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Disposition or dislocation? Why do foreign and local students’ learning styles differ?

Jinghe Han\textsuperscript{a} and James Schurmanns-Stekhoven\textsuperscript{b}
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\textbf{Abstract:} This paper explores the relationship between culture and learning style by investigating three groups: Chinese students enrolled in universities in China and Australia, and Australian students attending Australian universities. Semi-structured interviews were emailed to all participants in their native language. Specifically, the data is examined in relation to commonly held cultural stereotypes about Eastern and Western learning styles. Comparisons of Chinese and Australian preferred learning styles were indistinguishable for students enrolled in home/local institutions (though reasons for holding these preferences differed between cultures). However, the learning styles of Chinese students enrolled in Australian universities did differ from the other two groups. These results suggest that dislocation and language context factors, and not culture \textit{per se}, might better explain the previously observed differences in the learning styles between Western and Asian students at Western universities.

\textbf{Keywords:} learning styles; culture; Chinese (Asian) university students; Australian (Western) university students

\textbf{Introduction}

Australia’s international trade in education services is not economically insignificant. The value of the higher education sector for the 2008-09 financial year is reported to have been \$9.5 billion dollars (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2010). Bradley (2008, p. 88) reports that “Australia’s future will be determined by how well it performs in an economy driven by knowledge-based activities as well as its traditional industries”; this report also acknowledges the obvious truism that although Australia has been “extremely successful in developing education as an important export industry”, there remains room for further improvement (Bradley, 2008, p. 88).

Bradley’s report together with the fact that vast bulk (some 80%) of Australian international students are drawn from Asia, including East, South, Middle East and Southeast Asia (Australian Education International, 2010), has led to an escalation of research into the needs of Asian international students. Moreover, the recent slump in international student enrolments—typically attributed to the appreciation of the Australian currency and the \textit{Global Financial Crisis}—suggests an examination of possible strategies to improve Asian students’ Australian educational experience is especially timely. A large body of previous research has apparently identified an East-West difference (EWD) in learning styles and preferences (Boland, Sugahara, Opdecam and Everaert, 2011; Terry, 2001; You & Jia, 2008) and other research indicates there are clear benefits from matching teaching and learning styles (Gilakjani, 2012; Zhang, 2006). Accordingly, some researchers suggest educators should adopt as many teaching modes as possible to accommodate these culturally diverse students’ need (Morgan, 2010; Tulbure, 2011).

However, for modification of educational service delivery to be a potential solution to dwindling international enrolments, it is essential to first establish whether the claimed EWD is empirically supported. Given substantial methodological limitations in past papers, the true extent (if any) of the claimed EWD remains to be established. Methodologies previously
employed to establish the EWD are fundamentally culturally biased—being especially plagued by a well-established social cognitive bias known as the out-group homogeneity (OGH) effect (Quattrone & Jones 1980). Furthermore, past papers have focused heavily on Asian students within Western settings in comparison to local Western students. Such research designs are simply unable to identify whether any observed group differences are due to dislocation to a new culture or due to enduring cultural differences in inherent learning preferences. This paper examines East Asians’ learning preferences in both international and domestic settings in comparison to Anglophone Australian students in domestic universities. The next section critically reviews the existing literature.

Do learners really differ across cultures?

Trommsdorf and Dasen (2001 cited in Charlesworth, 2008, p. 116) argue that if one accepts that culture is “a certain commonality of meaning, customs and rules shared by a certain group of people and setting a complex framework for learning and development”, and then one also implicitly acknowledges that there is a connection between culture and learning styles. Yet the relationship between culture and learning style continues to be hotly debated, in part due to the dramatic increase of international enrolments in Western higher education institutions.

A summary of past research clearly indicates that group differences in local/Western and foreign/Eastern students learning styles and preferences can be observed. Those holding a culture-deterministic view argue that learning styles are shaped by, and embedded in, culture (Charlesworth, 2008; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Marlina, 2009; Prasad, Mannes, Ahmed, Kaur & Griffiths, 2004; Wen & Clément, 2003). This view implies lecturers should adapt to the learning styles rooted in their students’ culture. Others argue contextual factors dictate learning styles (Campbell & Li, 2008; Jones, 2005; Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005; Wong, 2004). This alternative perspective implies that although culture affects preferred learning style, with sufficient time and support, all students regardless of culture, are able to flexibly adapt to any learning environment so as to achieve their personal educational goals.

Clearly these disparate views have policy and practice implications for the increasingly internationalised Australian higher education system. Culture-determinists (Wang & Moore, 2007; Prasad, Mannes, Ahmed, Kaur & Griffiths, 2004; Ryan & Hellmund, 2003; Park, 2000; Ramburuth, 2002; Kennedy, 2002) have empirical support for their view. Accepting this evidence at face value, the implications for both the fairness of university programs and marketability of higher education to overseas students quickly become evident. Furthermore, culture-determinism necessitates institutional solutions that involve administrators and academics adapting their course designs and teaching styles to match the needs of a diverse student body.

Starting from the premise that “it is not always easy, perhaps not even possible, to completely divorce ourselves from the culture in which we were brought up,” (p. 2.) Prasad, Mannes, Ahmed, Kaur, and Griffiths (2004) found that Asian international university students are less likely to question others or to offer their own ideas (relative to their domestic peers in class). For these researchers, it was the students’ particular culture that decided two important educational beliefs – i) it is inappropriate for students to express their ideas publicly, and ii) commenting on unimportant issues in class wastes other students’ time. More recently, Ha Phan (2011) has argued that East Asians choose not to publicly express their views for intrinsic and strategic reason—that is, not to share their knowledge with their competitors. Therefore, these researchers concluded that Asian culture produces reserved students and gives way to an Authoritarian, monological, teaching style. Their telling
conclusion that educators must endeavour to understand other ways of learning (Prasad et al p. 2) tacitly implies that it is ultimately the lecturers’ responsibility to adjust their teaching style to accommodate foreign learning styles.

Yet Marlina’s (2009) qualitative study of four international students enrolled in an Australian university challenged the conception that Asian students are passive in class and the notion that this is culturally determined. By focusing on the extent to which these students’ participatory style of learning/tutorial was influenced by their culture and to what extent it was affected by the other contextual factors such as their lecturers/tutors, classmates and/or the new environment, the author concluded that the latter (i.e. the specific context in which the students conduct their studies) played a more decisive role than culture in shaping observed learning styles.

Wang and Moore (2007) explored learning style preferences of off-shore Chinese postgraduate students enrolled in an Australian transnational program. They collected data from two district groups of participants before and after their attendance at a one-week intensive training course delivered by Australian academics in both English and Chinese language. They claimed that the group who had prior teaching experience preferred teacher-directed and individual learning whereas teacher administrators preferred self-directed and tutorial type of group learning. The authors again concluded culture was at most a secondary influence on learning preferences—participants’ previous working experience was the main influence.

Using the Honey and Mumford Learning Styles Questionnaire, Charlesworth (2008) studied international students from China, Indonesia and France enrolled in a Western higher education institute, in the hope of identifying distinct cultural influences on learning styles. Significant differences in learning styles existed for the three cultural groups in the first semester of study. However, over time (by the sixth semester) these differences evaporated. Charlesworth posited that the observed convergence was directly due to natural enculturation that occurs with the more time spent within a foreign working environment. Similarly Wong (2004) also explored the malleability of international students’ learning styles by examining a group of undergraduate students who were from Asia and enrolled in universities in South Australia. This research initially found that Asian students tended to prefer a more student-centred learning style but over time they were adapted to the local teaching and learning style. Wong’s findings reiterated that although learning styles are culturally influenced context is the more important determinant.

**Policy implication of past research**

Taken at face value, the claims of some research conducted (Charlesworth, 2008; Marlina, 2009; Wang & Moore, 2007; Wong, 2004) imply that Australian universities need not adjust education delivery to suit foreign students’ learning styles. Moreover, the available research findings highlight the inappropriateness of relying on cultural stereotypes in relation to learning styles, which were largely developed by western theorists (Terry, 2001) and have continued to be perpetuated by Western researchers. Furthermore, the diversity of learning outcomes for foreign students observed in the studies reviewed contradicts the view that students from a given culture form a homogeneous group. In fact, the broad conclusion from past research is that international students exhibit a diverse and malleable range of learning styles, which are not necessarily distinct from those of local students. Educators and cross-culture researchers would also do well to remember that a large body of social psychological work demonstrates people perceive those from other (out-group) cultures as more homogenous than the objective evidence would support: the so-called out-group homogeneity bias (Quattrone & Jones 1980).
The limitations of past research: The need for further evidence

However, it is important to note that the designs of the studies reviewed are in many aspects unable to answer the question the researchers set for themselves. For example, these papers failed to compare international students in an unfamiliar ‘foreign’ university environment with those studying at their own domestic universities. Although the past results concord with the principles of humanist philosophy they may, at least in part, also be due to participant self-selection. That is, over time, those international students who were unable to adapt to the new cultural environment may have discontinued their enrolment over the study period (e.g. before the sixth semester follow-up in Charlesworth’s study), thus falsely creating the claimed enculturation effect. More pertinently, the changes observed in past studies could also be directly due to participation in higher education, per se and might be entirely unrelated to enculturation. A more rigorous control group design (i.e., including a foreign group studying in a familiar/home environment) is therefore necessary in order to establish the unique influence (if any) of cultural environment and pre-existing culture on learning behaviour in a foreign environment.

As a consequence of the design deficiencies in past papers, clear policy direction is impossible to ascertain from the published results. Despite the interesting group differences and similarities established by others, the extent to which these observations can be attributed to individual characteristics (i.e. hypothesised enduring cultural differences in learning preferences) and situational context (being dislocated from one’s familiar settings) remains to be established. For example, most culture and learning style studies are conducted in a Western context—comparing Western/local university students (who are in their home environment and on-shore) with international students (who are in an unfamiliar ‘foreign’ university environment). Hence, any observed group differences cannot be fully attributed to culturally-embodied learning styles within the individuals. Put bluntly, learning style researchers may just be over-attributing non-culture factors to culture. These non-cultural factors include the requirement to use a second language as the communication media, isolation from normal social support networks and the need to adapt to a distinctly different environment and establishing new contacts and networks.

Furthermore, even if the past observations of group differences are entirely due to distinct cultural learning styles, the suggestion that students or academics adapt, although well-meaning, is on its own neither useful nor practical. Even with institutional endorsement, ever-flexible learning/teaching strategies are not costless to learn and deploy. Moreover, since the policy-makers cannot predict the future mix of students’ cultural backgrounds and learning styles in their classroom, beyond some point, it is risky to alter styles on the basis of assuming the current cultural mix will stably prevail into the future.

The current research: Design and aims

The current study’s design includes three distinct groups of participants: local Australian students and two groups of Chinese students—one group enrolled at a university in China and another group enrolled at an Australian university. This design permits us to separately explore 1) whether students from the same culture display different learning preferences and styles a) when in their own cultural context and b) when out of their familiar language and environment; and 2) whether students from different cultures (in this context Chinese and Australian) do differ significantly when studying within in their culture of origin. This research is explicitly aimed at providing insight into the potential for educators to change their teaching style to accommodate the variety of students from diverse cultural groups. By
comparing two Chinese groups, the current design also allows us to test the presumption that culture has an enduring effect on learning preferences regardless of setting.

The research instruments employed were developed with reference to Keefe’s (1979) definition of learning style as “cognitive, affective and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment” (p. 4). From this perspective, individual approaches to learning tasks are thought to be “stable and pervasive characteristics” of the learner. As such, learning style is an interaction of behaviour and personality (Garger & Guild, 1984, p. 11).

Joy and Kolb (2009) have conceptualised the individual differences in approaches to learning as being based on an individual’s preference for combining the use of

1. Concrete experience (CE)—learning through experiencing and relating to the others;
2. Active experimentation (AE)—learning through doing;
3. Reflective observation (RO)—vicariously watching and reflecting; and
4. Abstract conceptualisation (AC)—learning through involving logical and systematic thinking.

Using Joy and Kolb’s framework to analyse the pedagogical nature of teaching modes, lectures involve reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation compared with tutorials whereas tutorials or workshops, including project work and group discussions, are characterised by more active learner engagement that typically utilise concrete experience and active experimentation. Starting from this perspective, it is plausible that these varying modes of teaching appeal to distinctly different student subtypes depending on their preferred learning style. Moreover, if learning styles are partly determined by culture (which as yet remains unestablished), then differing preferences for each learning mode (e.g. lectures, tutorials, etc) might be observed between Eastern and Western students. To this end, semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data.

Methods

The three cohorts of participants recruited were: Australian undergraduate students from three NSW universities (group 1), Chinese undergraduate students who were studying in a range of universities in North China (Group 2), and Chinese students who had completed at least two years of university study in China, and had undertaken more than 6 months of study in Australia (Group 3).

Semi-structured email interview (Flick, 2009, p. 267) questions concerning learning style preferences were emailed to the participants in their native language (See Appendix). The content of the interview questions was “back translated” (Brislin, 1980) to ensure conformity and conceptual equivalence in the two languages. Two English–Chinese bilingual experts in the fields of education and linguistics were involved and back translation was compared until the consistent meanings were obtained. Email interview method was preferred over face-to-face for both ease of access (Chinese university students in China) and to enhance the potential number of participants (and thus generalisability). Within six months, 51 email interviews from group 1, 106 from group 2 and 16 from group 3 were received.

Data analysis involves both qualitative and quantitative methods. The interview transcriptions were analysed using three established procedures: open coding, axial coding and thematic coding. Open coding was employed to categorise and label data into meaningful segments. Axial coding was used to classify the links between these substantive categories. These data segments were then subdivided and structured according to emerging patterns,
relationships and themes (Flick, 2009, p. 307). Non-parametric quantitative analysis (chi-squared) of group differences in these codes and themes were undertaken in Microsoft Excel.

Findings and discussions

Learning style preferences

Table 1: Four categories of data emerged from the participants’ responses to learning style preferences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant groups (n)</th>
<th>Tutorial</th>
<th>Lecture</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian students (51)</td>
<td>19 (37%)</td>
<td>16 (31%)</td>
<td>15 (30%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese students in Australia (16)</td>
<td>6 (37.5%)</td>
<td>8 (50%)</td>
<td>2 (12.5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese students in China (106)</td>
<td>56 (53%)</td>
<td>45 (42%)</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although chi-squared analysis of students’ lecture or tutorial preferences revealed significant group differences ($\chi^2(8)= 22.7833$, $p <.001$)—with more Australian students indicating that their preference depends on situational context (e.g. who is lecturing or tutoring, and/or on what subject or topic) (30% vs 12.5% and 4%)—the effect size of this difference was very small (Cramer’s $V^2 = .012$). Among those giving a categorical preference for either tutorials or lectures, the modal response for Australian (37%) and Chinese students enrolled domestically (53%) was a preference for tutorials (see Table 1). However, among Chinese students in Australian universities, lectures were more preferred than tutorials (50% vs 37.5%). Hence, when in one’s own learning environment regardless of culture, students tend to prefer tutorials. However, when enrolled in a foreign learning environment, Chinese students appear to reverse their learning style preference. Despite this, the two Chinese groups did not differ significantly ($\chi^2(3) = 3.1286$, $p > .10$). This finding fails to support Joy and Kolb’s (2009, p. 83) view that “culture has significant affect in deciding a person’s preference for abstract conceptualisation (learning through lectures) versus concrete experience (learning through tutorial).

Interestingly, approximately 6 times more Australian (Anglo-phone) than Chinese students reported their learning style preferences were situational or that both modes could be combined well (30% vs 5%). Although this might reflect actual differences in learning styles, it may also indicate that Chinese students were possibly more definitive in their responses to the questionnaire.

Reasons for the preferred learning mode

Participants were asked to give reasons for their preferred mode of learning. These were analysed separately according to whether the preference was for lectures (Table 2) and tutorials (Table 3).
Table 2: Reasons for preferring lectures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Groups</th>
<th>Lecturer</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Pedagogy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Australian students</strong></td>
<td>Broad knowledge; easier to understand; more informative; thorough explanation</td>
<td>Be able to focus on listening and thinking; Don’t have to perform.</td>
<td>Intensive; less distractive method.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chinese students (Australia)</strong></td>
<td>Systematic knowledge</td>
<td>Familiar; Comfortable to listen and take notes.</td>
<td>Efficient way of teaching and learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chinese students (China)</strong></td>
<td>Authoritative; Accurate; Systematic; detailed, well focused; In-depth.</td>
<td>Relaxed; Familiar; Learning more; Able to concentrate thinking Enjoying passive style; Communicating with others stresses me.</td>
<td>Efficient way of learning, Saving time; More focused; Classroom is controlled; Keep learning on the track.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preference for lectures: Participants of all the three groups who preferred lectures offered three similar reasons for this preference. Firstly, they enjoyed lectures as a learning mode because they were less distracted by peers, and therefore they felt it was time efficient. Secondly, the students said they were comfortable in lecture because they were not interrupted by prompts to respond or requirements such as organising a talk or performance. Therefore they were able to relax and concentrate on listening and thinking during the lecture. Thirdly, they enjoyed lectures because they believed lecturers were knowledgeable and informative. However, subtle cross-cultural differences emerged. Chinese students in China were concerned more about the “authoritativeness”, “accurateness” and “in-depth” knowledge and felt lectures provided this. For the Chinese in Australia, receiving “systematic and organised” knowledge was an important reason for attending lectures. The Australian students seemed more interested in “broad” information and they felt that the lecturer usually could satisfy this expectation.

A textbook-based test-driven university system tends to have lecturers provide students accurate and authoritative knowledge for the exam purpose (Wong, 2004). This may explain the different reasons for preference between the two Chinese student groups.
Table 3: Reasons for preferring tutorials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant groups</th>
<th>Student’s role</th>
<th>Peers</th>
<th>Pedagogy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Australian students</strong></td>
<td>Individual receiving more attention; less intimidating and/or less embarrassing to ask questions; able to compare own learning to peers.</td>
<td>Peers as resource.</td>
<td>Specific problem-solving; the tutor more approachable; clarifying uncertainty; informal and intimate way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chinese students (Australia)</strong></td>
<td>Like the light atmosphere; feel free.</td>
<td></td>
<td>More challenging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chinese students (China)</strong></td>
<td>Active engagement of thinking; Relaxed; flexible; Opportunity to communicate and to be argumentative; make friends; feeling good to express.</td>
<td>Learning from peers; Sharing good ideas.</td>
<td>More challenging; More focusing on solving problems; Helping with creative thinking and ideas exchange; increasing students’ passion for learning new knowledge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preference for tutorials: Among those who preferred tutorials, common themes included: i) they enjoyed being given more attention as individuals; ii) they liked peers acting as mentors and they could learn from and share ideas with others, and iii) they enjoyed the light atmosphere; flexible learning pace and the focus on specific problem solving. However, there were some different views of tutorials between the three groups. Tutorials as “being less intimidating” and “more intimate” seemed to be more relevant to Australian students. For Chinese students in China tutorials encouraged active and creative thinking and students were allowed to express and exchange ideas which made this learning style preferable. Interestingly, an important reason that some Chinese participants (either in their home country or in Australia) preferred tutorials was because they were “more challenging”.

Tutorial participation

Given previous research has noted non-participation by Asian students in Western tutorials (Prasad, Mannes, Ahmed, Kaur & Griffiths, 2004), all the participants in this study were asked to reflect on their tutorial performance (see responses in Table 4).
Table 4: Tutorial performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation in tutorials (n)</th>
<th>Mostly sit and listen</th>
<th>Actively involve</th>
<th>Both listen &amp; talk half/half</th>
<th>Subject and topic driven</th>
<th>Never had tutorial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian students (51)</td>
<td>22(43.1%)</td>
<td>14 (27.4%)</td>
<td>6 (11.7%)</td>
<td>9 (17.5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese students (Australia) (16)</td>
<td>8 (50%)</td>
<td>1 (6.3%)</td>
<td>6 (37.5%)</td>
<td>1 (6.3%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese students (China) (106)</td>
<td>33 (33.0%)</td>
<td>40 (40.0%)</td>
<td>22 (22.0%)</td>
<td>5 (5.0%)</td>
<td>6*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *a* - Excluded from subsequent analysis

Although chi-squared analysis of what students said they did in tutorials revealed significant group differences ($\chi^2 = 17.5207$, $p < .001$)—the effect size of this difference was very small (Cramer’s $V^2 = .01$). In contrast to stereotypical views, more Australian students (22/51 = 43%) than the two Chinese groups (combined) (41/116 = 35%) indicated that they just “sit and listen” in tutorials. This result is diametrically opposed to Charlesworth’s (2008) and others’ hypothesis of cultural difference and learning styles. However, between the two Chinese groups a significant difference emerged ($\chi^2 = 87.5238$, $p < .0001$)—the effect size of this difference was small (Cramer’s $V^2 = .108$)—50% of Chinese in Australia preferred to “sit and listen” (compared to 33% of Chinese in China). More importantly, just 6% (1/16) of Chinese students in Australia responded that they were “actively involved” in tutorials (compared to 40% in China). These results contradict the notion of an enduring East-West difference in learning disposition. The results are more consistent with a dislocation effect—with Chinese in Australia differing most from the remaining two groups. In fact, Chinese students in homeland universities were statistically more likely than Australians (27.4%, CI95 [15.2%:39.7%] < 40%) to say they were actively involved in tutorials or both listen and talk (11.7%, CI95[2.9%:20.6%] < 22%). Again Australian students were statistically more likely than Chinese to endorse “it depends” (17.6%, CI95[7.2%:28.1%] > 5.2%).

**Tutorial preference and active involvement** The percentage of Chinese students in China who preferred tutorial is 53% but the active involvement rate is 38%; whereas 37% of Australian students preferred tutorials and 27% believed they were actively involved. Thirty-eight per cent of Chinese in Australia preferred tutorials however, only 6% (1/16) categorised himself/herself as an active attendee. The two groups in their home university have comparable rates in preference and activeness related to tutorials. Yet, the Chinese group recorded a higher rate for both tutorial preference and active involvement compared to the Australian group. The percentage gap between preference rate and active involvement rate for both groups indicates that students preferring tutorials is not equal to students being actively involved in tutorials. This finding implies that there are some students in both countries that valued and enjoyed being active in learning (Marlina, 2009). It aligns with the argument that difference and similarity “not only occurs within, but also between cultures” (Marlina, 2009, p. 241).

An important finding about the group of Chinese students in Australia is their activeness rate (6.3%) in tutorial is significantly low compared to its preference rate (37.5%); and this former rate is lower than that of the other two groups. Although Prasad, et al (2004)
suggest that international students are less likely to actively offer their ideas than their domestic peers in class for cultural reasons, their conclusion seems problematic when considering the evidence in Table 4 above. Here a difference is only observed in the Chinese students in Australia (not those studying in their home country). This result suggests that a novel learning environment and language, rather than enduring culture, contributes to the low activeness in tutorial. A further exploration focuses on how the participants feel when participating in tutorials.

Participants’ reflections on tutorials: The participants were asked to give a few words to describe what utmost concern (if any) they had about tutorials as a learning mode. The responses were coded and categorised into the following table (Table 5).

Table 5: The utmost concern about tutorials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What may need to be overcome in tutorials</th>
<th>Australian students (51)</th>
<th>Chinese students (Australia) (16)</th>
<th>Chinese students (China) (106)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shy and no confidence to speak up;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of courage to talk to unfamiliar peers;</td>
<td>25 (49.0%)</td>
<td>5 (31.2%)</td>
<td>11 (10.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking of own idea inferior to others’ or judged negatively.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and expression strategies;</td>
<td>2 (3.9%)</td>
<td>11 (68.8%)</td>
<td>57 (53.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convincing and argumentative language;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative and critical thinking.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard to get a turn to talk;</td>
<td>13 (25.5%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>16 (15.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive and quiet team members;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No patience to peers’ non-sense</td>
<td>8 (15.7%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8 (7.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutors and time pace.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure of expectation / no challenge.</td>
<td>3 (5.9%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14 (13.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient preparation for tutorials.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Chi-squared analysis of the data revealed significant group differences ($\chi^2 = 59.64, p < .001$) — the effect size of this difference was again very small (Cramer’s $V^2 = .031$). In direct contrast to the stereotypical cultural view, a smaller proportion of Chinese indicated that they felt emotions related to embarrassment when compare to Australian students ($16/(106 +16) = 13.1\%, CI_{95}[7.1\%:19.1\%] vs 49\%$). Moreover, Australians tended to be more concerned of feelings of embarrassment even when compared to Chinese studying in Australia (49\%, CI_{95}[35.3\%:62.7\%] vs 31.2\%).

Relative to Australians, Chinese students were more likely to indicate a lack of confidence in the content, insight or originality of their contribution ($68/(106+16) = 55.7\%, CI_{95}[46.9\%:64.6\%] vs 3.9\%) as an impediment to tutorial participation. Comparisons between the two Chinese groups revealed a lower proportion of shyness (10\% CI_{95}[4.9\%:17.1\%] vs 31.2\%) and concern over originality (54\% CI_{95}[44.3\%:63.3\%] vs 68.8\%) among the Chinese in China. Thus, regardless of location of study, both Chinese groups reported feeling less concerned about shyness in class and more concerns about the originality of their ideas. The reader should hesitate before concluding that the latter finding is due to Chinese students’ concern that their ideas are inferior. In fact, the result might
equally reflect a ‘quiet confidence’ and not wanting to share this perceived advantage with others (see Ha Phan, 2011). Unfortunately, we did not gather the data needed to tease these possibilities out. Whatever the case, although this observed cultural difference is opposite to stereotypical expectations, it concurs with early findings (Marlina, 2009; Ryan & Louie, 2005).

Conclusion

This research explored the correlation of culture and learning style/preferences (lectures and tutorials) between Western (Australian) and Asian (Chinese) students in their home universities, and Asian students within Australia. The research failed to find significant differences in learning style preferences between the two groups who were studying in their home cultures—both preferring tutorial style learning for similar reasons. However, between the two Chinese groups, significant differences emerged in learning style/preferences and the reasons given for these preferences also differed. The current results imply that the past claims of enduring cultural differences in learning styles between Eastern and Western students may have been grossly over-stated. When the specific dislocation effects (changing from a familiar to an unfamiliar environment) are taken into consideration, apparent pervasive cultural effects dissipate. In fact, it is the dislocation effects rather than the cultural effects that appear to impact the most on participants’ learning styles. By extension, one can easily imagine Western students studying in a second-language in Asia displaying all the stereotypical Eastern student attributes (shy, quiet, reticent, etc). If correct, these results suggest policies aimed at assisting international students with their transition to a foreign country, rather than those that fundamentally alter the mode of education delivery, would be a more apt response to the needs of international students in Australian universities.

Limitations

Although the researchers carefully designed this research, limitations still exist. Firstly, the participants are from only two countries with three categories. Further research could investigate the role of cultural dimensions on students’ learning styles across a number of countries. Secondly, the sample of Chinese students studying in Australia is small compared to the other groups. A larger group of these participants may increase the validity of the research findings. Thirdly, data collection only involved e-mail interviews, which provided participant students’ perceptions on how they performed in lectures and/or tutorials. Future research could also include an observation method to increase the validity of the data. Finally although the back-translation method was employed to ensure uniformity of the interview questions, slightly different understandings of the same concepts between the two languages may still exist. These limitations can be addressed in future research.

References


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