches.

In conclusion, in line with the internationalisation of higher education, it is vital that institutions of higher education and particularly host educators adopt a synergistic pedagogical approach in order to further augment the process of institutional internationalisation. This goal can be realised through the application of appropriate teaching approaches designed to attract and retain international students of diverse backgrounds.

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