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ABSTRACT

Information is offered in this paper to aid teachers of Asian Americans in their understanding of the language learning problems which Asian Americans may encounter. Language learning is considered a social phenomenon which cannot be dissociated from other life experiences. A reading program should match the cognitive style and learning modalities of the students. The language backgrounds of Asian Americans differ from generation to generation and from country to country. Many students are already bilingual or trilingual, factors which may aid them in understanding English. The cultural patterns and value orientations of the Asian societies which emphasize reflection and self-restraint can influence cognitive and affective variables in language learning. Asian students may be less verbal and less willing to take risks, traits which hinder learning to read and speak a second language. Reading teachers should know that Asian students may have highly developed visual-memories and may be familiar with a total-modality process similar to the Fernald technique. (HKM)

The Asian Connection

Grace E. Lee

Asia is a vast continent spanning approximately 16 million square miles of land from Europe east to the Pacific, and from the Arctic south to the Indian Ocean. Students in California schools of East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) and Southeast Asian (Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian) ancestry comprise the largest group of ethnic minorities from that part of the world. The process in their endeavor to attain literacy in English needs to be viewed by educators from the broader context of linguistic, experiential, cultural, cognitive, as well as affective components. It is the purpose of this paper to offer some basic understandings regarding these variables within the life experiences of Asian learners so as to facilitate this process.

Language Differences of Asian Americans

Generally speaking, there are three generations of Asian Americans in this country. The first generation is largely made up of new immigrants who may or may not speak English. Their basic struggle is toward economic survival while attempting to learn a new language and culture. In comparison, the second generation has a better command of English and appears comfortable with the American culture. Many have attempted to blend into the dominant culture, some by renouncing their traditional culture while others refuse to speak the parents' native language. Third generation Asian Americans are largely fluent in English. Many desire identification with both their eastern and western cultural heritages, thus experiencing periods of identity crisis.

A knowledge of language backgrounds of immigrant students is helpful to teachers in terms of planning reading and language instruction. For instance, there are some monolingual Spanish-speaking Chinese from Cuba or South America who have retained both cultures. Recent Vietnamese refugees may be monolingual or bilingual, Vietnamese-French, or trilingual, Vietnamese-French-English.

The student who speaks French or Spanish would understand many words in English which share similar phonemes and cognates. If literate in these languages, he would also have learned a largely similar set of alphabet. Literacy in English, therefore, becomes a rapid process of transferring what is already learned in the native French or Spanish to English as a

second language (ESL). On the other hand, the student who comes from Korea, and who may never have been exposed to the English language, would have to learn English as a foreign language (EFL).

Due to the strong influence of the Chinese language and culture in centuries past, the writings of Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese have retained various degrees of usage of Chinese writing. The spoken languages, like Chinese, are monosyllabic, non-inflected and tonal, each having unique syntactical structures emphasizing rigid word order. Prepositions are non-existent; the use of sentence-ending particles are preponderant.

Cambodian, unlike most Indo-Chinese languages, is largely polysyllabic, written in a script derived from India. Many Cambodians are bilingual, with French as their second language. Modern Filipinos have Tagalog as their national language, and many are fluent speakers of Spanish.

In California, it is commonplace to have several ethnic minorities represented in one classroom while few teachers are able to communicate with students in their native languages. The effective teacher would want to make certain that his or her classroom reflects the presence and contributions of the diverse cultures and language families.

Cultural Patterns and Value Orientations

In Asian societies, where free public education is an emerging phenomenon, scholars are traditionally held in high esteem, and education is regarded as the best means of economic upward mobility. Immigrant parents, overwhelmed by the opportunity to educate every child, often hold expectations of high achievement, thereby exerting strong and subtle pressure on their children to perform. Meanwhile, the immigrant children are experiencing culture shock as well as language barriers in the "outside" world, while attempting to satisfy their own and their parents' achievement motivation. Failure in accomplishing this juggling act results in the cultural constraint called "shame," thereby "losing face." Ultimately, this manifests itself in lowered self-concept, which becomes internalized by the student as "being inferior."

Asian cultures emphasize reflection over past history, strong family ties, and development of oneself in harmony with nature, whereas the dominant value orientations of middle-class America look toward the future, with individuals accomplishing tasks which would give them a sense of mastery over their environment. Following Confucian philosophy, Asian parents encourage deference over aggressiveness or quarrels. Self-

restraint, yielding in the face of dispute, and polite refusal are considered mature behavior and duly praised. Such behavior may not be understood by Americans whose culture rewards self-reliance, independence, and individual freedom. In fact, it is often misinterpreted to mean a lack of courage and conviction.

In addition, teachers are generally more concerned with aggressive behavior than with withdrawn, anxious, or unhappy behavior. Thus, the Asian student's needs, values, and thinking may go unnoticed, further reducing his interest in learning. For some Asian students, teachers and school may be their only contact with the dominant society. Intercultural sensitivity and values clarification on the part of the teachers become crucial, for the lack of it could create stress points which may block learning for the students. (1, 6)

Cognitive and Affective Variables in Language Learning

Individual differences in cognitive organization and functioning are found to be self-consistent and enduring and seem to co-vary with personality types. (4) For example, Chinese- and Japanese-American male college students appear to have higher quantitative scores in comparison to verbal performance. Thus, the quantitative activities which emphasize the structured, logical, concrete, and impersonal attributes may be compensating for the cultural values emphasizing restraint in verbal expressions, especially of strong feelings. (8)

Kagan (5) has referred to the differential decision times in problem solving situations, termed "conceptual tempo," which is related to the behaviors of reserve and perseverance. Reflective children are thought to be more efficient in inductive reasoning and tend to make fewer errors in reading, while impulsive thinkers may be more willing to take risks, and, therefore, become faster readers. (3) The traditional favoring of perseverance, reserve, and patience — indicative of the reflective conceptual tempo — have prompted Asian students to strive for higher standards of performance while handling anxieties through self-restraint, denial, and repression. Such strains on their mental health have caused great consternation on the part of personnel involved in the educative process.

Ego, otherwise termed self-knowledge, self-esteem, and self-confidence, seems to play an important role in success in learning a language. Brown (4) has suggested that during the process of pronouncing strange sounds, and making mistakes, one risks being laughed at. Strong tendencies toward inhibition, a key obstacle to language learning, may be overcome by a healthy "language ego." He further pointed out that in acquiring a new

language, one must interact with a new society and develop an understanding of that speech community. Language seems to be one of the primary means in attaining such empathy.

Mannerisms and Stereotypes

It has been said, inaccurately, that Asians are the "successful, model minority" who have "made it" in America. In the classrooms, Asian students often are perceived as high achievers who excel in academics without exhibiting any disciplinary problems. Many teachers have come to expect them to remain obedient and cooperative. In order to conform to teachers' expectations, Asian students may remain passive and unquestioning. The student who is boisterous or verbal, or who happens to be a low achiever, risks the teachers' ire for violating the stereotype.

What is often misinterpreted as passivity is a shyness which is more aptly described as a reserved attitude. Along with modesty and humility, they are important social graces in the Asian cultures which may prevent a student from volunteering information in class, for he is traditionally discouraged from open demonstration of his knowledge or skills unless called upon to do so. In addition, a lack of language competence to phrase a question correctly, or a desire not to embarrass the teacher who may not have explained clearly, reinforces a cultural trait of not talking back to adults nor questioning their opinions.

The reluctance to risk one's "dignity," a guarded trait in Asian societies, strengthens inhibition in language learning and may be regarded by teachers as undesirable behavior. Covering one's mouth with a hand while talking or laughing is another cultural trait which may be counterproductive to learning English, a comparatively breathy language, which requires unobstructed streams of air to pass through the speech musculature in order to formulate the various vowel sounds.

Other students may avoid eye contact with teachers due to the traditional down-cast eye as a sign of respect, as well as an indication of listening intently. Teachers need to guide Asian students gently toward a willingness to develop face-to-face interaction during language learning and oral reading.

Learning Styles

Child-rearing practices in Asian societies have consistently minimized the importance of physical exploration or manipulation of environment while emphasizing visual incorporation and mastery. Coupled with a perennial shortage of books and printed materials, students learn to place a premium on visual memory so as to make the most of such resources when they are available.

Visual learning is further reinforced by writing systems that include Chinese logograms; which may constitute from ten to fifty percent of loan words in Vietnamese, Japanese, and Korean government documents and classical literature. The process of learning logograms taxes heavily one's ability to discern distinctive visual features and the exact sequence of each stroke. A procedure is repeated many times over until the word "takes" and becomes functional. The use of the index finger for tracing each stroke, and the constant use of a dictionary, are two skills which Asian students acquire early in their school career. The American counterpart for this total-modality reading process is known as the Fernald Method, which is largely reserved for the severely reading-disabled students. However, it makes good sense in terms of efficiency both in teaching and learning that East Asian students, especially those who have become accustomed to this method, learn to read English using this approach.

Traditionally written materials in East Asia are set in vertical lines, to be read from top of the line to the bottom, and from the right edge of the page to the left. Books are bound on the right hand margin, rather than the left. Therefore, the entire mechanical process of eye movement in reading, and hand movement in turning pages, are drastically different from that in western societies. The awkwardness and lack of coordination experienced by Asian students during beginning English reading programs should be met with understanding and patient guidance.

Summary

The suggestions contained herein are basic, working generalizations offered for consideration by classroom teachers. Language learning is a social phenomenon which cannot be dissociated from one's other life experiences. A reading program which matches the cognitive style and learning modalities of a student allows him to maintain his self-esteem while developing intellectual abilities as well as other affective objectives. The effective teacher, sensitive and responsive to the cultural, linguistic, cognitive, and affective diversities among Asian students, will have made "The Asian Connection."

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