

Iranian Students' Attitudes toward the Existing Stereotypes about Asian Learner

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Abstract: In the recent EFL/ESL literature, the common assumptions about Asian students, which describe them as reticent, passive and obedient learners, have been widely criticized as invalid overgeneralizations that may lead to dangerous cultural stereotypes. These assumptions have been mostly questioned based on the attitude surveys of East Asian students and teachers. The present study, on the contrary, provides evidence for these assumptions based on the data obtained through Littlewood's (2001) questionnaire as well as classroom discussions with participants. The data obtained through questionnaire partially questioned validity of common stereotypes yet since there was an apparent discrepancy between the collected data and the author's expectations and observations, a series of discussions was hold with participants that provided evidence for the existing stereotypes rather than the questionnaire generated data. Results of this study were also compared with Littlewood's (2001) findings about the students' attitudes to classroom English learning in East Asia and Europe that showed significant differences between students' attitudes in Iran, East Asia and Europe. It is concluded that cultural stereotypes need to be investigated with different methods in different contexts in order to find out to what extent they are valid.

Key words: Asian learner; Iranian students; cultural stereotypes; students' attitudes

1. Introduction

In the recent years, the common assumptions often made about *Asian learner* have been the subject of an ongoing debate in ESL/EFL. According to these assumptions, Asian learners are often characterized by: total obedience to teachers, lack of critical thinking, and low participation in classroom activities (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). However, some scholars have challenged validity of these assumptions and warned about their wide generalization as cultural stereotypes (Pennycook, 1998; Littlewood, 2000, 2001; Cheng 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Stepleton, 2002; Liu, 1998; Gan, 2008).

For example, in an informal survey study about teachers' attitudes towards Asian learners' reticence and passivity, Cheng (2000) reported that teachers mostly challenged the stereotypes set up against Asian learners. Then, he argued that Asian learners' reticence and passivity is largely a groundless myth, and that if some Asian students are observed to be quiet, this is because of differences between teaching methodologies and lack of proficiency in English language rather than their cultural background.

In another attitude survey study in Japan, Stepleton (2002) found that the students had a little hesitation to voice opinions against the authority figures, and that the students had a firm grasp of elements of critical thinking. Accordingly, he concluded that the traditional constructs that describe Asian students as non-critical thinking, harmony-seeking passive learners are no longer accurate.

In an attempt to explore to what extent the generalizations made about Asian learners correspond to the students' own preferences and perceptions, Littlewood (2001) conducted a large scale survey study on the students' attitudes to classroom English learning amongst 2656 students in East Asia and Europe. He found that most students in all these countries questioned traditional authority-based transmission mode of learning, wished to participate actively in exploring knowledge, and had positive attitudes towards working purposefully, in groups, towards common goals.

However, the author's observations, as an Iranian EFL teacher who has the experience of both learning and teaching English as a foreign language in Iran for many years, were not in line with what Littlewood (2001) and other similar studies reported. The author has observed that most of Iranian students seem to be quite comfortable with the traditional authority-based transmission mode of learning; they are reluctant to participate in the interactions going on in the classroom; and avoid working in groups. The author's colleagues, in different fields of study, also repeatedly complain about similar observations in their classes.

Thus, since there was an apparent discrepancy between the results of these studies and the author's personal observations and expectations, and also since most of the empirical research about Asian learner was based on the data obtained through questionnaire from students and teachers in East Asia, the author of the present study decided to investigate the students' attitudes in Iran, a country in the Middle East that has been less investigated, through a combination of questionnaire and discussion with participants in order to explore to what extent the common assumptions often made about Asian learners are valid about Iranian students.

The present study also intends to see if there are any differences between Iranian students and other students in East Asia and Europe in their attitudes to classroom English learning. To achieve such an aim, the results of the present study will be compared with those published by Littlewood's (2001). The same questionnaire used by Littlewood was employed in the present study in order to make the results of the two studies comparable. This questionnaire was used to investigate the students' attitudes to four factors: 1) working in groups; 2) teacher's authority and speaking out in classroom; 3) perception of learning; and 4) nature of achievement motivation.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

One hundred university students at Hormozgan University in Iran participated in this study. They were studying English as minor, in year 1 to 3 at BA level. The age of students ranged from 18 to 22 and they were majored in Engineering, management, statistics, biology, and psychology. Most of the subjects were female students (60 %) because the female students were the dominant population.

2.2 Instrument and procedures

The data for the present study comes from two sources: 1) The data collected through Littlewood's (2001) questionnaire, 2) Discussions with participants about their responses to the questionnaire.

Littlewood's (2001) questionnaire, which consisted 12 items aimed to explore four factors, is presented below. The item numbers refer to the order of items in the actual questionnaire:

Factor 1. students' attitudes to working in groups

1. I feel more relaxed when we work in small groups than when the whole class works together.
8. I like activities where I am part of a group in which we are all working towards common goals.
12. I like activities where there is a lot of discussion with classmates in small groups (of between 3 and 5 students).

Factor 2. students' attitudes to speaking out in class & to the teacher's authority

5. In the open classroom, I do not like to 'stand out' by voicing my opinions or asking questions.
9. Sometimes I feel nervous to answer a question because I am afraid of being wrong.
6. In the classroom I see the teacher as somebody whose authority should not be questioned.

Factor 3. students' perceptions of learning

11. I see knowledge as something that the teacher should pass on to me rather than something that I should discover myself.
3. I expect the teacher (rather than me myself) to be responsible for evaluating how much I have learnt.

Factor 4. the nature and strength of students' motivation

10. In the classroom I am always very eager to perform well and correctly in what I do.
2. I work especially hard when I can see a practical purpose in what I am asked to do.

4. When I am working in a group, I like to help keep the atmosphere friendly and harmonious.
7. I work especially hard when my own success will benefit other people (e.g. my family or other students) as well as me.

This questionnaire was translated into Persian and distributed among students in author's General English classes. Prior to completing the questionnaires, the students were assured that their responses will be used only for the purpose of research, they would not affect their score on English, and there are no right or wrong answers.

The data obtained through questionnaire were coded on a five point Likert scale: 'Strongly Disagree' was scored as 1, 'Disagree' as 2, 'Neutral' as 3, 'Agree' as 4 and 'Strongly Agree' as 5. The higher scores indicated a more positive attitude towards the four factors.

Data analyses of the questionnaire data were then carried out using the statistical package SPSS 16.0. The major statistical procedures used in the analyses of the data were: (1) Descriptive statistics; and (2) Independent-samples t-test. The means and standard deviations for each of the 12 items and 4 factors were calculated. Analyses of variance between the Iranian students' responses and the data published by Littlewood (2001) about the students' responses in East Asia and Europe were performed by the use of t-test.

Since some parts of the results obtained through questionnaire were not in line with the author's classroom observations and her teaching/learning experiences, she discussed the issue with her colleagues to discover to what extent the students' responses to the questionnaire represent their attitudes and behavior in classroom. The students' responses to a number of questionnaire items astonished my colleagues. For example, the students had showed positive attitudes to discovering knowledge rather than receiving it from the teacher passively but my colleagues stated that they show just the opposite in class. Then, in order to find more reliable data, the author held a series of discussions with participants about their responses, the results of which will be presented in Results section along with the results of questionnaire generated data.

3. Results and discussion

The means and standard deviations obtained from Iranian students' responses will be presented for each of the 4 factors and the items attributed to them. The results of Littlewood's (2001) study for East Asia and Europe will also be presented beside Iran for the ease of comparison.

3.1 Students' attitudes to working in groups (factor 1)

It is said that Asian culture highly values collectivism (Hofstede, 1994), accordingly Asian learners are assumed to show positive attitudes to group work. The questionnaire generated data seem to support such an assumption, as Table 1 shows, the majority of Iranian students

approached working in groups with positive attitudes. Besides, item 8 received the highest figure (4.24) among the three items attributed to this factor. The frequency tables (can be obtained from the author) revealed that 90 % of the students provided positive responses to this item while only 60% of them showed positive attitudes to the other two items.

Table 1. Students' responses to factor 1(working in groups)

	Item 1 ^a		Item 8 ^b		Item 12 ^c		Factor 1
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean
Iran	3.56	0.96	4.24	0.85	3.74	0.88	3.83
East Asia	3.81	0.89	3.99	0.84	3.81	0.93	3.87
Europe	3.73	0.87	3.76	0.89	3.72	0.94	3.74

^a I feel more relaxed when we work in small groups than when the whole class works together.

^b I like activities where I am part of a group in which we are all working towards common goals.

^c I like activities where there is a lot of discussion with classmates in small groups (of between 3 and 5 students).

As Table 1 shows, little differences were observed between the raw mean scores of Iran, East Asia, and Europe; however, these differences were not statistically different. Such a result supports Littlewood's (2001) finding that the majority of students in East Asia and Europe approached working in groups with positive attitudes.

However, such a finding was in conflict with the author's classroom observations. Therefore, in order to achieve more reliable data, the author went to the classroom and asked participants to form small groups in order to study English. It was explained that each session, one member of the group will answer teacher's questions and her/his score will be assigned for the entire group. Most students rejected the idea and stated clearly that they prefer to work on their own. When she reminded them about their positive responses to this factor in the questionnaire, they said: "since group working is considered as a good thing, we selected positive responses to show that we are good persons but in reality it is quite different. When we work in groups, we may not achieve our goals no matter how hard we work because there is no guarantee that other members also do well and thus there is no way to predict the outcome". They also added: "when you work on your own, you will have more freedom to do the job in the way you wish to".

Thus, such a result contradicts the common assumptions about Asian learners yet it provides support for the previous findings that one of the most visible features of Asian students studying in western tertiary institutions is their negative response to and low level of participation in group work and group assignments (Hodne, 1997; Holmes, 2004).

The students' negative reply to the author's suggestion for group work might not be interpreted solely as an evidence for their negative attitude to group work; For example, it might possibly be in reaction to the assessment approach suggested by the author according to which

the marks for each individual were going to be determined by the performance of the entire group. Li and Cambell (2008) have also reported that Asian students expressed their strong negative feelings about the value and legitimacy of such an assessment approach. Their preference for individual work might also be attributed to the high emphasis they put on *goal* or *outcome*. As demonstrated earlier, item 8 (I like activities where I am part of a group in which we are all working towards common goals) received the highest score among other items perhaps because of the word *goal*. Participants also declared that when there is a practical goal, they will work far better. In complete agreement with what quoted from participants earlier, Wong (2004: 162) reported that Asian students preferred to 'work individually so that they can have full control of the final product'. Thus, it seems that more in depth investigations are needed on Asian students' attitudes to group work and the possible reasons behind such attitudes.

3.2 Students' attitudes to speaking out in class and to the teacher's authority

There is a common assumption that Asian students are silent obedient learners. The data obtained from Iranian students seem to support such an assumption. Items 9 and 5 were included to measure the extent to which the students are unwilling to ask questions, give responses, or voice opinions in the classroom. The students' responses to this items show that most of them (about 65%) feel nervous to answer questions in classroom. The frequency tables also show that 40% agreed with item 5 (*In the open classroom, I do not like to 'stand out' by voicing my opinions or asking questions*), the same portion disagreed with it, and 20% of them selected neutral responses. The students' responses to Item 6 also show that most of them (62%) believe in teacher as somebody whose authority should not be questioned. Discussions with participants also provided support for these findings.

Table 2. Students' responses to factor 2 (teacher's authority and speaking out in class)

	Item 5 ^a		Item 9 ^b		Item 6 ^c		Factor 2
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean
Iran	3.02	1.28	3.47	1.28	3.33	1.25	3.27
East Asia	3.01	1.07	3.62	1.01	2.46	1.03	3.03
Europe	2.93	1.09	3.32	1.07	2.53	1.02	2.93

^a In the open classroom, I do not like to 'stand out' by voicing my opinions or asking questions.

^b Sometimes I feel nervous to answer a question because I am afraid of being wrong.

^c In the classroom I see the teacher as somebody whose authority should not be questioned.

If we take factor 2 as a whole, the differences between Iran and Asia, and Iran and Europe are statistically different. As Table 2 shows, the mean score of Iran is higher than those of East Asia and Europe. Such a result does not support Littlewood (2001) that reported significant differences between Asia and Europe only on item 9 but not on items 5 and 6, however, it

confirms the common assumptions about Asian students that they are obedient, reticent, and more reluctant than their European counterparts to participate in the interactions in classroom.

Iranian students are silent obedient learners possibly because they are raised, encouraged and expected to be so; these characteristics are valued as positive attributes within Iranian culture. Silence, for example, is considered as a sign of wisdom and thoughtfulness in Persian literature. There are dozens of poems, anecdotes, and wise words on advantages of silence. Obedience is also strongly encouraged, taught, and practiced in Shia, the formal branch of Islam in Iran, which emphasizes unconditional obedience to God and God's representatives on earth including the holy prophet Muhammad, the holy 12 Imams, and the religious leader. Iranian culture also values obeying the elderly, teachers, and parents. For example, it is rude to voice opinions in the presence of these people without asking their permission. So silence and obedience are considered as signs of respect.

It has been argued that if Asian students are observed to be silent, passive, and obedient, this is because of situation specific factors such as social context, institutional context, educational traditions, teaching methodologies and lack of required foreign language proficiency rather than Asian culture (Cheng, 2000; Littlewood, 2000). However, it should be noted that even these situation specific factors are shaped and affected by culture because it has been shown that culture influences thought and behavior in many ways (Brislin, 1993; Gallois & Kallan, 1997; Gudykunst, 1994; Klopff, 1995; Samovar & Porter, 1995; Smith & Bond, 1993) and people act and react in certain ways because of cultural expectations (Kucer, 2001).

3.3 Students' perceptions of learning (factor 3)

Another common assumption about Asian students is that they are reluctant to be creative and critical and they like to receive knowledge from teacher passively. Questionnaire generated data in the present study contradicts such an assumption. As illustrated in Table 3, Iran's mean score on factor 3 is 2.93, which is the lowest figure among the mean scores it obtained for all factors. On item 11 (*I see knowledge as something that the teacher should pass on to me*), which obtained the lowest figure among all the twelve items, 76 % of Iranian students selected negative responses. On item 3 (*I expect the teacher (rather than me myself) to be responsible for evaluating how much I have learnt*); however, 66% of students selected positive answers.

Table 3. Students' responses to factor 3 (perception of learning)

	Item 11 ^a		Item 3 ^b		Factor 2
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean
Iran	2.18	1.19	3.96	1.05	2.93
East Asia	2.51	1.05	3.16	1.07	2.83
Europe	2.14	1.96	2.64	0.96	2.39

^aI see knowledge as something that the teacher should pass on to me rather than something that I

should discover myself.

^b I expect the teacher (rather than me myself) to be responsible for evaluating how much I have learnt.

As illustrated in Table 3, Iran's mean score (3.69) is higher than East Asia and Europe. The observed differences between Iran and Europe were statistically significant yet not between Iran and East Asia. This is in line with Littlewood's findings that showed significant differences between Asia and Europe as predicted by stereotypes that describe Asians as passive learners.

Discussions with participants, on the contrary, provided support for the common assumptions about Asian learners; the students admitted that on the questionnaire, they have responded according to their ideals not their real attitudes: "we have heard somewhere that being active is better than being passive, so we selected positive responses to demonstrate our high manners but in reality we feel quite comfortable to just sit down in class and listen to what teacher says". They also went on, "our teachers provide more than enough, more than we want so what remains for us to discover? We only have to bother to memorize them."

In teaching of EFL in Iran, which seems to be mostly dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method and an emphasis on rote learning, the students are trained to provide answers not to raise questions. Teachers try hard to explain everything in a way that no ambiguity is left; in return they expect students to pass everything they received to show that they have learnt. Thus, when there is no ambiguity and the students are expected to memorize, what sort of knowledge is left to be discovered actively? When the food is fully chewed and put in your mouth by someone else, what will remain for you to do? In addition where silence and obedience are considered as good characteristics, what is the use of raising questions or critical thinking?

3.4 Nature and strength of students' motivation (factor 4)

Table 4 shows, this factor consisted 4 items: Items 10 and 2 were included to investigate the students' attitudes to the common assumption about Asian learners that in countries where they are immigrants, they show a strong ability to succeed and often outperform students born locally. The Iranian students' responses seem to support such an assumption. On item 10 (*in the classroom I am always very eager to perform well and correctly in what I do*) 92% of the participants selected positive responses. On item 2 (*I work especially hard when I can see a practical purpose in what I am asked to do*) also 94% of students provided positive responses. Littlewood (2001) reported significant differences between East Asia and Europe on item 2; but it was the European students who demonstrated the highest level of agreement not Asians as predicted by the common assumptions.

Item 4 were included to examine the attitudes to another common assumption about Asian learners that they concern for maintaining harmony within their working groups. Iranian students' responses were also in line with such an assumption; 94 % of them provided positive responses to this item. Littlewood has also reported that Asian and European students were

equally concerned to maintaining harmony within their working groups. On item 7 (*I work especially hard when my own success will benefit other people as well as me*), which was intended to measure the extent to which the students' motivation is socially oriented, 92% of Iranian students opted for positive responses. This is in line with the general assumption that achievement motivation is more likely to be socially oriented in Asian collectivist societies.

Table 4. Students' responses to factor 4 (nature and strength of motivation)

	Item 10 ^a		Item 2 ^b		Item 4 ^c		Item 7 ^d		Factor 4
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean
Iran	4.31	0.78	4.52	0.72	4.51	0.69	4.39	0.89	4.43
East Asia	3.61	0.87	3.99	0.83	4.24	0.77	4.04	0.85	3.97
Europe	3.52	0.84	4.15	0.75	4.24	0.66	3.58	0.81	3.88

^a In the classroom I am always very eager to perform well and correctly in what I do.

^b I work especially hard when I can see a practical purpose in what I am asked to do.

^c When I am working in a group, I like to help keep the atmosphere friendly and harmonious.

^d I work especially hard when my own success will benefit other people (my family or other students) as well as me.

On factor 4 as a whole, as Table 4 shows; Iran obtained a mean score of 4.43 which is higher than Asia and Europe. It is interesting to note that Iran obtained the highest score on all items of this factor. Significant differences were observed between Iran and Asia, and Iran and Europe on this factor. Thus, considering the higher means for Iran, it seems that compared to other students from Asia and Europe, Iranian students are more socially oriented. Discussion with participants also provided support to such a finding. Iranian students stated that when there is a practical goal and everyone is working well to achieve that goal, they will do far better than ever.

To sum up the results, according to the data obtained from questionnaire, most of Iranian students had positive attitudes to working in groups; they believed in teacher's authority and felt nervous to answer questions; and they were more socially oriented. It was also found that most of them did not like to receive knowledge from teacher passively. Discussions with participants, on the other hand, showed that most Iranian students did not like to cooperate in groups and they preferred to receive knowledge passively rather than trying to discover it.

4. Conclusion

The present study intended to investigate the Iranian students' attitudes to a number of common assumptions made about Asian learners. According to the results of this study it is suggested that the common assumptions about Asian learners might not be completely invalid in all contexts. Thus, when it is said that Asian learners are, for example, reluctant to participate actively in the interactions going on in the classroom or in the learning process, this may not be a pure myth being created to be used as a means for humiliating or accusing Asianness in order to approve colonialism or advertise Western culture. This might be a real problem that many

teachers face in their career and thus it needs to be investigated from different perspectives in order to find out what measures might be taken to solve this problem.

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