

Module 4: Language Learning and Culture

4.2 Does culture affect language learning?

3. Realize the danger of over-generalizing

TEXT 1: CULTURAL LEARNING STYLES

Source: Heredia, A. (1999). Cultural Learning Styles.
Available at <http://library.educationworld.net/a12/a12-166.html>

Cultural learning styles are those learning styles of an individual that are the product of his or her cultural background and upbringing. In this digest, we review the theory on learning styles, the role culture plays within the theory, and the advantages and disadvantages of using culture as a means of understanding learning styles and their impact on the education of minority students.

LEARNING STYLES THEORY

The concept of cultural learning styles finds its basis in learning styles theory. Learning styles theory states that students prefer one way or style of learning over another. The theory suggests that designing educational experiences, curriculum, and instruction that match student learning styles may improve academic achievement (Irvine and York, 1995). The cultural learning styles concept goes a step further by stating that cultural upbringing plays a decisive role in determining a student's learning style.

More than 30 learning style testing instruments have been developed to measure different learning styles along a meaningful and reliable continuum. Examples of instruments include the Swassing-Barbe Modality Index and the Group Embedded Figures Tests. The Swassing-Barbe Modality Index categorizes learners as preferring visual, auditory, or tactile/kinesthetic styles (Barbe and Swassing, 1979). The Group Embedded Figures Test categorizes students as being field-dependent or field-independent (Witkin, 1971) by having them find geometric figures that are embedded in patterns of figures (Irvine and York, 1995). Field dependence/independence refers to "the ways individuals respond cognitively to confusing information and unfamiliar situations," and the behaviors that the responses produce (Irvine and York, 1995). Field-dependent individuals are considered to be more group oriented and cooperative and less competitive than field-independent individuals (Dunn and Griggs, 1996).

CULTURE AND LEARNING STYLE

Culture consists of values, beliefs, and ways of perceiving (Irvine and York, 1995). Cultural differences in children's learning styles may develop through their early experience (Guild and Garger, 1998). A cultural group's values and traditional lifestyle may, through child – rearing practices, influence the learning styles the individual will develop (Worthley, 1999).

Numerous studies have attempted to identify learning style preferences among students from a variety of cultures and ways to use the preferences to enhance learning. Dunn and Griggs have reviewed research on Hispanic students' learning styles. The research shows that Mexican

American students seem to require a higher degree of structure than other groups. They prefer to work alone more than African American students, but less than Caucasian students. Nor are they as auditory and visual as Caucasians and African Americans. Hispanic middle and high school students are more field-dependent than Anglo students.

Based on these research conclusions, they advise teachers and counselors to expect a large number of Hispanic students to prefer:

1. conformity;
2. peer-oriented learning;
3. kinesthetic instructional resources;
4. a high degree of structure; and
5. a field-dependent cognitive style.

Ramirez and Castaneda (1974) recommend cooperative learning; the use of humor, drama, and fantasy; modeling; and a global rather than analytic approach to understanding concepts.

Research on African American students demonstrates that they tend to prefer inferential reasoning, to focus on people rather than things, to prefer kinesthetic learning, and to be more proficient in nonverbal communications (Irvine and York, 1995). Gilbert and Gay recommend a loosely structured classroom environment for African American field dependent students. Teachers should work together with such students (Gilbert and Gay, 1989). In contrast, Clarkson recommends techniques such as highly structured presentations of material and proximity to the teacher in order to reduce distractions from other students (Clarkson, 1983).

Research on Native American students demonstrates that they tend to be field-dependent, like African Americans and Hispanics. They tend to prefer visual to verbal information, prefer learning in private rather than in public, prefer learning by watching and doing, and tend to value concise speech communication (Irvine and York, 1995). Sawyer recommends that teachers not focus on individual achievement, minimize lecturing, place less emphasis on competition, and minimize teacher directions (Sawyer, 1991).

The research in general tends to describe minorities as more field-dependent than non-minorities (Dunn and Griggs, 1996). Cooperative learning tends to be the most recommended technique for students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Irvine and York, 1995).

THE DEBATE OVER STYLES

Learning style theory continues to be the subject of debate. Instruments that measure learning style are popular, but research does not fully support either their use or the underlying theory behind them (Irvine and York, 1995). Problems with making learning style theory the basis of educational practice have been identified. One problem is that different learning style theories and instruments use different style categories to define learning style continuums (Curry, 1990).

Evidence for the reliability and validity of learning style instruments is weak. Several learning style tests – like the Rod and Frame Test and the Group Embedded Figures Test – designed to measure the same construct have shown low correlations when given to the same subjects (Witkins et al, 1962). Some tests are not sensitive to the small differences between individuals'

best and able learning styles and most cannot differentiate between auditory, tactile, visual, and kinesthetic strengths (Hilliard, 1988). Some researchers argue that cognitive style instruments measure cognitive ability rather than style preference (Irvine and York, 1995).

A third problem is identification of changes in educational practices that complement particular learning styles. Changes that teachers make in their practice already reflect the recommendations of the learning styles literature (Curry, 1990). Achievement gains based on the implementation of learning style theory may simply be the result of explaining a task with such detail that both student and teacher can adapt to complete it successfully (Levine, 1982).

The application of learning styles theory to identify preferences of different cultural groups presents a further complication. The information obtained from learning styles assessments of specific cultural groups is based on different ways of assessing and describing style. Yet, results of different studies are often compared with little or no consideration of the types of assessment instruments used when reporting findings. The use of different instruments often leads to reports of contradictory information about groups of learners (Guild and Garger, 1998). The data conflict because of a number of flawed practices, including inappropriate statistical designs, poor analyses, misinterpretation of the findings, and/or faulty conclusions (Hilliard, 1988).

A number of issues that deal directly with the relationship of culture to learning in our society today also complicate the use of the concept of cultural learning styles. The concept is linked with efforts to improve the academic achievement of minority groups. In an effort to explain why these students underachieve, the distinction between differences in learning style and the lack of abilities can be blurred. We must decide whether or not "equality of instruction (is) synonymous with equity of educational opportunity for all" (Guild and Garger, 1998). Do our instructional practices support all students' learning equally? Educational practices in the traditional classroom may then be pushed to the front of the debate.

Where does the incongruity between learning styles of minority students and traditional classroom practice originate? According to a New York State Board of Regents' report on learning styles, the traditional school curriculum follows a "linear, step-by-step approach to learning" (Martel, 1998). Ogbu (1988) states that the traditional curriculum reflects "the middle class cultural values, beliefs, and norms of schools." Such an approach focuses on linguistic and quantitative strengths. It limits learning by limiting instructional strategies that can successfully address student learning styles. The conclusion for researchers is that students of color who fail academically do so because of their differences in learning style when compared to mainstream students (Irvine and York, 1995).

Dunn warns that cultural learning styles should not be used to establish limited style categories for members of any cultural, national, racial, or religious group. Students who do not perform as well as their peers in traditional American classrooms tend to differ from them in learning style even when they share the same cultural background (Dunn, 1997). Dunn and Griggs caution teachers to emphasize learning style strengths of the individual rather than his or her culture and to match instruction to individual preferences (Dunn and Griggs, 1996).

Nonetheless, there may be benefits to increasing the knowledge base on the relationship between culture and learning style. The large achievement gap between minority and non-minority students suggests a need for as much information as possible to help all students succeed. If learning style tests do show that instruction is not compatible with student learning styles, such results may be the necessary motivation that compels us to reexamine educational practice at the classroom level (Irvine and York, 1995). Hilliard suggests that the question that

needs to be asked "is how a given style user will approach the (learning) task and whether the approach that a given style user uses is compatible with that of the teacher or the institution which provides instruction" (Hilliard, 1988).

CULTURAL LEARNING STYLES AND TEACHING STYLES

Teaching style categories that may be useful in examining our instructional practices have been developed. Fischer and Fischer (1979) have defined six categories for teaching styles. They are:

- Task Oriented
- Cooperative Planner
- Child-Centered
- Subject-Centered
- Learning-Centered
- Emotionally Exciting and its Counterpart

Teaching styles are distinct from methods of instruction such as lecturing or cooperative learning. Teaching styles are supposed to define the behaviors that teachers exhibit as they interact with learners. In applying teaching style categories to their practice, teachers should strive to identify the categories that best characterize them regardless of the methods that they use. Like students and learning styles, teachers may exhibit a teaching style preference while being able to teach in a number of different styles. Teachers tend to teach to their preferred learning style (Bennett, 1995). So, they may find it helpful to identify their own learning style to help understand their practice.

Bennett identifies steps that teachers can take to make learning a success for all students regardless of their cultural backgrounds. They are:

- Know our own teaching and learning styles.
- Determine how far we can stray from these strengths and preferences and still be comfortable.
- Begin with a few students, those who are having difficulty in our classes.
- Know the learning style patterns that seem to characterize various ethnic groups.
- Build classroom flexibility slowly, adding one new strategy at a time.
- Use all modes (visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic) when teaching concepts and skills.

References

- References identified with an EJ or ED number have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. Journal articles (EJ) should be available at most research libraries; most documents (ED) are available in microfiche collections at more than 900 locations. Documents can also be ordered through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (800-443-ERIC).
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