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Abstract

This paper examines learning preferences of Japanese students of English. Using learning style preference categories first described by Knowles in 1982, and a questionnaire similar to that used by Willing in a 1988 study of immigrant ESL learners in Australia, the authors focused on a group of 63 Japanese university students. It was found that the subjects in this study could not be placed neatly in any single preference category. The authors discuss the results of the questionnaire, and offer some possible explanations for the preferences expressed by the subjects.

1. Background to the study

With Japan’s ascendancy as a world economic power, and the consequent increase in the country’s contact and communication with other nations, there has come an increased need among Japanese for English communicative competence. In order to meet this need, the Japanese Ministry of Education (renamed the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) has begun to shift the focus of language instruction in Japan from the country’s traditional, grammar-oriented style of language teaching to one that is more communication-oriented. This trend has resulted in the introduction of communication-based classes. These classes are based on classroom activities intended to encourage teacher-student and student-student interaction. While these activities are considered to be quite effective in light of current language acquisition theories (see, for example, Long, 1983 and Swain, 1985), their introduction has not been without its problems. There seem to be several reasons for this. However, one of the most significant reasons may be a lack of awareness by English teachers of their students’ learning style preferences. The writers feel that one of the most pressing needs in the Japanese school system’s English education today is an examination of students’ learning style preferences and the variables that influence these preferences.

There have been a great number of studies that address learners’ learning style
preferences. Among recent studies is one by Knowles (1982) that classifies learners as having one of the following four learning styles; Concrete Learning Style, Analytical Learning Style, Communicative Learning Style, and Authority-Oriented Learning Style.¹

These same classifications were used in a study on learning style preferences among ESL/EFL learners by Willing (1988). This was a large-scale study that was conducted to explore possible learning style differences among adult immigrant ESL learners in Australia. The study was based on a questionnaire that asked students about their preferences for particular, specific methods of learning. Based on their responses, the authors put the subjects into one of the four categories. Subjects that indicated a preference for “learning by studying English books,” and “studying grammar,” for example, were classified as Analytical Learning Style learners. Those who preferred to learn using games, pictures, and videos were classified as Concrete Learning Style learners.

In a more extensive research project, Reid (1987) asked 1,338 students with different language backgrounds (including 154 native speakers of English) to identify their learning style preferences. She reported; 1) non-native speakers of English often differ from those of native speakers; 2) there exists a high correlation between ESL students’ L1 and their learning style preference; 3) other variables such as age, and sex are related to differences in learning style preference; and 4) modifications and extensions of ESL student learning styles may occur over time. Studies focusing exclusively on Japanese students’ learning style preferences include Hyland (1994), who replicated Reid’s (1987) study of perceptual learning style preferences using 405 Japanese undergraduate students in Japan and New Zealand. The results show that Japanese students do not favor any major learning style, and that they display a tendency to change their learning style when taught by native English-speaking teachers.

2. The Study

Using a methodology similar to that used by Willing, and studying a group somewhat similar to the one studied by Hyland, the writers hope to add to the general study of Japanese students learning preferences, as well as learn more about the preferences of the students at the specific university where the writers teach. The writers feel that insufficient knowledge of students’ learning style preferences on the part of teachers may be a source of misunderstanding, and may hinder students’ learning. By identifying Japanese students’ learning style preferences, the writers hope to help increase teachers’ understanding of students, and in doing so increase the effectiveness of English education for Japanese students both at the writers’ university and elsewhere.

2.1 Subjects

A total of 63 Japanese students (16 males and 47 females), all majoring in English at Hokuriku University, participated as subjects in the study.
2.2 Elicitation method

A questionnaire was used (see Appendix I). The questionnaire was taken from Willing (1988) and was used with a few modifications. It consisted of 28 items. Each item was a statement of a learning preference, for example, *I like to learn grammar best*, followed by four choices *no / a little / yes / very much*.

2.3 Procedures

The subjects were asked to circle the most suitable of the four choices. The questionnaire was written in English, and was explained to the subjects in Japanese. Ten of the subjects were interviewed a week after they answered the questionnaire.

3. Results and Discussion

The results for the questionnaire are in Appendix II. In Table 1, the items in the questionnaire are rearranged according to Knowles’ classification.

For items listed under Concrete Learning Style, it is interesting to note that while 19 subjects circled “very much” for item 3, and 25 subjects circle “very much” for item 5, only 11 subjects circle “very much” for item 14. Here, the subjects show a preference for “learn by games” and “learn by pictures, films, video,” however, they show significantly less interest in wanting to “learn English by talking in pairs.” This may indicate a general shyness or unwillingness to take risks.

Among the Analytical Learning Style items, what is conspicuous is that learners express a dislike to “learn by studying English books” or “study grammar.” This may reflect weariness by subjects of traditional English classrooms in Japan where emphasis is placed on the teaching of grammar and on translation of English passages into Japanese. However, about 40 percent of the subjects think it best for the teacher to let them find their mistakes. This suggests that, while they may not want to return to the traditional study of grammar, the subjects are still concerned with accuracy. The fact that making mistakes in front of others is considered to be especially embarrassing in Japanese culture may at least partly account for this concern with accuracy.

Among the Communicative Learning Style items, the subjects tend to show a strong preference to “learn by watching/listening to native speakers of English” and “learn by watching TV in English.” This does not surprise the writers. One of the main reasons why students choose to enter Hokuriku University is because of the relatively large number of native English-speaking teachers here. What we should pay attention to is the item 27 (“I like to learn by talking to friends in English”). Only ten subjects marked this “very much.” This, like the subjects’ relatively low ranking of talking in pairs, seems to indicate a tendency on their part to avoid risk-taking.

In Authority-Oriented Learning Style, not many subjects mark the items as “very much,” but more than 60 percent of the subjects marked them “yes.” This may be because of traditionally
teacher-centered English classrooms in Japan, where teaching is largely one-way (from a teacher to students).

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**Concrete Learning Style:**
3. In class, I like to learn by games.
   4 | 13 | 27 | 19
5. In class, I like to learn by pictures, films, video.
   2 | 7 | 29 | 25
14. I like to learn English by talking in pairs.
    6 | 22 | 24 | 11

**Analytical Learning Style:**
17. I like to study grammar.
   11 | 20 | 21 | 11
6. At home I like to learn by studying English books.
   4 | 22 | 30 | 7
12. I like the teacher to let me find my mistakes.
    3 | 9 | 26 | 25

**Communicative Learning Style:**
28. I like to learn by watching/listening to native speakers of English
   2 | 3 | 22 | 36
27. I like to learn by talking to friends in English.
   8 | 23 | 22 | 10
24. At home, I like to learn by watching TV in English.
   5 | 7 | 33 | 18

**Authority-Oriented Learning Style:**
8. I like the teacher to explain everything to us.
   5 | 7 | 39 | 12
6. I want to write everything in my notebook.
   8 | 4 | 38 | 13
7. I like to have my own textbook.
   8 | 18 | 24 | 12 | 1
Let us turn to Table 2 and Table 3, where 10 most frequent preferences and 10 least frequent preferences are listed respectively.

**Table 2**

**Ten most frequent preferences** (the number in parentheses is the ratio of the subjects who circled *yes* or *very much* to all the subjects answering the item)

1. I like to learn by watching/listening to native speakers of English. (92%)
2. I like to practice the sounds and pronunciation. (87%)
3. I like the teacher to tell me all my mistakes. (86%)
4. In class, I like to learn by conversation. (86%)
5. In class, I like to learn by pictures, films, video. (86%)
6. I like the teacher to help me talk about my interests. (84%)
7. I want to write everything in my notebook. (81%)
8. I like the teacher to explain everything to us. (81%)
9. At home, I like to learn by watching TV. (81%)
10. I like the teacher to let me find my mistakes. (81%)

**Table 3**

**Ten least frequent preferences** (the number in parentheses is the ratio of the subjects who circled *a little* or *no* to all the subjects answering the item)

1. I like to study English by myself (alone). (71%)
2. I like to learn English with the whole class. (57%)
3. I like to learn by talking to friends in English. (49%)
4. I like to study grammar. (49%)
5. I like the teacher to give us problems to work on. (46%)
6. I like to learn English by talking in pairs. (44%)
7. I like to have my own text book. (41%)
8. At home, I like to learn by studying English books. (41%)
9. In class, I like to learn by reading. (35%)
10. I like to learn many new words. (35%)

Like other studies that warn against seeing Japanese students as having one learning style preference (for example, Hyland, 1994, Stebbins, 1995), a look at the 10 most frequent preferences and the 10 least frequent preferences above indicates that it is risky to jump to the conclusion that there is a single Japanese learning style. The subjects show a preference for Communicative Type (items 1 and 9 in Table 2), but at the same time they also display a preference for Authority-Oriented Type (items 7 and 8 in Table 2). This seeming contradiction may be explained by the co-existence of two very different factors, the first the fact that because these subjects are English majors they are much more likely to see English as a means of
communication rather than a dry study of grammar, and the second an aversion by the subjects to risk-taking resulting from the passive, one-way educational style they experienced in high school. What is particularly notable here, however, is the fact that nearly half of the students circled a little or no for the items “I like to learn by talking to friends in English” and “I like to learn English by talking in pairs” in Table 3 (49% and 44% respectively). This shows that, while they may want to express themselves in English, they are somewhat reluctant to do so. The findings generally agree with Call (1998), who says “... I also found learners to be quite willing to participate in class by listening, but to be very passive with respect to speaking” (p. 136).

This passive learning style may be the result of the students’ socio-cultural backgrounds (see, for example, Nelson, 1995, Reid, 1998). There are several studies that have characterized Japanese as collectivists when compared with people from English-speaking countries (for example, Hofstede, 1984, 1997). As Gudykunst & Nishida (1994) point out, beliefs about oral communication are a reflection of a culture’s individualism or collectivism. In Japan, collectivist characteristics such as unity and conformity have long been of great importance. One manifestation of this unity and conformity is evident in a study by Hayashi (1997), where 63 Japanese university students and 19 American university students are compared regarding their views of classroom behaviors. When asked the question, “What behaviors do you think makes a good student,” the Japanese subjects responded that good students do not interrupt the procedure of the class and should be quiet (p. 115).

Japanese collectivist classrooms are typically “one teacher to the whole class.” The focus is on the transmission of information a teacher to the students. The teacher spends the majority of the class lecturing, leaving students with few opportunities to express their opinions. They are not encouraged to challenge the teacher or their classmates. The fact that Japanese students are not accustomed to challenging their classmates is also evident in Hayashi (1997). In the research, the subjects were presented with the situation of students expressing opinions conflicting with those of other students, and they were asked to rate the acceptability of this situation. The results were:

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<th></th>
<th>acceptable</th>
<th>somewhat impolite</th>
<th>very impolite</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>(32% acceptable)</td>
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<td>(89% acceptable)</td>
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<td>(Hayashi 1997, p. 154)</td>
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This may be seen as being consistent with Japanese collectivism, the typical Japanese reluctance to appear different from the group. A single Japanese student who expresses opinions that conflict with those of other students while the rest of the class is silent, would stand out. However, collectivism does not seem to be as large a factor in the research that the writers have reported here. The results show that the subjects have a greater awareness of the importance of being active in the classroom. This greater awareness may be explained by the fact that many
students decide to come to Hokuriku University because of the University’s relatively large number of native English speaking teachers, and this may indicate a higher motivation on their part to improve their oral proficiency in English.

It should be noted that in an interview with one of the writers, some of the subjects reported that even though they understood that active participation is necessary in the classroom, they don’t know how the appropriate or proper way to be active. This obviously points to the importance of taking the time to sufficiently prepare students for activities that will be very new to them.

6. Implication for teaching

The data from this study indicates that the subjects do not seem to favor the kind of active, risk-taking behavior that seems to be required for a Communicative Learning Style, though they do show preference for other teaching methods associated with this style. In the follow-up interviews conducted, students said that one reason for their passivity during class is often simply because they do not know how to go about being active in class. It seems then that a primary challenge for English teachers of these students is to encourage students to be more active, and teach them how to do so.

One obvious step towards meeting this challenge is simply to let Japanese students know that they are expected to express their opinions actively in English classrooms. In a sense, English teachers should free students from the constraints of traditional teacher-centered classrooms. In order to let this happen smoothly, the following suggestions may be useful:

1) Since Japanese students are not accustomed to volunteering to speak, the teacher may want to initially call on his/her students individually. Formally granting students the space to speak in this way is particularly helpful for beginners.

2) Group work and pair work are not common in Japanese classrooms (Nelson, 1995), and teachers should introduce these kinds of activities with this in mind, carefully structuring the presentation of such activities and gradually increasing their use with each class.

3) In order to gently draw students into a lesson without raising their affective filters, the teacher could begin lessons by asking students simple questions to which the student can respond with one-word answers, or just “yes” or “no.”

In addition to making it clear that they are expected to express their opinions in class, it is also important to teach the students ways in which to do this. The fact that Japanese students feel uncomfortable taking risks in class suggests that they need to learn some pragmatic communication strategies. English teachers should teach strategies such as starting conversations, expressing opinions, and taking turns. By learning such strategies, Japanese students would learn, in a sense, the communicative template in which to place the language they are learning.
7. Conclusion

This study has investigated characteristics of Japanese students’ learning preferences in EFL classrooms. The data indicate that the subjects are not easily placed into one language style preference. They show a preference for some methods of learning that are Authority-Oriented, which may be because of the familiarity of this style of learning for Japanese students, but they also favor some methods that are classified as Communicative Learning, and this may be because of the nature of these particular subjects, who have indicated a desire to communicate with native speakers through their choice of a university where there is a relatively high number of native-speaking English teachers.

While familiarity seemed to lead subjects to favor some of the methods in Authority-Oriented, it is perhaps the same familiarity, or over-familiarity that led them to show a dislike for some Analytical Style methods, such as studying grammar and using books. While showing a preference for Communicative Learning methods, students also rated lower methods that involved them speaking in pairs and with friends in English. This may be explained in cultural terms as Japanese collectivism, or a general shyness and unwillingness among Japanese students to take risks. This reluctance to be more active, particularly during speaking activities, has been reported on by other researchers, and is clearly at odds with the Communicative Approach. Students said in follow-up interviews that one reason they are not more active and do not take more risks in class is that they do not know how to be active. Suggestions for helping Japanese students learn new classroom behaviors that will allow them to more actively participate in the classroom are provided.

Finally, some directions for further research are suggested. First, since gender is an important influencing factor, we need to carry out another study in which an equal number of males and females are investigated and compared. Also needed is a study addressing how variables such as motivation relate to learning style preferences. In addition, we should also conduct a longitudinal study, where the present subjects are asked to answer the same questionnaire after a period of months or years.

Notes

i Knowles (1982) characterize learners by the following four learning styles.

- Concrete Learning Style: Learners in this category like to be able to see real-life applications for what they are learning. They dislike abstract, decontextualised learning activities and perhaps learn best through performing practical tasks.
- Analytical Learning Style: Analytical learners look for systematicity and are good at logical problem-solving activities. They are more likely to enjoy grammatical exercises than the other three types. They generally work well by themselves.
- Communicative Learning Style: Communicative-style learners like to be able to see the social usefulness of whatever they are learning. They will probably respond better to a lesson on ‘how to make offers/promises’ than one on ‘the future tense.’
Japanese students' learning style preferences in the EFL classroom

- Authority-Oriented Learning Style: Learners in this category like to have content presented in a clear, ordered sequence. They like the teacher to tell them what to do and how to do it, and are often compulsive note-takers. They will not react well to negotiation of syllabus, etc., and may become disillusioned when the teachers fallibility shows.

ii The word “Australians” is changed to “native speakers of English.” The following two questions “I like to go out with the class and practise English” and “I like to learn by using English in shops/CES/trains ...” are omitted from my questionnaire since they do not fit in EFL settings.

References


Appendix

Dear Students:
Hello. I ask you to please take the five minutes needed to complete this survey about your learning styles. This is an anonymous survey.
I appreciate your time and sincerity.

HOW DO YOU LIKE TO LEARN BEST?

Please circle your answer.

1. In English class, I like to learn by reading. no a little yes very much
2. In class, I like to listen to and use cassettes. no a little yes very much
3. In class, I like to learn by games. no a little yes very much
4. In class, I like to learn by conversations. no a little yes very much
5. In class, I like to learn by pictures, films, video. no a little yes very much
6. I want to write everything in my notebook. no a little yes very much
7. I like to have my own textbook. no a little yes very much
8. I like the teacher to explain everything to us. no a little yes very much
9. I like the teacher to give us problems to work on. no a little yes very much
10. I like the teacher to help me talk about my interests. no a little yes very much
11. I like the teacher to tell me all my mistakes. no a little yes very much
12. I like the teacher to let me find my mistakes. no a little yes very much
13. I like to study English by myself (alone). no a little yes very much
14. I like to learn English by talking in pairs. no a little yes very much
15. I like to learn English in small groups.  no  a little  yes  very much
16. I like to learn English with the whole class.  no  a little  yes  very much
17. I like to study grammar.  no  a little  yes  very much
18. I like to learn many new words.  no  a little  yes  very much
19. I like to practice the sounds and pronunciation.  no  a little  yes  very much
20. I like to learn English words by seeing them.  no  a little  yes  very much
21. I like to learn English words by hearing them.  no  a little  yes  very much
22. I like to learn English words by doing something.  no  a little  yes  very much
23. At home, I like to learn by reading newspapers, etc.  no  a little  yes  very much
24. At home, I like to learn by watching TV in English.  no  a little  yes  very much
25. At home, I like to learn by using cassettes.  no  a little  yes  very much
26. At home I like to learn by studying English books.  no  a little  yes  very much
27. I like to learn by talking to friends in English.  no  a little  yes  very much
28. I like to learn by watching/listening to native speakers of English.  no  a little  yes  very much