Teachers' Experiential Reflections on Iranian and Malaysian Students' Collaborative Orientations

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger study which was concerned with the comparison and description of Iranian and Malaysian students' classroom behaviors in general and their collaborative tendencies in particular. In this paper the core findings of interviews with five teachers who had the experience of teaching both in the contexts of Iran and Malaysia are reported. They all shared the view that the collectivist orientation is tangibly stronger among Malaysian participants than among their Iranian counterparts. The findings are discussed with regard to the macro-cultural dichotomy of world cultures (collectivist/ individualist). The possible pedagogical implications of the study are touched upon as well.

Keywords: collaborative tendency, Iranians, Malaysians, teachers, culture

1. Introduction

There has been a great deal of discussion about the relationship between culture and collaboration (e.g., Carson & Nelson, 1994, 1996; Nelson & Carson, 1995, 2006). Crook (1996) links establishment of intersubjectivity (construction of shared meanings and concepts) to cultural issues. Donato (2004) discusses the notion of collaboration in relation to a community and identity, and reckons the socio-historical and cultural contexts of learners among the very influential variables. According to Berry (2002), it is culture that shapes peoples' values, perceptions and behaviors. Similarly, Markus and Kitayama (1991a, 1991b) have recognized that the cultural orientation of a person could have a strong influence on the individual's communication style, value system and behaviors. Some research studies have looked into the relationship between culture and collaborative tendencies.

Ellis and Gauvain (1992) in their study observed that pairs of nine-year-old Navajo children who were asked to teach seven-year-olds to play a game were much more likely to build on each other's comments than were European-American children. Moreover, while the Navajo children stayed engaged observing their partners when they were not controlling the game moves, the European-American children, lost interest when they were no longer in control of the game; sometimes they even left the task. The discrepancy in the behaviors and the intersubjective attitudes of the children was attributed to the culture they were affiliated with. Salili's (1996) study found Chinese students very willing to collaborate and with a better performance in collaborative tasks. In their investigation of interaction in peer response groups, the researchers (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Nelson & Carson, 1998) found similar patterns of behavior among Chinese students: the students had creation and preservation of harmonious group relations as their first and foremost priority and they were reluctant to criticize others' drafts as they did not intend to embarrass the writer. Nelson and Carson (1998) interpreted this sense of consensus and intra-group agreement as part of Chinese students' perceived need for harmonious group relations. Other researchers have reported similar patterns of behavior with Chinese students as well (Hyland, 2000; Hyland, 2003). Nelson and Carson (2006) assert that the behaviors of people in the groups are the reflections of their cultural backgrounds.

As far as the willingness of Iranian learners towards collaborative modality of learning is concerned, no

independent study has been carried out yet, and the existing studies in the literature are confined to reporting about certain advantageous aspects of collaborative learning from the perspective of the research participants. For example, in Momtaz and Garner's (2010) study some of the Iranian interviewees commented that group work (collaborative reading) provided them with a relaxed learning environment. Similarly, Pishghadam and Moghaddam (2011) reported a sense of security and enhanced self-confidence on the part of the participants in their study. As for Malaysian learners' tendency towards collaborative learning, a number of studies have already been carried out. Reid (1987), in an extensive study, investigated the learning style preferences of ten groups of students from nine language backgrounds. The study included over 1200 ESL students and native English speakers. The results indicated that "English speakers rated individual learning the highest, while [113] Malaysian students, whose preference mean for group learning was the highest among nine language backgrounds, had the lowest preference mean for individual learning" (p. 98). The researcher argued that the differences might be attributable to "culture" as well as "previous educational experience" and suggested further research to further illuminate the issue. Maesin (2006) reported that the participants of her study at UiTM University, regardless of being from urban or rural areas, equally preferred collaborative learning. In a similar study by Maesin, Mansor, Shafie, and Nayan (2009) among 162 Malaysian science and social science undergraduates at the Universiti Technologi MARA (UiTM) Perlis, it was found that almost all of the participants (male & female) preferred collaborative learning activities during their English lessons. The results of a study by Kamsah and Talib (2003) among the lecturers and the final year students at the faculty of Chemical and Natural Resources Engineering at the University of Technology Malaysia Skudai indicated that the participants unanimously agreed on the importance of group work activities in classrooms.

Reviewing through the studies in the relevant literature, it becomes evident that the previous studies have been merely focused on seeking learners' views and perceptions towards collaborative learning, and a study has yet to be conducted to shed light on the actual behaviors of the learners in the context of classrooms. In addition, no study has comparatively investigated the collaborative orientation of Malaysian vs. Iranian learners. This study is in fact an attempt in this direction, being crystallized around the following questions:

1) How are Iranian and Malaysian students like in terms of collaborative tendencies in the classrooms?

2) In teachers' views, are the (possible) similarities and differences in the collaborative tendencies of Iranian and Malaysian students related to the variable of culture or learners' individual differences?

2. Method

Five teachers who had the experience of teaching in both Iranian and Malaysian educational contexts were interviewed. The major themes for teachers' interviews were classroom behaviors of Iranian and Malaysian students, the similarity or difference in their collaborative tendency as well as the teachers' perceptions about whether the similarities or differences are culture-based or the product of individual differences.

3. Interview Findings

3.1 Teacher 1: Vahid

Vahid was a PhD student of TESL at University Putra Malaysia (UPM). He had over fifteen years of experience in teaching English both in Iranian and Malaysian contexts at the time of the study. He said he had taught more than ten years at tertiary level and private English institutes in Iran, and in Malaysia he tutored (both practical courses and theoretical courses) for over two years in the UPM. He also had the experience of consultancy with some Malaysian students at UPM.

3.1.1 Classroom Behaviors

Vahid believed that in terms of learning styles and classroom behaviors "Malaysian students and Iranian students are very different." To him, one of the outstanding differences between Malaysian and Iranian learners was their degree of inquisitiveness about their assignments. He remarked that:

> I found Iranians very hard to control. By control I mean it is very hard to have them do something. They always ask for the reason. When you ask them to do something, they ask you whether they could do something else in return. However, when you assign Malaysian students to do something they just go ahead and do it. They never question you.

As for learning styles of Iranian and Malaysian learners in classes, Vahid highlighted the strong orientation of Iranians towards individual learning as opposed to the dominant tendency of Malaysian learners towards collaborative learning. He said:

> Iranian students like to do things alone, on their own, not together with their classmates. Maybe

because Iran is a highly competitive society where learners learn to compete to enter universities…. The person you are helping may be your rival in Master's or PhD entrance exam…. However, in Malaysia it is not like this at all. In Malaysia there is no fighting over scores or grades. In Iran it is like that and we teach them to be like that. All the tests are criterion-referenced, not norm-referenced. These people [Malaysians] have learnt how to be collaborative, not competitive.

Vahid further added that:

My Iranian students found it [collaborative learning] ok as long as you asked them to do something in the form of an activity, not in the form of an assignment, and the reason was because the work would go to two people. Collaborative learning was really problematic for Iranian students and you could see one of the students coming to you and complaining that "I did everything and he did nothing; why the mark goes to both of us?" There were always problems. That's why I prefer it not to make them work together. In the case of Malaysians, I never had that problem. If you ask me [for Iranians] as long as there was no score, as long as collaboration did not put any scores at stake, they could work together; otherwise, the teacher would be in real trouble. I may say there is no sacrificing when it is a serious learning condition and their personal benefits are at stake.

3.1.2 Culture-Based or Individual?

Vahid was of the opinion that the classroom behaviors and learning tendencies that students display are true reflections of some realities and developments in the learners' respective societies. He said:

You look at Iran. The motto in Iran is "No EAST, NO WEST." This motto is intended to remind you of being independent, and standing on your own feet. But in Malaysia the motto is "satu Malaysia". Here the culture which is dominant is the culture of unity and collaboration, but in Iran and maybe some other places we are emphasizing competitiveness…. We are teaching our children to be competitive. Competitiveness is everywhere, in the very context of our culture our children acquire to be competitive, so they have no choice and you find this as a culture everywhere.

3.2 Teacher 2: Sima

Sima was another PhD student of TESL at UPM with over ten years of teaching English. She had taught general English and special English (e.g., linguistics, testing, teaching methodologies) at tertiary level in Iran. In Malaysia she had had only one semester of tutoring a class of computer applications in education.

3.2.1 Classroom Behaviors

When asked about her experiential reflection on Iranian and Malaysian learners' learning styles and classroom behaviors, she said, "They are totally different. They are poles apart." As for classroom behaviors of the Malaysian and Iranian students, she added:

Handling classes to me in the setting of Iran is more difficult. The students follow their own way of thinking and even sometimes the authority of teacher is under question. They tend to ignore the sage on the stage. But in Malaysian setting students are very obedient. They are really submissive in the case of assignments like classroom projects, term papers, classroom activities, etc.

Concerning learning style of the Iranian and Malaysian learners, Sima asserted that individual learning and group learning are the two poles of a continuum when it comes to Malaysian and Iranian learners. Iranians account for the "solo leaning" end and Malaysians make up the "group learning" end of the continuum. She remarked that:

Iranians tend to be more individual. They really avoid teamwork and collaboration is hardly seen in Iranian classes. Iranian classes are really individual-oriented classes. However, the case is the opposite when it comes to Malaysian learners. They are really willing to work as part of a team, rather than just separately or individually. Iranian students are hardly eager to do groupwork activities while over here in Malaysia Malaysian learners are really welcoming group activities.

3.2.2 Culture-Based or Individual?

Perceiving individuals as the building blocks of culture, Sima asserted that:

To me you can never separate individuals from their culture. But if I want to answer your question properly, I would specifically attribute their behaviors and tendencies to culture. Even out of classroom context and back in societies, you can easily witness the feeling of collaboration and teamwork. Definitely it is culture-based. The individuals form the big culture. Mostly this is cultural. I myself had

the chance of interviewing Malaysia's teachers for my own project which is concerned with Malaysian teachers' perceptions about application of modern technologies in classes. What matters for me was the difference of Malaysian teachers' perceptions with [those of] teachers of other nationalities. In fact, what Malaysian teachers care is teamwork and this is something which is obviously observed in the context of [Malaysian] society as well. Maybe because it is a multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-lingual society and they have learnt it from childhood to get along with differences very smoothly.

3.3 Teacher 3: Katrin

Another colleague who consented to sharing her views with the researcher was a PhD student of TESL at UPM. Back in Iran she had taught some courses at tertiary level as well as TOEFL and conversation classes at some private English institutes from 1998 to 2006, when she came to Malaysia to further up her studies at PhD level. From 2006 to the date of the study she was involved in teaching IELTS, conversation courses, as well as some courses at UPM.

3.3.1 Classroom Behaviors

Katrin stated that "there were absolutely huge differences" between Iranian and Malaysian learners in terms of their classroom behaviors, learning preferences as well as learning styles. As far as the classroom behavior of the learners from the two cultural contexts is concerned, she asserted that Iranian students are "more risk-takers" and they "have not been as obedient as my Malaysian students." In her own words, she said:

> Malaysian students were really obedient, no matter what personality they had, what culture they had, what religion they had, you know here in Malaysia there were different races in many classes, I mean Malays, Chinese and Indians, but they were all obedient. They just followed what I said without like confronting or without making any problems. Iranians are more risk-takers, maybe they want to present themselves to showoff they know better than their peers. I have no idea why Iranians were not as obedient as my Malaysian students, so I decided to have Iranians work on their own or in very small groups to avoid this kind of confrontation.

Katrin went on to say that Iranians and Malaysian students are different in terms of their preferred learning styles:

> As far as I can remember from Iranians in Iran and Iranians here in Malaysia, most of my students have been very interested to work individually in the classes or at home. Iranian students are not willing to collaborate in groups and they are very interested to present themselves more openly. However, my experience with Malaysian learners turned out to be quite different. Most of students here are really enjoying working in groups. Also, Malaysian students are more reserved and maybe this is one of the reasons why they want to be in groups rather than to present themselves individually. As a specific example, I clearly remember my students in one of my classes in Agriculture University in Tehran. The students were very interested in presenting themselves in front of the whole class with preparing PowerPoint presentations and showing pictures to the class. However, in Malaysia it is different. Over here students prefer to have like group discussions, you know, like focus discussions instead of presenting one by one in front of the class.

3.3.2 Culture-Based or Individual?

Katrin was of the opinion that "these differences are mostly culture-based. Most of the behaviors I am talking about are shared among many students and they cannot be individual differences."

3.4 Teacher 4: Omid

Omid was a PhD student of applied linguistics at the University of Malaya. Before coming to Malaysia, he had been teaching different subjects at different universities in Iran. In Malaysia he was working as a private teacher and had the experience of teaching English at different language centers.

3.4.1 Classroom Behavior

"I have no doubt that Iranian and Malaysian students differ a lot from the viewpoint of classroom behavior and their favored learning strategies," said Omid. He further added that "each learning setting is unique, so it sounds reasonable to claim that learners coming from two different backgrounds are different." According to Omid, whereas the state of being "reticent and quiet" is the salient characteristic of Malaysian learners, Iranian students are "aggressive speakers, by aggressive, I mean, they are assertive. They have a tendency to display their knowledge in front of peers." Omid shared more of his experiences from his classes:

About the classroom behavior, I think Malaysian students are very easy to manage. They are very flexible and listen to you very well. They are very respectful and never try to question the authority of the teacher. I have searched for a reason behind this type of behavior and now I am sure it is a very established culture here.

About the learning styles of the students he said:

Iranian students are individually smart but they hardly can put their knowledge, abilities and competences together. However, Malaysians are kings and queens of collaboration. In many cases I have asked my students to do a task. At first it seemed the learners were not able to perform the task on their own, but collaborating together they could create wonderful outcomes. When you put a topic on the board for speaking or writing, all of a sudden the entire class transforms into islands of collaboration. It seems as if the learners have a sort of inner attraction to do the tasks collaboratively.

3.4.2 Culture-Based or Individual?

Omid seemed to strongly believe in the culture-based nature of the differences between Iranian and Malaysian learners rather than the individual-based idiosyncrasies. He highlighted the role of culture as follows:

I think individuals are like atoms and molecules which attach together and make up a material, I mean culture. So culture is not separated from individuals. When we speak about individual differences we mean that a factor has got different manifestations and forms among different people. When you go to classes you can easily pick certain common patterns among your students. For example, many of my Arab students and Iranian students are similar when it comes to the amount of classroom talk. This is not about only one or two students; it is a recurring pattern among them. This is the reason I feel the cause lies somewhere underneath individual differences, it is all in our bloods.

3.5 Teacher 5: Reza

Reza had approximately ten years of teaching experience in different countries. Back in Iran he had taught English literature at tertiary level and exam-prep courses, FCE, ACE, IELTS and TOEFL at private language institutes for six years. For the past five years he had been out of Iran, working as a full-time senior English teacher in Azerbaijan republic, Georgia, Malaysia and Indonesia. Reza stated that his depicting the classroom behaviors and learning styles of Iranian learners could be much more accurate than his impression from Malaysian students, in that he had learnt and taught in Iranian context for many years, but he had been living in Malaysia for only 5 months.

3.5.1 Classroom Behavior

Reza compared and contrasted the behaviors and learning styles of Iranian and Malaysian students in the classes as follows:

Notably in Iran students liked to speak a lot, although their accuracy was not very high. Iranian students here [International House in Malaysia] are very similar to the students back in Iran.... As for Malaysians, they seem quite sociable. They love taking part in classroom activities. As far as teamwork is concerned, they contribute considerably more than the Iranians. All in all, I could say Iranians tend to like to work on their own. That's my genera impression.

3.5.2 Culture-Based or Individual?

Unlike the other teachers who confidently attributed the behaviors of their learners to culture-based reasons, Reza did not rule out the meager possibility of individual differences to have a part. He stated that:

To be honest, I have not lived and worked long enough [five months] in Malaysia to consider myself an authority on what type of culture Malaysian culture is. I think we are looking at a case here when we might have individual differences also playing a part, but obviously there are cultural differences determining the outcome of an activity and learners behaviors and styles…. But with the Iranians the extensive experience that I had teaching Iranians tells me that they are not wonderful at pairwork, they are not wonderful at grouowork, and even if they are, I have noticed that groupwork or pairwork does not have a great deal of influence on the outcome of their learning in the long run…. When I was in Azerbaijan, culturally I would think that the people in Azerbaijan are culturally very akin to people in Iran, especially Azeris of Iran. I found them very similar to Iranians in terms of their degree of unwillingness to perform the tasks collaboratively….

4. Summary of the Findings and Discussion

The interviewed teachers all shared the view that whereas their Malaysian students were "obedient", their Iranian students tended to be more "assertive." One possible explanation for such a behavioral discrepancy could be the Malaysian students' stronger deference towards the authority. According to Scollon (1994), as a result of the influence of Confucian ethics or ideological beliefs, students in East Asia feel obliged to have respect for authority (e.g. parents and teachers) and they hardly question the authority. Alluding to the findings of other studies, Hofstede (1986) asserted that students from collectivist cultures only speak when addressed. The interviewed teachers also unanimously stated that collaborative tendencies were evidently stronger among their Malaysian students compared to their Iranian counterparts. Thinking within the conceptual framework of some scholars (e.g., Hofstede, 1991) who have identified systematic variation along the dimension of "power distance", that is, people's attitudes and behaviors to power and authority, the discrepant tendency of Iranian and Malaysian students towards collaborative learning might be justified. Based on the findings of Hofstede's (1991) seminal study, it was claimed that there is often a correlation between the rate of power distance and rate of collectivism. In Hofstede's study, Malaysians rank first with the power distance index of 104 and Iranians rank twenty ninth with the power distance index of 58 among fifty-three countries. Thus, it seems reasonable to conjecture that one of the possible explanations for the stronger tendency of Malaysian students towards collaborative learning compared to Iranian students might be due to their higher power distance index, and accordingly a higher collective/collaborative orientation.

5. Implication

The results of this study should not be construed as a prescription for the superiority of individual learning over collaborative learning, or the other way round. But rather they should be seen as further back up evidence to recognize cultural diversities and differences of the learning settings in order to robustly exercise democracy in language classes. The results are, indeed, in the direction of promoting the notion of "one size might not fit all" all the time. The relatively contrasting tendencies and behaviors towards collaborative learning between Iranian and Malaysian students could be seen as a caution against the invariable utilization of this modality of learning in all the contexts. This in turn highlights the fact that learning and teaching should be seen as context-bound. Such a pluralistic and democratic conceptualization of learning and teaching is linked to Kumaravadivelu's (2001, 2008) parameter of *particularity,* being the most important aspect of post-method pedagogy. Particularity basically underscores the appreciation and recognition of the locality of educational ecosystems (local exigencies and lived experiences). This recognition is of paramount importance because if the learners' backgrounds, beliefs and tendencies are taken for granted, then the result would be resistance and alienation on the part of the students. Some unsuccessful examples of implementation of communicative language teaching in Asia (Li, 1998; Liu, 1998) and problematic application of constructivist/collectivist models of education in the cultural milieu of the West (Crook, 1996) are recorded in the literature. The unsuccessfulness and the challenges faced have been blamed on insensitivity to the cultural and contextual exigencies.

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