

原著

Learning Styles and the Immersion Language Learner: A Preliminary Study

Malcolm R. Swanson, L. Dennis Woolbright, Harumi Yahiro

<Abstract>

An earlier study by Woolbright, Hayashi, and Nishioka (2006) noted culturally based tendencies in the learning styles of Japanese students studying abroad, many of which were hindering these students from taking full advantage of their time overseas. This paper, a preliminary study in a research project currently being undertaken by the authors, first examines the potential value of such immersion type courses as international study abroad programmes. It then provides an overview of the study of learning styles, with a particular focus on Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory. This learning style model was selected as being the most appropriate for a study of Japanese students learning languages abroad and how they compare to other cultural groups. The paper concludes with a brief overview of future directions for the research project, with the ultimate goal of developing programmes to help our students better prepare for study abroad.

Key words: Learning styles, cultural differences, Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory, immersion programmes

Background

Language-learning programmes are, by their very nature, self-limiting. Students are put into controlled environments where they are prescribed areas of study for fixed times each week. Content is controlled, and material is eked out at a pace the teacher feels the class as a whole can accept. By the end of the study cycle, the students have been exposed to (and hopefully absorbed) a set body of knowledge that has the ostensible aim of improving their language capabilities. To a degree, this is true. After six years of pre-university instruction, they do possess a basic knowledge that is a suitable foundation for further study. Their university studies, often in classes taught by native-language teachers, can build their skills still further, using the knowledge they possess in

practical settings or semi-authentic situations. For many students, their oral or other communication classes expose them to actual communication opportunities for the first time, providing a vital opportunity for their abilities to improve.

However, as any language teacher will readily attest, this level of study is not enough. For those university students who attend the bare minimum of language classes, their skills usually show little improvement, and in some cases, even atrophy. Indeed, sobering as it may be for educators to consider, the only students who generally show real progress are those who take on responsibility for their own learning by engaging in self-study opportunities. These might include participating in extension programmes, attending extra courses, studying toward external examinations, joining communication circles, or seeking extra teacher

assistance outside of class times.

Seinan Jo Gakuin University's English Extension Programmes

Many institutions do offer extra-curricular programmes that encourage students with their self-study. At Seinan Jo Gakuin University's English Department, for instance, we provide a full and regular selection of activities to supplement the regular studies that students undertake. The school year begins on the very first day with a *Hanami and Haiku* session in which students work with Professor David McMurray of Kagoshima International University, creating haiku in English while networking with students from other year groups. The following month, all first- and second-year students attend a two-day *English Camp* in which they take part in language activities and attend relevant lectures. Every month, an *English Lecture* is held at which an invited speaker addresses students on a particular issue—of course in English. This year's lectures revolved around an environmental theme, in line with a general focus our English Department is pursuing.

We often run movie nights, watching a movie together and discussing it later. Popular cultural festivals such as Halloween and Valentines Day are also celebrated, usually with theme parties. At Christmas, we hold a one-day English intensive course during which the students rotate through a cycle of six Christmas-based activities. We collaborate with outside groups, such as Kitakyushu City's International Centre or the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), to run one-day programmes on such topics as *Pacific Island Culture* (2006) or *Poems for Mother Earth* (2007). This year we are also planning a weekend intensive programme in which students will commit themselves to two days of English-only activities in an all-English environment. In between these activities, the native-English teachers hold frequent office events, such as luncheons and discussions, to give the students ample opportunity to use their

English.

Although it is still too early to see the results of these intensive programmes, in the English Department we have been able to see significant improvements in scores on our annual placement test (ACE Placement Test <<http://www.english-assessment.org>>, a commercially-available composite examination that tests grammar, vocabulary, listening, and reading skills) given at the beginning and end of the 2006 school year. Students showed an average gain of over 30 points (or around 15%). More tellingly, during end-of-year course evaluation meetings, all Oral English class teachers reported definite improvements in communicative ability, more often than not tied to greater confidence and an increased willingness to engage in English communication. Although not empirical evidence, these would suggest that the extra-curricular activities are serving a positive function in stimulating learner progress.

Of greater relevance to this paper are the international studies English language programmes run through Seinan's Faculty of Humanities. Currently we run programmes in three countries: The United States of America (Mercer University), Great Britain (Winchester University), and Australia (University of Southern Queensland). These will hopefully be supplemented by programmes in Canada and New Zealand in the near future. Other language programmes are also run in China and Korea. The purpose of these programmes is to put our students into an immersion language-learning situation where they have no choice but to use the target language.

Immersion Language Learning

The use of immersion language programmes in assisting with communicative skill building has been well documented. Immersion learning was first developed in Canada in the 1960s as a means to foster French language education in elementary schools in which the home L1 was English (Cummins, 2000). While immersion in some

form has been a feature of language education for many years, this was the first programme to receive any long-term scrutiny and evaluation. Although some deficiencies were found in the programme, Cummins concluded that, “students gain(ed) fluency and literacy in French at no apparent cost to their English academic skills.” In many bilingualism studies, this has been a constant finding; that students in bi/multi-lingual situations not only do not suffer for it, but in most cases actually benefit. Keegan (1996) cites the research of Peal and Lambert in 1962 who, in comparing monolingual and bilingual children from similar backgrounds, found that bilingual children significantly outperformed monolingual children in all tests performed.

Immersion programmes work on the benefits of bilingualism as a basis for learning, though they do this by temporarily ‘forsaking’ the L1 in favour of developing the L2, knowing that in doing so the L1 will not be hindered or stunted. Indeed, they foster a natural form of learning much in the same way a child learns its mother tongue (Potaka-Dewes & Engler, 2006). Instead of working on the structure of the target language, it is used as the basis for communication, information giving, and instruction.

With these benefits in mind, many institutions with language-learning courses encourage their students to participate in international studies programmes as a form of immersion learning. Far from home in an unknown setting, studying with fellow students of many differing nationalities, learning in an all-English environment, and probably homestayng with a local family, the students are not only using and developing their English because they want to, but because they need to in order to communicate and live.

The Japanese Immersion Learner

Many stereotypes exist about Japanese students, both in their home environments and when participating in international studies programmes. During interviews with lecturers in international studies programmes, the writers

have often heard students being referred to as quiet, passive, unresponsive, or possessing a herd mentality for sticking with other Japanese students. The students themselves often discuss these issues after returning from study sessions abroad. *M-san*, a student who studied at the post-graduate level in Australia, described her fellow Japanese students as “really quiet, serious, and a bit (self-) conscious.” She found students from Southeast Asian countries to be far more responsive and assertive in classes, “always asking questions and stuff.” *K-san*, who also studied in Australia, found Japanese students focused too much on writing down everything the teachers said, rather than concentrating on what the teacher was trying to say. Australian students, by contrast, only wrote what they were told to record, so spent more time actively participating in the lessons. She stated, “For me, Australians are trying to learn in class, but Japanese are more like thinking about studying at home.” She also noted the cultural differences in attitudes toward the teachers, with Japanese students tending to place greater trust on what the teacher says, rather than thinking for themselves. This led to less participation in class because of fear of errors. “I think Japanese people need to be positive, be strong, and try not to care about making mistakes.”

It is not the purpose of this paper to determine the validity (or invalidity) of these and other stereotypes, but to lay the groundwork for a study into the learning styles of Japanese students when placed in immersion learning situations, particularly in international study programmes. We will begin with an overview of the study of learning styles and how they might apply to a language-learning context. We will then lay down some parameters for field study and research for the next stages in this research project. The overarching goal of this study is to examine whether there are, in fact, patterns of learning that are applicable to Japanese language learners in non-domestic settings, and if such patterns do exist, how can knowledge of them help educators better prepare students for study in immersion

programmes overseas?

Learning Style Theory: An Overview

Many models of learning styles have been put forward. In general, these can be organized under theories of information processing, personality patterns, or social interaction (Conner, 2007). Information processing covers the way we organize and use information, within which the most prominent models are Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (Kolb, 1984) and Gregorc's Mind Styles Model (Gregorc, 1985). Personality patterns deal with values and emotions, an understanding of which allows us to better predict behaviour. Within this field, Gardner's (1985) theories on multiple intelligences, the Myers-Brigg Type Indicator (a commercial instrument for assessing individual differences. See <<http://www.cpp.com/products/mbti/index.asp>>), and Keirsey's Temperament Sorter (Keirsey, 1998) are most likely to be known. Social interaction examines "likely attitudes, habits, and strategies learners will take toward their work and how they engage with their peers when they learn" (Conner, 2007). While all these models are worth examining, we have chosen to focus on Kolb's theory of learning styles because it provides a better instrument within which to gauge where Japanese students stand in relation to students from other countries, and identify what (if any) cultural differences exist in the way they learn in immersion situations.

Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory

The theory behind Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory states that all of us rely on a four-stage cycle in experiential learning. In general, learners exhibit a preference for either *concrete experience* or *abstract conceptualization* in the way they absorb information, and utilize either *reflective observation* or *active experimentation* in the way that information is internalized. All of us rely to some extent on all four of these learning modes:

- Concrete Experience (CE)
- Reflective Observation (RO)
- Abstract Conceptualization (AC)
- Active Experimentation (AE)

A truly effective learner uses all four modes by first becoming involved in some new experience, then reflecting on and observing the experience from many different angles. Next, these observations are used to develop logical theories that are finally used to solve problems and make decisions.

Although we each, to some extent, use all four of these learning styles, we usually depend more heavily on one or two of them. A high score on the inventory in the area of concrete experience indicates a person who relies heavily on feeling-based judgments. These individuals tend to be empathetic and people oriented. They also benefit most from discussion. A high score in abstract conceptualization on the inventory indicates a learner who relies on logical thinking and rational evaluation. These people tend to rely more on things and symbols than on other people in their learning experiences. They are more comfortable with theoretical and systematic analyses than discovery learning, such as exercises and simulations. An individual who scores highly in the active experimentation areas indicates they are a "doer" whose orientation to learning depends much on experimentation. They are usually extroverts who avoid passive learning, such as class lectures, and prefer to do such tasks as homework, projects, or group discussions. People who score highly on the reflective observation portion of the inventory are those who lean towards tentative, impartial, and reflective approaches to learning. They are usually introverted and prefer to take the role of impartial objective observers. A more graphic breakdown of this learning cycle can be found in Appendix 1.

Based on research and clinical observations, Kolb (1984) developed his definitions of learning styles using the terms *converging*, *diverging*, *assimilating* and *accommodating*. Figure 1

illustrates the relationships observed between learning modes and styles.

	<i>Doing</i> (Active Experimentation - AE)	<i>Watching</i> (Reflective Observation - RO)
<i>Feeling</i> (Concrete Experience - CE)	<i>Accommodating</i> (CE/AE)	<i>Diverging</i> (CE/RO)
<i>Thinking</i> (Abstract Conceptualization - AC)	<i>Converging</i> (AC/AE)	<i>Assimilating</i> (AC/RO)

Figure 1. A matrix of Kolb's learning styles

Converging learners' dominant learning abilities are abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. These individuals are strong in the area of the practical application of ideas. They are usually unemotional, being more comfortable dealing with things rather than people. They usually major in physical science, so this is the learning style of many engineers.

Diverging types of learners are best at concrete experience and reflective observation. These people are creative and have imaginative abilities. They can view situations from many perspectives and use strategies such as brainstorming to solve problems. These people tend to be in the humanities and liberal arts. Counselors, and personnel managers tend to be divergers.

Assimilating learners' major learning abilities are abstract conceptualization and reflective observation. These people create theoretical models and excel in inductive reasoning. They are less interested in people than in abstract concepts. Theories are actually more important to these individuals than the practical application of those theories. This learning style is often found in the areas of research and planning, where their basic science and mathematical skills are highly valued.

Learners who are accommodating find their strength in concrete experience and active experimentation. As "risk-takers," they enjoy learning anything that involves them in new experiences. They can adapt themselves to specific immediate circumstances. They are problem

solvers, but may come across as impatient and pushy. They are action-oriented and can often be found in marketing or sales.

Learning Styles in Context

In their *Preliminary Report on Linguistic Readiness of Japanese Students Studying at an American University*, Woolbright, Hayashi, and Nishioka (2006) looked at the perceived strengths and weaknesses of Japanese students studying at Mercer University in Macon, GA.—a private American university. Eight Japanese students and eight native English instructors were interviewed for the study, using two questionnaires. The instructors all found Japanese female students to be highly motivated with good study skills, but lacking in the skill of self-expression due to a lack of linguistic experience. The students all felt that they were better able to achieve progress in their English ability in the United States because they were compelled to use English to survive.

The above study helped the authors realize that Japanese language students actually have their own learning style, as do students from other cultures. This learning style is a mixture of not only diversity in individual learning styles, but also a difference in cultural learning styles.

Their research suggested the theme for this current research project: "What if we paid more attention to individual and group learning styles when we plan our lessons as language teachers?"

The following comments came from native English instructors at Mercer University who suggest that the learning styles of Asian students—and in particular, Japanese students—differ from students from other cultural backgrounds:

"I think a lot of Japanese students are polite and respectful. The only thing I can think is that participation is in need of improvement. They're not risk takers."

"For me the most frustrating thing is to try to get them to dialogue with you. Umm,

they, and this is cultural, it's not their fault. After they get here a while, they begin to do that because they begin to model after their classmates, but when they initially come, and generally, I would see them in those initial stages, they are very hesitant to dialogue because that's not what they're accustomed to, and umm, I think that if a college wanted to truly be successful in their English program, they would have to adopt that philosophy that students should be able to dialogue, should be able to express their opinions, should ask questions."

"Study habits... ooh this is difficult. They copy stuff out of the book, but they spend so much time with that, so they don't get out. [Too disciplined] They need to get out more and use the language."

"They cannot accept the fact that they can do less than perfect and still be successful in learning. I find them better prepared than my Latin or Middle Eastern students. I don't find them as prepared in grammar as my Korean students."

These teachers listed Japanese students' strengths as politeness, enthusiasm, organization, preparation, and diligence with good study habits. The weak points mentioned were a lack of participation in class, getting discouraged, and not asking for help. Several instructors mentioned not seeking out help.

"They'll go to maybe a friend or someone else, but they won't go to a professor or the learning skills center or a place they might be able to get the appropriate help they need. That's the biggest weakness I see because in a sense it embarrasses them to have to admit they don't know how to do something, whereas the American student is accustomed to saying, 'I don't know how to do this.'"

One teacher thought Japanese students were too serious. "I don't see any weaknesses, just the fact they need to lighten up."

Another teacher commented, "They're very reserved. Making choices is difficult for them, and I find that very difficult to help them overcome." One teacher remarked that strengths could also be weaknesses.

"Again, I would tend to say strengths: study habits, study skills. Umm...but that can also be a weakness cause the Japanese students who tend to learn are the outgoing ones who go play basketball in the gym and umm go off to parties or whatever. But they're with other people. The people oriented ones that umm is good for language study."

One obstacle would be, females, women students in Japan, are not as accustomed to expressing their opinions as American women are, and that is an obstacle in an American University because rather than express an opinion, they will remain quiet. Another obstacle is in that same category of ideas is their fear of being thought of as not smart or not intelligent because they can't express themselves well, and again, they won't communicate because of that, and it's not so much the case with American students. They generally will come right out and say whatever they want to.

Partly the shyness. Umm...and another thing would be encouraging them to come up with really original ideas... Creativity. For example, in a persuasive essay, to get a strong opinion and follow up on it. It's almost like it's uncool to behave too strongly, and the Thais are like that too."

One teacher thought it was an Asian thing.

“I think that they have a tendency to be very Asian, and they have a difficult time presenting themselves with problems to the teacher. Arguing or bringing his or her own opinion to the situation. When I ask, “What’s wrong?” or “Why do you seem to be upset with this?” or “Do you understand why I’ve marked that?” they won’t accept the fact that I had given them a 60, but they won’t ask, “why?” The Turkish will and the Middle Eastern students, and the French, and all the African students. That’s the way they learned to do that with their native culture. Of course, we’re dealing with an Asian culture. The teacher is always right, and we say “Hey, we make mistakes. Let’s talk about what I said and why you feel this way.”

Observations of the data collected in these interviews indicate that although the instructors found Japanese students to be highly motivated with good study skills, their communication skills (such as the ability to express their own opinions, to argue their point, or to seek help and advice), were very weak. The students themselves, on the other hand, felt that although they were making progress in English, they often were frustrated with the American communication style, with its lack of concern for cultural differences and varied accents.

Future Directions

There is a wealth of research material available that deals specifically with learning styles and the language learner, with a reasonable proportion directly related to an Asian context. A number of studies do deal specifically with Japanese students, but there appears to be little that examines the learning styles of Japanese

L2 learners when they are in a non-domestic, immersion-type learning situation. The study by Woolbright, et al (2006), though limited in scope, would suggest that Japanese students studying overseas do (initially anyway) have learning problems that they might not experience at home in a familiar environment. It would also suggest that these differences are culturally related, and are researchable within a learning-styles model.

With this in mind, it is the intention of the writers to undertake a case study, initially in New Zealand but later in other countries, to determine whether, in fact, these differences do exist in measurable amounts. This will be done by a series of interviews with instructors and students at a number of institutions that cater to foreign students throughout the country. It will also be accompanied by observations of lessons in which Japanese students are taking part.

In addition, two questionnaires (one for instructors, one for Japanese students) will be made available online for which submissions will be sought from language schools, universities, and other institutions around the world. Data obtained from these surveys will help us to gauge the validity of data gathered during our interviews and observations in New Zealand. If, in fact, it is found that there are culturally determined learning styles that are hindering our students when they study in international programmes, we will then be in a better position to develop an orientation programme that will help them more adequately prepare for their time overseas.

References

- Conner, M. L. (2007). *Introduction to learning styles. Ageless learner*. Available online: <http://agelesslearner.com/intros/lstyleintro.html>
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Immersion education for the millennium: What we have learned from 30 years of research on second language immersion*. Available online: <http://www.>

- iteachilearn.com/cummins/immersion2000.html
- Fishman, J., & Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Gardner, H. (1985). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books Inc.
- Gregorc, A. F. (1985). *An adult's guide to style (2nd. ed.)*. Columbia, CT: Gregorc Associates Inc.
- Keegan, P. (1996). *The benefits of immersion education: A review of the New Zealand and overseas literature*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Keirse, D. (1998). *Please understand me: 2*. Del Mar, CA.: Prometheus Nemesis Book Co.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984) *The Learning Style Inventory: Technical Manual*. Boston, MA.: McBer & Co.
- Lazear, D. (1991). *Seven ways of knowing: Teaching for multiple intelligences*. Palatine, IL.: IRI/Skylight Publishing, Inc.
- Potaka-Dewes, T. M., & Engler, S. (2006). Developing and assessing a language immersion camp. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2005 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.
- Rausch A. (1996). Learning styles, learning strategies, and the Japanese University second language student. *Journal of Aomori University & Aomori Junior College*, 19, pp 71-96.
- Smith, D. M., & Kolb, D. A. (1986). *The User's Guide for the Learning-Style Inventory: A Manual for Teachers and Trainers*. McBer & Company. Boston, MA.
- Woolbright, L., Hayashi, Y., & Nishioka, K., (2006) Preliminary report on linguistic readiness of Japanese students studying at an American university. *Seinan Jo Gakuin University Research Bulletin*, 10, pp133-142.

Appendix 1

A Summary of the Four Stages of the Learning Cycle (adapted from Kolb, 1984)

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE (CE)

This stage of the learning cycle emphasizes everyday involvement with people. CE people rely more on their feelings than on any systematic approach to problems and situations. In learning situations, they rely on their ability to be open-minded and adaptable to change.

Learn from feeling

- Learning from specific experiences
- Relating to people
- Being sensitive to feelings and people

REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION (RO)

RO people understand ideas or situations from different points of view. In a learning situation they rely on patience, objectivity and careful judgment but do not necessarily take any action. They rely on their own thoughts and feelings in forming opinions.

Learn by watching and listening

- Carefully observing before making judgements
- Viewing issues from different perspectives
- Looking for the meaning of things

ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION (AC)

AC learners use logic and ideas rather than feelings to understand problems or situations. Usually, they rely on systematic planning or theories to solve problems.

Learn by thinking

- Logically analyzing ideas
- Systematic planning
- Acting on an intellectual understanding of a situation

ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION (AE)

AE people experiment with influencing or changing situations. They take a practical approach and are concerned with what really works, rather than simply watching a situation. They value getting things done and seeing the results of their influence and ingenuity.

Learn by doing

- Ability to get things done
- Risk-taking
- Influencing people and events through action

学習スタイルとイマージョンの言語学習者について：予備的研究

マルコム・ロス・スワンソン デニス・ウールブライト

八尋 春海

<要 旨>

ウールブライト、林、西岡による2006年の研究は、海外で学ぶ日本人学生の学習スタイルの文化に基づく傾向について行ったものである。研究では日本人学生たちは海外で過ごす利点を活かさないという傾向が明らかになった。本論は本著者たちの研究プロジェクトの予備研究であり、まず海外における国際的な研究として、イマージョン教育の潜在的価値について検討をする。そしてKolbの学習スタイルに焦点をあてつつ、学習スタイルの概観をまとめる。この方法は、海外において語学学習をする日本人学生と他の文化を持つグループとの比較の研究領域において、最も適切なものとして選ばれたものである。本論は、本研究プロジェクトの将来における方向性を示し、かつ学生たちが海外で学習する際に、より望ましい心構えができるようなプログラムの構築を最終的な目標とするものである。

キーワード：学習スタイル、文化の相違、コルブ、イマージョン