



Cultural Differences in Attitudes Towards Foreign Language Study

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Introduction

In many educational assessments conducted at the global level, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), several East Asian countries have consistently appeared among the top rankings for almost twenty years. Recent results indicate that the difference between those countries and many of their Western counterparts remains as large as ever, particularly in mathematics (Jerrim, 2014).

While variation in students' educational performance is commonly attributed to national educational policies and structures (Feniger & Lefstein, 2014), wider social, cultural, demographic, and economic conditions must be considered (Alexander, 2012). Other potential explanations include teaching methods (Leung, 2006), work ethic (Byun & Park, 2012), family pressure (Fu & Markus, 2014), high levels of extracurricular tuition (Bray & Kwok, 2003), natural ability (Lynn & Meisenberg, 2010), and a greater respect of the value of education (Francis & Archer, 2005). In this report, we investigate an alternative explanation; that of the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) construct.

The CHC construct is the idea that students from certain countries, principally China, Vietnam, Singapore, Korea, and Japan, express a constellation of attitudes and behaviours derived from their shared Confucian heritage which can explain the relative academic success of students from those countries. While some research supports the CHC construct (e.g., Sellick & Bury, 2018), it is unclear whether students from CHC countries' attitudes towards study truly differ from those of students from non-CHC countries.

Since students' self-perceptions of ability and self-efficacy are related to levels of classroom participation and performance (Katz et al., 2014), instructors should be aware of how they may vary among students with different cultural heritages. Consequently, this report describes an investigation into CHC and non-CHC students' attitudes to study. This is relevant and important as following PISA results, many countries are looking to East Asia for educational policies that can be incorporated into their own systems to improve performance (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016).

Literature Review

In the 2015 PISA tests, students from CHC countries took the top two places for mathematics, reading, and science. Of the top 10 performing countries in all three categories, students from CHC countries filled at least four places, and seven places in both mathematics and science. By contrast, students from the same countries are often described as being poor at learning foreign languages, in particular English (e.g., Kom & Park, 2006). Thus, it could be posited that the cultural features that drive students from CHC countries' strong performance in the PISA tests hinder their performance in learning languages. If this is to be tested, it is important to first identify what the features associated with the CHC construct are.

Students from Confucian heritage cultures have been characterized as being strongly focused on exam performance, believing that effort is more important than talent, and emphasizing memorization and practice (O'Dwyer, 2003). However, they are also described as promoting collectivist attitudes over individualism, deferring to teachers as authorities, being passive learners, having weak critical thinking skills, and as having difficulty understanding plagiarism (Tran, 2013). Research has further shown that individuals from CHC countries tend to under-estimate their abilities (Heine et al., 2001), which is in line with the Confucian concept of modesty. However, some of these characteristics have been challenged as artefacts of the contemporary educational focus adopted by the countries in question (Tran, 2013), and as resulting from a political expediency that encourages a passive citizenry (O'Dwyer, 2003).

In relation to students' perceptions of difficulty of various aspects of English, Sellick and Bury (2018) found significant differences not only between students from CHC countries and those from non-CHC countries, but also among students from different CHC countries. Consequently, it must be asked whether the CHC construct is sufficient to differentiate students from CHC countries from students from non-CHC countries. Furthermore, in that study comparison between students from CHC and non-CHC countries' attitudes towards study and any differences in their attainment was not conducted. Thus, this report assesses the extent to which Confucian traditions impact attitudes towards study by attempting to identify areas of difference in attitudes toward study among students of different nationalities and to isolate these differences from differences in actual performance.

Research Questions

If being a member of a CHC results in a distinct approach to education and learning, then this should be evident in the opinions expressed by students from such countries. Consequently, in this study, the research questions below were investigated. For the purposes of this investigation, a consistent trend was defined as more than 25% of results being significant at 0.05 or better.

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|----------------------|---|
| Research Question 1. | Are there consistent differences in relative ratings of attitudes towards study between students from different CHC countries? |
| Hypothesis 1. | There are no consistent differences in relative ratings of attitudes towards study between students from different CHC countries. |
| Research Question 2. | Are there consistent differences in relative ratings of attitudes towards study between students from CHC countries and students from non-CHC countries? |
| Hypothesis 2. | There are no consistent differences in relative ratings of attitudes towards study between students from CHC countries and students from non-CHC countries. |
| Research Question 3. | Are there consistent differences in awarded grades among students from CHC countries? |

- Hypothesis 3. There are no consistent differences in awarded grades among students from CHC countries.
- Research Question 4. Are there consistent differences in awarded grades between students from CHC countries and students from non-CHC countries?
- Hypothesis 4. There are no consistent differences in awarded grades between students from CHC countries and students from non-CHC countries.

Method

Participants

171 male and 90 female students from ten South, South-East, and East Asian countries (Table 1), attending a private four-year university in Japan participated.

TABLE 1.
Distribution of Participant Nationality

<i>CHC</i>		<i>Non-CHC</i>	
<i>Country</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>No.</i>
Japan	198	Nepal	34
China	11	Sri Lanka	2
Vietnam	10	Indonesia	1
		Taiwan	1
		Philippines	1
		India	1
		Bangladesh	1
		Not Given	1
Total	219	Total	42

Data Collection

Data was collected via a 29-item questionnaire consisting of three demographic items, and 26 positively keyed five-point Likert items. The questionnaires were anonymous and participation was voluntary. Data was collected during the final lesson of the course as it was hoped that the students would participate voluntarily rather than doing so out of a feeling of obligation and that they would be able to adequately reflect on their experiences through the course. In order to better capture the students' opinions, and to minimize response bias, the 26 Likert items were grouped into dyads and triads (Tables 2 and 3).

TABLE 2.
Questionnaire Dyadic Items

<i>Item</i>	<i>Paired with</i>
4. In general, courses at university are too easy.	5. In general, courses at university should be more difficult.
7. Lessons that are too easy are boring.	8. Lessons that are too difficult are boring.
9. Lessons that are too easy are demotivating.	10. Lessons that are too difficult are demotivating.
12. It is better when students in a class are of a similar level.	13. All students in a class should be of a similar level.
17. Students should tell their teacher if the course is too easy.	18. Students should tell their teacher if the course is too difficult.
19. Teachers should check if the students think the course is too easy.	20. Teachers should check if the students think the course is too difficult.
24. I wanted this course to be easier.	25. I wanted this course to be more difficult.

TABLE 3.
Questionnaire Triadic Items

<i>Item</i>	<i>Grouped with</i>	
6. It helps students to improve more when courses are more difficult.	11. Courses should increase in difficulty throughout the semester.	29. Students need to study difficult courses to improve.
14. Courses should focus most on what students find most difficult.	15. Courses should focus most on what the students are best at.	16. Courses should focus most on what will help the students in their future goals.
21. I was surprised by how difficult this course was.	22. I thought this course would be easier.	23. I thought this course would be more difficult.
26. This course should be easier.	27. This course should be more difficult.	28. The level of this course was just right.

Results

The results were analysed via ANOVA in order to identify any attitudinal variations among students from CHC countries, and the direction of any such differences (Table 4).

TABLE 4.
Questionnaire Results Comparing Students from Different CHC Countries

<i>Item</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>Vietnam</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
4.	3.0	3.4	2.7	2, 206	1.459	0.235
5.	2.9	3.5	3.0	2, 209	1.840	0.161
6.	3.2	3.5	3.0	2, 205	0.691	0.502
7.	2.8	2.9	3.1	2, 210	0.310	0.734
8.	3.0	3.0	2.7	2, 209	0.300	0.741
9	2.8	3.1	2.6	2, 208	0.436	0.647
10.	3.3	3.0	3.0	2, 209	0.589	0.556
11.	3.0	2.8	3.3	2, 206	0.668	0.514
12.	3.5	3.5	3.2	2, 206	0.416	0.660
13.	3.0	2.9	3.3	2, 208	0.496	0.610
14.	3.4	3.7	2.8	2, 206	2.197	0.114
15.	3.3	3.4	2.2	2, 210	1.511	0.223
16.	3.7	4.2	3.4	2, 210	2.273	0.105
17.	3.2	4.2	3.9	2, 208	7.110	0.001*
18.	3.5	4.4	3.7	2, 210	4.236	0.016*
19.	3.7	3.9	4.1	2, 210	1.065	0.347
20.	3.7	3.7	4.1	2, 208	0.714	0.491
21	2.6	3.3	2.7	2, 210	2.596	0.077
22.	2.7	2.7	2.2	2, 208	1.388	0.252
23.	2.9	2.9	3.2	2, 210	0.524	0.593
24.	2.6	3.0	2.1	2, 210	1.694	0.186
25.	2.8	2.4	3.0	2, 210	1.066	0.347
26.	2.5	2.5	2.4	2, 209	0.048	0.953
27.	2.9	2.6	3.2	2, 210	1.167	0.313
28.	3.5	3.3	3.1	2, 210	0.985	0.375
29.	3.4	3.7	3.7	2, 210	0.567	0.568

(* indicates statistical significance at 0.05 or better)

No significant variation among students from CHC countries were identified, with the exception of items 17 and 18.

In the case of item 17, that students should tell their teacher if the course is too easy, Chinese students most strongly agreed with this statement (with a mean of 4.2 on a positively keyed five-point Likert scale), followed by Vietnamese students (3.9), and finally Japanese students (3.2). For item 18, that students

should tell their teacher if the course is too difficult, Chinese students most strongly agreed with this statement (with a mean of 4.4), followed by Vietnamese students (3.7), and finally Japanese students (3.5).

As students from the individual CHC countries were highly homogeneous in their responses to all but two items, we must accept Hypothesis 1, and conclude that there are no consistent differences in relative ratings of attitudes towards study among students from different CHC countries.

t-Tests were conducted in order to ascertain whether there were any variations among students from CHC countries and the non-CHC group of students (see Table 5).

TABLE 5.
Questionnaire Results Comparing CHC and Non-CHC Countries

Item	CHC			Non-CHC			p
	n	SD	Mean	n	SD	Mean	
4.	209	0.9	3.0	39	1.1	2.8	0.2206
5.	212	1.0	2.9	40	1.0	3.2	0.0830
6.	208	1.0	3.2	40	1.2	3.4	0.2638
7.	213	1.3	2.8	40	1.4	3.2	0.0790
8.	212	1.2	3.0	40	1.3	3.0	1.0000
9.	211	1.2	2.8	40	1.2	2.9	0.6294
10.	212	1.2	3.3	37	1.2	2.6	0.0012*
11.	211	1.0	3.0	40	1.3	3.4	0.0285*
12.	209	1.1	3.5	40	1.6	3.4	0.6276
13.	211	1.0	3.0	40	1.5	2.9	0.5964
14.	209	1.0	3.4	39	1.4	3.3	0.5931
15.	213	0.9	3.2	40	1.4	2.5	0.0001*
16.	213	0.9	3.7	40	1.0	4.4	0.0001*
17.	211	1.0	3.3	40	1.3	3.8	0.0063*
18.	213	1.0	3.5	40	1.2	4.0	0.0054*
19.	213	1.0	3.7	40	1.1	3.7	1.0000
20.	211	1.0	3.7	40	1.1	4.0	0.0882
21.	213	1.0	2.6	40	1.2	2.7	0.5750
22.	211	1.0	2.7	40	1.2	2.4	0.0937
23.	213	0.9	2.9	40	1.2	2.9	1.0000
24.	213	1.1	2.6	39	1.2	2.5	0.6073
25.	213	1.0	2.7	40	1.1	2.8	0.5983
26.	212	1.0	2.5	39	1.0	2.2	0.0863
27.	213	0.9	2.9	40	1.1	2.9	1.0000
28.	213	1.0	3.5	40	1.1	3.6	0.5685
29.	213	0.8	3.8	40	1.0	4.1	0.0379*

(* indicates statistical significance at 0.05 or better)

Significant variation among students from CHC countries and non-CHC countries were identified for items 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 29. In the case of item 10, that lessons that are too difficult are demotivating, CHC students more strongly agreed with this statement (with a mean of 3.3) than non-CHC students (2.6). For item 11, that courses should increase in difficulty throughout the semester, non-CHC students more strongly agreed with this statement (with a mean of 3.4) than CHC students (3.0). For item 15, that courses should focus most on what the students are best at, CHC students more strongly agreed with this statement (with a mean of 3.2) than non-CHC students (2.5). For item 16, that courses should focus on what will help students achieve future goals, non-CHC students more strongly agreed with this statement (with a mean of 4.4) than CHC students (3.7). For item 17, that students should tell teachers if the course is too easy, non-CHC students more strongly agreed with this statement (with a mean of 3.8) than CHC students (3.3). For item 18, that students should tell teachers if the course is too difficult, non-CHC students more strongly agreed with this statement (with a mean of 4.0) than CHC students (3.5). Finally, for item 29, that students need to study difficult courses in order to improve, non-CHC students more strongly agreed with this statement (with a mean of 4.1) than CHC students (3.8).

As there are significant differences between students from CHC countries and non-CHC countries in the results obtained on seven items of the questionnaire (26.9% of the total Likert scale items), we must

reject Hypothesis 2 and conclude that there are consistent differences in relative ratings of attitudes towards study between students from CHC countries and students from non-CHC countries.

Course grade data was analysed via ANOVA in order to determine if there was any variation in final course grades among students from different CHC countries (see Table 6).

TABLE 6.

Comparing Final Course Grades Among Students from Different CHC Countries via ANOVA

	<i>Japanese students</i>	<i>Chinese students</i>	<i>Vietnamese students</i>
Mean Grade (\bar{x})	78.40	75.48	72.70
Standard Deviation (σ)	14.491	10.662	23.688
Number of students (n)	198	11	10
F	0.853		
p	0.427		

(* indicates statistical significance at 0.05 or better)

These results indicate that we must accept Hypothesis 3 and conclude that there are no differences in awarded grades among students from CHC countries. However, it must be noted that a particularly large standard deviation (23.688) was obtained for the Vietnamese students.

Finally, a t-test was conducted in order to determine if there was any variation in final course grades between CHC and non-CHC students (see Table 7).

TABLE 7.

Comparing Final Course Grades Between CHC and Non-CHC Students via T-tests

	<i>CHC students</i>	<i>Non-CHC students</i>
Mean Grade (\bar{x})	78.06	76.89
Standard Deviation (σ)	14.827	10.403
Number of students (n)	219	42
p	0.6134	

(* indicates statistical significance at 0.05 or better)

These results indicate that we must accept Hypothesis 4 and conclude that there are no differences in awarded grades between students from CHC countries and students from non-CHC countries.

Discussion

When asked to provide self-assessments of their attitudes towards study, students from different CHC countries are practically indistinguishable. This is as would be expected if the CHC construct was valid. Furthermore, when comparing students from CHC countries and non-CHC countries, statistically significant differences were obtained on 26.9% of the items, further supporting the idea that the CHC construct is valid.

Compared to students from non-CHC countries, CHC students were more likely to present the opinion that language course difficulty should remain roughly constant, but not be too difficult, and should focus on the students' strengths. Furthermore, CHC students were less likely to stress the students' responsibility to inform teachers if the course level was inappropriate and were less concerned that course content be directed to achieving future goals. These findings are in line with some of the features identified among students from CHC countries, including deference to teachers as authorities and being passive learners.

Previous investigations into the cultural features underlying educational attainment have identified multiple distinct cultural clusters, among which CHC and Nordic countries were highest achievers, and Arab, Latin America, and South Asian countries the lowest (Zhang, Khan & Tahirsylaj, 2015). However, in this study no significant differences in language test scores between students from CHC countries and

students from non-CHC countries were identified. What then underlies the apparent relative weakness of students from CHC countries at learning foreign languages?

CHC cultures have been identified as being less forgiving which, while encouraging academic performance, can also result in high levels of test anxiety and self-doubt (Stankov, 2010). Furthermore, research also indicates that confidence is a more important indicator of academic success than self-efficacy (Morony et al., 2012). This is in line with prior research by Sellick and Bury (2018), which found that students from non-CHC countries rate themselves as significantly more confident in using a foreign language (English, in this case) than students from CHC countries.

It is easy to see how cultural features that are intolerant of error and which encourage self-doubt and reliance on the teacher lead to student passivity in the language classroom and oppose the error tolerance and self-confidence necessary to communicate well in a foreign language. Consequently, it could be argued that the very features of CHC countries that lead to high academic achievement in certain areas of the curriculum, act to retard foreign language learning.

There are several limitations to this study. First is the relatively small sample size of non-CHC students. However, although a relatively small group, the non-CHC students do represent approximately one fifth of the total number of students taking part in the study, which is a reasonable representation of the ethnic make-up of the student body as a whole.

More importantly, the majority of non-CHC students were from South Asia, primarily Nepal, with the result that the characteristics of students from other countries may have been diluted. As a result, it must be asked whether this study actually compares students from Confucian heritage cultures with students from South Asian cultures and not non-CHC students in general.

Finally, all of the students taking part in the study were either Japanese or had already been studying in Japan for a minimum of two years. It is possible that acculturation to the Japanese education system could have diminished prior existing cultural differences. Alternatively, it could be argued that students who had chosen to study full-time at a foreign university are not representative of peers who opted to study in their home countries. It is therefore suggested that further research into the effects of confidence and the cultural features of CHC students on language learning that takes these limitations into consideration is needed.

Conclusion

This paper has compared attitudes towards study among students from Confucian heritage culture countries and non-Confucian heritage culture countries. The students' final grades were also compared. Consistent significant differences were evident in attitudes towards studying between the CHC and non-CHC groups, but no consistent significant differences were found in the final grades awarded to students from different countries.

The findings presented in this article have relevance to education and teaching, especially in the context of Asian TEFL, and thus have important implications for educators, students, and educational institutes. By providing some insight into these attitudes towards study, it is hoped that all stakeholders will be able to better understand current students and the factors that impact on their learning.

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