Module 4: Language Learning and Culture
4.2 Does culture affect language learning?
2. Explore the link between culture and learning styles

TEXT 3: MATCHING TEACHING STYLES WITH LEARNING STYLES IN EAST ASIAN CONTEXTS

Available at http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Zhenhui-TeachingStyles.html

TRADITIONAL EAST ASIAN LEARNING STYLES

Traditionally, the teaching of EFL in most East Asian countries is dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method and an emphasis on rote memory (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). These traditional language teaching approaches have resulted in a number of typical learning styles in East Asian countries, with introverted learning being one of them. In East Asia, most students see knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by the learners. They, therefore, find it normal to engage in modes of learning which are teacher-centered and in which they receive knowledge rather than interpret it. According to Harshbarger et al (1986), Japanese and Korean students are often quiet, shy and reticent in language classrooms. They dislike public touch and overt displays of opinions or emotions, indicating a reserve that is the hallmark of introverts. Chinese students likewise name "listening to teacher" as their most frequent activity in senior school English classes (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). All these claims are confirmed by a study conducted by Sato (1982), in which she compared the participation of Asian students in the classroom interaction with that of non-Asian students. Sato found that the Asians took significant fewer speaking turns than did their non-Asian classmates (36.5% as opposed to 63.5%).

The teacher-centered classroom teaching in East Asia also leads to a closure-oriented style for most East Asian students. These closure-oriented students dislike ambiguity, uncertainty or fuzziness. To avoid these, they will sometimes jump to hasty conclusions about grammar rules or reading themes. Many Asian students, according to Sue and Kirk (1972), are less autonomous, more dependent on authority figures and more obedient and conforming to rules and deadlines. Harshbarger et al (1986) noted that Korean students insist that the teacher be the authority and are disturbed if this does not happen. Japanese students often want rapid and constant correction from the teacher and do not feel comfortable with multiple correct answers. That is why Asian students are reluctant to "stand out" by expressing their views or raising questions, particularly if this might be perceived as expressing public disagreement (Song, 1995).

Perhaps the most popular East Asian learning styles originated from the traditional book-centered and grammar-translation method are analytic and field-independent. In most of reading classes, for instance, the students read new words aloud, imitating the teacher. The teacher explains the entire text sentence by sentence, analyzing many of the more difficult grammar structures, rhetoric, and style for the students, who listen, take notes, and answer questions. Oxford & Burry-Stock (1995) states that the Chinese, along with the Japanese, are often detail- and precision-oriented, showing some features of the analytic and field-independent styles. They
have no trouble picking out significant detail from a welter of background items and prefer language learning strategies that involve dissecting and logically analyzing the given material, searching for contrasts, and finding cause-effect relationship.

Another characteristically East Asian learning style is visual learning. In an investigation of sensory learning preferences, Reid (1987) found that Korean, Chinese and Japanese students are all visual learners, with Korean students ranking the strongest. They like to read and obtain a great deal of visual stimulation. For them, lectures, conversations, and oral directions without any visual backup are very confusing and can be anxiety-producing. It is obvious that such visual learning style stems from a traditional classroom teaching in East Asia, where most teachers emphasize learning through reading and tend to pour a great deal of information on the blackboard. Students, on the other hand, sit in rows facing the blackboard and the teacher. Any production of the target language by students is in choral reading or in closely controlled teacher-students interaction (Song, 1995). Thus, the perceptual channels are strongly visual (text and blackboard), with most auditory input closely tied to the written.

Closely related to visual, concrete-sequential, analytic and field-independent styles are the thinking-oriented and reflective styles. According to Nelson (1995), Asian students are in general more overtly thinking-oriented than feeling oriented. They typically base judgment on logic and analysis rather than on feelings of others, the emotional climate and interpersonal values. Compared with American students, Japanese students, like most Asians, show greater reflection (Condon, 1984), as shown by the concern for precision and for not taking quick risk in conversation (Oxford et al, 1992). Quite typical is "the Japanese student who wants time to arrive at the correct answer and is uncomfortable when making guess" (Nelson, 1995:16). The Chinese students have also been identified to posses the same type of thinking orientation by Anderson (1993).

The final East Asian preferred learning style is concrete-sequential. Students with such a learning style are likely to follow the teacher's guidelines to the letter, to be focused on the present, and demand full information. They prefer language learning materials and techniques that involve combinations of sound, movement, sight, and touch and that can be applied in a concrete, sequential, linear manner. Oxford & Burry-Stock (1995) discovered that Chinese and Japanese are concrete-sequential learners, who use a variety of strategies such as memorization, planning, analysis, sequenced repetition, detailed outlines and lists, structured review and a search for perfection. Many Korean students also like following rules (Harshbarger et al, 1986), and this might be a sign of a concrete-sequential style.

It is worth noting that the generalizations made above about learning styles in East Asia do not apply to every representative of all East Asian countries; many individual exceptions of course exist. Nevertheless, these seemingly stereotypical descriptions do have a basis in scientific observation. Worthley (1987) noted that while diversity with any culture is the norm, research shows that individuals within a culture tend to have a common pattern of learning and perception when members of their culture are compared to members of another culture.

MATCHING TEACHING STYLES WITH LEARNING STYLES

From the descriptions and scientifically observed data reviewed above, it is legitimate to conclude that there exist identifiable learning styles for most East Asian students. We can assume, therefore, that any native English speaker engaged in teaching English to East Asian students is likely to confront a teaching-learning style conflict. This is illustrated by the two
examples cited at the very beginning of this paper and further confirmed by Reid's (1987) and Melton's (1990) studies. Such style differences between students and teachers consistently and negatively affect student grades (Wallace and Oxford, 1992). It is when students' learning styles are matched with appropriate approaches in teaching that their motivation, performances, and achievements will increase and be enhanced (Brown, 1994).

ALTERING THE TEACHING STYLE TO CREATE TEACHER-STUDENT STYLE MATCHING

In all academic classrooms, no matter what the subject matter, there will be students with multiple learning styles and students with a variety of major, minor and negative learning styles. An effective means of accommodating these learning styles is for teachers to change their own styles and strategies and provide a variety of activities to meet the needs of different learning styles. Then all students will have at least some activities that appeal to them based on their learning styles, and they are more likely to be successful in these activities. Hinkelman and Pysock (1992), for example, have demonstrated the effectiveness of a multimedia methodology for vocabulary building with Japanese students. This approach is effective in tapping a variety of learning modalities. By consciously accommodating a range of learning styles in the classroom in this way, it is possible to encourage most students to become successful language learners.

In addition, EFL teachers in East Asia should consider culturally related style differences as they plan how to teach. Following is a list of activities for East Asian learners that could be tried for each style:

Visual learning style preference
1. Read resources for new information.
2. Use handouts with activities.
3. Keep journals of class activities to reinforce vocabulary or new information.
4. Watch an action skit. Write narrative of events.
5. Take notes on a lecture. Outline the notes to reinforce ideas and compare with others. (Melton, 1990:43)

Analytic learning style preference
1. Judge whether a sentence is meaningful. If the sentence is not meaningful, the student changes it so that it makes sense.
2. Give students a list of related vocabulary words (such as a list of foods, animals, gifts, etc.) and ask them to rank these words according to their personal preferences.
3. Give students questions to which two or three alternative answers are provided. Students' task is to choose one of the alternatives in answering each question.
4. Ask students to express their opinions as to agree or disagree with a given statement. If they disagree, they reword the statement so that it represents their own ideas.

The prospect of altering language instruction to somehow accommodate different learning styles might seem forbidding to teachers. This reaction is understandable. Teaching styles are made up of methods and approaches with which teachers feel most comfortable; if they try to change to completely different approaches, they would be forced to work entirely with unfamiliar, awkward, and uncomfortable methods. Fortunately, teachers who wish to address a wide variety
of learning styles need not make drastic changes in their instructional approach. Regular use of some the instructional techniques given below should suffice to cover some specified learning style categories in most East Asian countries.

- Make liberal use of visuals. Use photographs, drawings, sketches, and cartoons to illustrate and reinforce the meanings of vocabulary words. Show films, videotapes, and live dramatizations to illustrate lessons in text.
- Assign some repetitive drill exercises to provide practice in basic vocabulary and grammar, but don't overdo it.
- Do not fill every minute of class time lecturing and writing on the blackboard. Provide intervals for students to think about what they have been told; assign brief writing exercises.
- Provide explicit instruction in syntax and semantics to facilitate formal language learning and develop skill in written communication and interpretation.

References