

UNDERSTANDING FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PASSIVITY VIA THEIR ATTITUDES AND LANGUAGE BEHAVIORS TOWARDS ANSWERING QUESTIONS IN CLASS

TRUONG THI NHU NGOC

Van Lang University, Vietnam – truongthinhungoc2303@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Learning styles and learning strategies play a key role in learners' success and autonomy in language learning. However, the majority of research in this area is carried out in foreign context rather than locally. Thus, many false assumptions have been made about Asian learning styles in general and Vietnamese learners in particular, i.e. they are passive and group-oriented learners, and they tend to learn by rote and memorize knowledge. In an attempt to find out if Vietnamese first year university non-English majored learners are passive or active, the study investigates their attitudes and language behaviors towards answering questions in class. The major findings from valid questionnaires responded by 90 students from five different technology-grouped departments reveal that Vietnamese students are not passive at all and the reasons why they appear passive are related to their shyness and face-saving attitudes. No statistically significant association was found between students' personality and their passivity in the classroom.

Keywords: Active learners; Learning styles; Passive learners.

1. Introduction

In the past fifty years, a considerable number of different methodologies have emerged and have been claimed to be effective practices to enhance students' second language learning capabilities. These methods and approaches are mostly determined by educators and teachers, which can lead to the fact that how students are taught is a far cry from what they need. For that reason, a more learner-centered approach would probably bring in expected results. However, how can teachers acquire a genuine understanding of their students in addition to knowing their needs? In order to deploy suitable classroom activities effectively, it is vital to understand individual students' learning styles and strategies. Unfortunately, teachers often have misconceptions or false overgeneralizations about their students' styles and strategies, due to being influenced by what they read and misinterpreting what they see. Thus, a conscientious teacher should be not only

sensitive to dissimilarities amongst their students, but should also be able to avoid stereotyping them. It is obvious that the majority of second language learning research about Asian learners is carried out in English-speaking countries, and thus an inaccurate picture of Asian learners in general, and Vietnamese learners, in particular, can be generated. Since the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Method to Vietnam in 1990s, the learning and teaching practice has changed to a certain extent. Departing from the traditional way of learning, students are relatively more active thanks to classroom communicative activities. Nevertheless, teachers often complain that most of their students still remain quiet although they try to encourage them to talk and put them into groups so that they will feel more secure. This passivity can be attributed to the students' individual personalities, or to the fact that they are still influenced by how they used to be taught.

1.1. Purpose of the study

Many passivity-related questions have been raised about Vietnamese learners in the new era of international economic integration: Are Vietnamese students passive in their thinking? Does their view about the suitability for speaking out in classroom make them appear passive in their classroom? This paper investigates the passivity of Vietnamese first year university non-English majored students with five major questions related to their attitudes and language behaviors towards answering questions in class.

1. Do students self-assess themselves as passive or active students?

2. If the teacher poses a question, when do students raise hands?

3. If students remain reticent when their teacher asks questions, what will they do?

4. Are students afraid of making mistakes in the classroom? If yes, what are the main reasons?

5. Is students' learning style dependent on their personality?

1.2. Significance of the study

In Vietnam, the issue of learning styles and strategies is not widely and duly understood. Many assumptions have been made about Vietnamese learners; most noticeably, they are passive learners. In fact, there has been little research on Vietnamese learning styles and, if any, there is no research carried out from students' perspectives, asking students to reflect on their own learning style via their attitudes and language behaviors towards answering questions in class. If teachers know the answer to the aforementioned questions, therefore, they will better be equipped to understand their students' needs, and to know how to help them improve and tackle the problem of second language learning. They will also be able to adapt their teaching styles to match their students' learning styles. For this myth to be unraveled, I have conducted this pilot research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of terms

Before having a closer look at Vietnamese students' language learning style, the following terms need to be clarified: style, learning style, active and passive.

2.1.1. Style

Style is a term referring to individual preferences or tendencies that are constant. In other words, styles are "those general characteristics of intellectual functioning" (Brown, 2000, p. 113) that belong to you and distinguish you from others. However, styles and abilities should not be confused. Style is a way of thinking and utilizing abilities (Stenberg, 1995, p. 266). Moreover, styles are changeable in accordance with tasks, time, context, the learning stage, culture and the age of the learners (Rubin, 1993, pp.48-49). It is noticeable that a person can have more than a style and no styles should be thought of as superior; they are just 'different' (Stenberg, 1995, pp.268-269).

2.1.2. Learning style

In reality, there is "a bewildering confusion of definitions surrounding learning style conceptualizations" (Curry, 1991, p.249). On the one hand, learning styles can be defined as "a characteristic and preferred way of approaching learning and processing information" (Hedge, 2000, p. 18) or the "general orientations to the learning process exhibited by learners" (Nunan, 1999, p.55). On the other hand, learning styles are equated with cognitive styles, which are "consistent individual differences in preferred ways of organizing and processing information and experience (Messick, 1976, p.4) or "the link between personality and cognition" (Brown, 2000, pp.113-114). In this case, learning styles can be divided into four categories: 'accommodators' (who enjoy hands-on experience and discovery), 'divergers' (who are curious and want to explore the problems from different angles), 'convergers' (who prefer to work with things, rather than people)

and finally assimilators (who tend to focus on abstract ideas and are good at organizing and synthesizing data) (Kolb, 1984). Nevertheless, there is another school of thought claiming that viewing learning styles from a purely cognitive perspective can be misleading (Reid, 2007, p.27) and “learning style is just one aspect of cognitive style” (Mortimore, 2008, p.6) and thus it should be considered as “the application of a person’s preferred cognitive style to a learning situation” (Mortimore, 2008, p.6). In fact, educators employ the term learning styles to mention “cognitive and interactional patterns which affect the ways in which students perceive, remember and think” (Scarcella, 1990, p.114). Moreover, since people’s styles are subject to how they internalize their surroundings, it is not necessary that learning styles are characteristically cognitive. In other words, “physical, affective, cognitive domains merge in learning styles” (Brown, 2000, p.114). In particular, some research has tried to take into account other factors rather than cognitive ones. For example, based on purely the senses, learning styles can be grouped into four categories: “read/write, auditory, visual and kinesthetic” (Fleming & Mill, as cited in Nilson, 2010, pp.232-233). Besides, there is a multi-perspective approach to classifying learning styles. This is to say that learning styles can be explored from four dimensions: sensory preference (e.g. visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic); personality types (e.g. extroverted versus introverted, active versus reflective, and thinking versus feeling); desired degree of generality (global versus analytic); and biological differences (e.g. the times of day that students perform best and the need of food and drink whilst learning) (Oxford, 2003, pp.3-7).

2.1.3. Active

“Active” is defined as “being involved in something; making a determined effort and not leaving something to happen by itself” (Oxford dictionary) or in other words, it

means “taking positive actions in order to make something happen, rather than just hoping that it will happen” (Macmillan dictionary). Accordingly, an active person is someone “who is active, does a lot of different activities and has a lot of energy and interests” (Macmillan dictionary).

2.1.4. Passive

Meanwhile, “passive” is defined as “accepting what happens or what people do without trying to change anything or oppose them” (Oxford dictionary). Thus, a passive person will rarely take steps to react to things around them. Another definition of “passive”, which was found during the short interviews with my colleagues around Van Lang University campus is “not showing others any motive, interests or intent to join a certain activity”.

2.2. Asian learning styles

There has been much research into Asian students’ learning styles and strategies, both in those Asian countries themselves and “host” countries where Asian students study. For the most part, learners in a particular Asian country will show a bias towards a particular learning style. For example, Chinese, Korean and Indonesian choose auditory learning as their major learning style whilst Thai, Malay and Japanese students favor other methods (Saracho, 1997, p.18). Although Asian learners have varying learning styles, a few common factors can apply to all of them.

2.2.1. Asian learners are cooperative

One noticeable attribute belonging to Asian learners is their being more cooperative (Scarcella, 1990, p. 123). However, there is doubt as to whether this learning style is culturally or contextually affected. This is because some Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam are influenced by Confucian heritage culture and ideologies, so they share some characteristics of a collectivist society, and thus learners in these countries tend to be group-oriented,

confirming to norms and hierarchy (Biggs, 1996; Church & Lonner, 1998). Interestingly, some studies have shown that Asian learners who have studied English for more than three years in the United States tend to favor group learning far less than those who have spent shorter periods of time there (Reid, 1987, pp.95-96).

2.2.2. Asian learners are passive

Another characteristic of Asian learning style is 'passive learning'. It is generally assumed that Asian learners are inclined to adopt passive learning styles because they tend to keep quiet in the classroom. In addition, most people have a preconception that Asian learners really want to listen and obey. They appear passive because they want to be polite to teachers and they see knowledge as something their teachers transfer to them (Chalmers and Volet, 1997, pp.90-91). However, according to some research, many students do not want to adopt this role, i.e. being obedient listeners in class. They "do not want to sit in class passively receiving knowledge [but] want to explore the knowledge themselves" (Littlewood, 2000, pp.33-34). Furthermore, it is claimed that those who support these misconceptions do not take into account the cultural factors, cultural clashes and the students' expectations (Chalmers and Volet, 1997, pp. 90-91). A recent investigation of Chinese students' passive learning reveal that "passive learning behavior is related to the cultural background where one subsists [and that] they are afraid of making mistakes" (Yi, 2016, p.359).

2.3. Vietnamese learning styles

As a member of the Asian continent, Vietnam, to some extent, shares a culture similar to that of other countries in the region. This cultural heritage influences Vietnamese students' learning styles and strategies. It is noticeable that in terms of history, Vietnam was dominated by the Chinese for nearly one thousand years. Vietnamese people value harmony, family, achievement and hierarchy

(Triandis, 1995) because China's Confucian ideologies are deeply ingrained in Vietnamese culture, which focus on virtue, respect, obedience and the relationship between ruler and subjects, father and son, older brother and younger brother, husband and wife, seniors and juniors. Moreover, in Vietnamese culture, self-respect and respectful attitudes are very important. This is expressed through politeness and obedience. Besides, Vietnamese people tend not to reveal their feelings and avoid conflict for fear that they will hurt others' feelings. In the classroom, most Vietnamese students tend to keep quiet and instead of volunteering, they wait until called on to answer the question posed by their teacher. They will even avoid eye contact with their teacher and tend to copy down everything on the board. This is due to the belief that being quiet in class demonstrates respect towards the teacher, and they do not raise questions because of their beliefs that it is enough to receive knowledge transferred from their teachers (Nguyen, 2002). However, this behavior is often "misunderstood as a passive or non-cooperative attitude"(Nguyen, 2002). Furthermore, in line with the common stereotypes of Asian learners, Vietnamese learners employ more frequently "repetitive learning strategies" (Helmke and Tuyet, 1999), but "repetition appears to have a different psychological meaning" (Helmke and Tuyet, 1999) for them. This is to say that the stereotype of being rote learners is not applied to Vietnamese learners.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedures

The study was conducted at Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. In order to investigate the Vietnamese first-year undergraduates' passive learning style, a sample of 90 freshmen, who attended English class regularly, from five different technological grouped departments (Biotechnology, Environmental Technology,

Architecture, Civil Engineering and Interior Design) was employed. Data was collected using convenience sampling survey technique. Particularly, students were selected from diverse personal and academic backgrounds. No attempts were made to select random samples. Students are required to complete a questionnaire. Questions pertained to students' self-assessment of their passive or active learning style, raising hands in class, responding to the teacher's questions, fright of making mistakes in class and reasons for the fright and self-assessment of their introverted or extroverted personality. After that, 10 students from the sample were conveniently selected to participate in the deep interviews in order to find out if their responses match their answers on the questionnaires.

3.2. Data analysis

The statistical analyses were conducted using the SPSS software program. To answer the question of whether students self-assess themselves as active or passive learners, when they raise hands in class, and what they do if they remain silent, descriptive statistics were reported. The data were obtained from students' responses on the designed questionnaire. Regarding the fourth question with the main objective of finding out whether students are afraid of making mistakes and the reasons for this fright, the mean scores and the frequency of participants' responses were calculated. To answer the fifth question of the study- finding the relationship between students' passivity and personality, the Pearson Chi-square test was employed.

4. Results

4.1. Students' self-categorization of their learning style

Table 1

Descriptive statistics results for students' self-categorization of their learning style

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid Active | 47 | 52.2 | 52.2 | 52.2 |
| Passive | 34 | 37.8 | 37.8 | 90.0 |
| Neutral | 9 | 10.0 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 90 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Slightly more than half of the participants (52.2 %) reported themselves to be active learners while only just more than one third of them (37.8%) categorized themselves as

passive learners. An insignificant percentage (10%) self-assessed themselves as neither passive nor active learners.

4.2. Cases in which students raise hands

Table 2

Descriptive statistics results for cases in which students raise hands

| | When I am sure of the answer | Even when I am not sure of the answer | Even when I don't know the answer |
|-----------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Frequency | 68 | 35 | 3 |
| Percent | 75.6 | 38.9 | 3.33 |

About three-fourths (75.6%) of the students chose to raise hands when they are certain about the answer. Meanwhile, just only 3 cases questioned decided to raise hands even when

they did not know the answer. There was only more than one third of the participants (38.9%) who chose to make educated guesses and raise hands when they are not sure of the answers.

4.3. Students’ alternative ways of responding to the teacher’s question

Table 3

Descriptive statistics results for students’ alternative ways of responding to the teacher’s question

| | I do nothing and wait for my friends to answer the teacher’s question | I think about the answer | I think about the answers and write guesses on paper | I ask my neighbor friends and discuss with them | Others |
|-----------|---|--------------------------|--|---|--------|
| Frequency | 6 | 40 | 18 | 45 | 0 |
| Percent | 6.7 | 44.4 | 21.1 | 50 | 0 |

Although nearly half of the participants (44.4 %) chose thinking about the answer while their teacher poses questions in class, half of them turned to their neighbor friends for help and discuss ideas with them. Only a negligible percentage of the students (6.7%)

chose doing nothing and waiting for others to answer their teacher’s questions. Slightly more than one-fifth (21.1) decided to work independently, i.e. thinking about the answer and writing guesses on paper.

4.4. Students’ fright of making mistakes in front of the class and reasons for their fright

Table 4

Descriptive statistics results for students’ fright of making mistakes in front of the class

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid Extremely scared | 6 | 6.7 | 6.7 | 6.7 |
| Scared | 23 | 25.6 | 25.6 | 32.2 |
| Neutral | 39 | 43.3 | 43.3 | 75.6 |
| Not scared | 13 | 14.4 | 14.4 | 90.0 |
| Extremely not scared | 9 | 10.0 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 90 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

| | | |
|----------------|---------|-------|
| N | Valid | 90 |
| | Missing | 0 |
| Mean | | 2.96 |
| Std. Deviation | | 1.038 |

The results show that students tend to be neutral towards the fright of making mistakes in class, with mean 2.96, Std, 1038. One third of students (32.2 %) said they were either scared or extremely scared of making incorrect answers in front of the class while

nearly one fifth of them (24.4 %) reported that they were positive about making mistakes in class.

Concerning main reasons for those who are fearful of giving incorrect answers, let's look at the following table.

Table 5

Reasons for students' fright of making mistakes in class

| | I am shy | I am afraid of being laughed at by my friends | I am afraid of being ridiculed by my friends | I don't want to leave a bad impression on my teacher | Others |
|-----------|----------|---|--|--|--------|
| Frequency | 32 | 27 | 18 | 25 | 0 |
| Percent | 35.6 | 30 | 20 | 27.8 | 0 |

As can be seen from the above table, the most popular reason for students' reticence in class is related to face-saving attitudes (77.8 %); particularly, being fearful of being laughed at or ridiculed at by friends takes up

50 % and unwillingness to leave a bad impression on their teacher consists of 27.8 %. Slightly more than one-third of the participants (35.6 %) attributed shyness to their quietness in class.

4.5. Students' learning style and their personality

Table 6

Personalities and learning styles cross tabulation

| | | Learning styles | | | Total |
|---------------|-----------|-----------------|---------|---------|-------|
| | | Active | Passive | Neutral | |
| Personalities | Extrovert | 19 | 14 | 2 | 35 |
| | Introvert | 26 | 15 | 7 | 48 |
| | Neutral | 2 | 5 | 0 | 7 |
| Total | | 47 | 34 | 9 | 90 |

Table 7

Results from Pearson Chi-Square test for students' learning style and personality

Chi-Square Test

| | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|--------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 5.850a | 4 | .211 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 6.284 | 4 | .179 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | .676 | 1 | .411 |
| N of Valid Cases | 90 | | |

The Chi-Square tests show no dependent relationship between the personality and learning style with $\chi^2(4) = 5.850$, $*p = .211$. However, it is interesting to note that out of 48 cases of introverted learners, slightly more than half of them (26 cases) rated themselves as active learners.

5. Discussion

5.1. *Students are not passive learners. Students appear passive due to their shyness and their face-saving attitudes*

In the light of the discussion and comparison with the assumptions about Vietnamese learning style literature, some conclusions can be drawn as follows. Contrary to what is generally stated about Vietnamese learners in the literature, the participants' responses reveal that they are not passive learners at all. Even when they do not raise their hands in class or think it out loud their ideas, their minds are active because they still think about the response to their teacher's questions and try to figure out the answers, and when they do not comprehend something, they will ask their friends for help. This, in this vein, is similar to Littlewood's research results in 2000, which conclude that Asian students do not want to be passive learners and obedient listeners. The fact that Vietnamese students do not appear to be active is partly due to their shyness, fear of being laughed at or ridiculed by their friends, or partly because of their face-saving attitudes. This finding also shows a sharp contrast to the widely held belief stated by Chalmers & Volet in 1997 about the reason why Asian learners are passive, i.e. they want to be polite to teachers and they see knowledge as something their teachers transfer to them. To help students overcome psychology-related hindrances above-mentioned, a positive mental attitude should be created among students, which helps them realize that mistakes are their friends that enable them to learn and that making mistakes is an unavoidable part of learning languages.

Whenever anyone makes mistakes in class, instead of responding to mistakes with habitual laughter, students should be encouraged to say "That's ok. You are gonna better next time". Furthermore, no matter what extroverted or introverted learners they are, most Vietnamese students can be shy in nature. Therefore, they should be encouraged to think it out loud and share their ideas with their classmates more even when they are not certain about their answers. Besides, students should always receive positive comments for even wrong answers, which can leave positive imprints on the students that no matter how wrong their answers can be, they are all appreciated for sharing their opinions and ideas. Also, it is highly expected that no student is underestimated or ridiculed because of their wrong answers.

5.2. *Students are very autonomous learners. Stereotyping should be avoided*

From the finding, it is clear that students do not always sit silently and wait for others to feed them with answers. They are very autonomous; they think about the answers or discuss with their friends when they do not raise hands in class. Besides, although students tend to turn to their friends for help, it is not clear that they tend to be more cooperative as stated by Scarcella in 1990. Therefore, further research is necessary. Though there is evidence suggesting that "culture, as learned by the child from family, community, and school, has a strong influence on learning style" (Hedge, 2000, p. 19) and that a child's learning style depends on the "type of society and the way [he] is reared" (Brown, 2000, p. 115), stereotyping should always be avoided. In the same culture, there is still a wide variety of learning styles. It should be noted that there are serious and hidden dangers if students' learning styles are misidentified and that teachers' inappropriate instructional practices in response to any misidentified learning style can lead to students' future academic failure.

5.3. Students are not afraid of making mistakes. They have different personal reasons for the suitability of speaking in the classroom

Finally, concerning the matter of being fearful of making mistakes in class, from the findings, Vietnamese undergraduates are not totally afraid of giving incorrect answers in class because they have different personal reasons for suitability of speaking in the classroom. This is to say that they would raise hands when they are certain about their responses and that they do not want to waste time or win their friends' turn with their guesses (findings from deep interviews). Reluctance to raise hands can also be due to face-saving attitudes, which means they do not want to be ridiculed or laughed at or leave a bad impression on their teacher. For that reason, at the beginning of the semester, students should be clearly informed of how they are expected to contribute to the lesson and to behave towards each other in order to avoid future mismatched conceptions about the suitability of sharing ideas in classroom environment between students and teachers.

5.4. Students' learning styles are changeable. They should be encouraged to experience different learning styles

Moreover, though fairly stable learning styles appear, they are changeable. If not, students will not be able to surpass drawbacks or restrains of their own style. In fact, they will exert a certain style appropriate to the context. For example, when studying in Australia, "Asian international students [...] are able to adapt to the new style of teaching and learning [...] within two to three months (Woong, 2004), "have a positive attitude towards the Australian academic culture" (Ramsay, 2016) and can "adapt to deeper learning approaches" (Basthomi, 2016). However, not many learners can identify their own styles. Thus, they should be provided with the opportunities to discover their styles

through facing certain challenging tasks and they should also be encouraged to experience themselves in different learning styles since students who employ multiple learning styles can enjoy "greater classroom success" (Reid, 1987, p.101).

5.5. Limitations and future directions

Since the respondents do not represent a scientific sample of first year Vietnamese university non- English majored students, generations beyond the sample cannot be made. However, the study can provide depth of understanding the students' beliefs about their learning style and conceptions about the suitability of speaking out loud in class as well as provide a guide towards future research and better practice at the institutional level. It is not in the scope of the research to find out whether external factors or internal factors have more impact on their passivity learning. Therefore, further research is necessary.

5.6. Conclusion

The present study shows that the majority of Vietnamese first year non-English majored students are not passive learners at all, which is consistent with prior research (e.g. Littlewood, 2000), and their learning style is not dependent on their personality. Those who consider themselves passive learners do not attribute their reticence in class to such attributes as obedience and politeness found in research done by Chalmers and Volet in 1997, but to shyness and face-saving attitudes. In the light of these findings, teachers should deploy suitable teaching strategies to help students develop a more positive and cooperative learning environment where students see mistakes as helpers rather than hindrances and have enough courage to make mistakes in learning. Also, it is necessary for teachers to explore their students' learning styles and help them experiment with other learning styles since styles can be changeable and adaptable■

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