

Language learning style: the Romanian case

Estilos de aprendizaje de lenguas por parte de alumnos rumanos

Raluca Elena Prundeanu

Universidad Brancoveanu (Rumania).

raluca.prundeanu@gmail.com

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RESUMEN

El presente trabajo se propone comentar el artículo “La percepción de la cultura educativa y de los estilos de aprendizaje en el aprendizaje de lenguas: el caso Rumano” por Isabel Morera Bañas y Kris Buyse, reflejando la influencia de la cultura sobre el aprendizaje de las lenguas extranjeras, analizando los métodos, los resultados y las futuras implicaciones en el dominio.

Palabras clave: estilos de aprendizaje, cultura educativa, dimensiones culturales, educación comunista, aprendizaje de lenguas.

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the article " Perception of educational culture and learning styles in language learning: the Romanian case" by Isabel Morera Bañas and Kris Buyse reflecting the cultural repercussion in language learning, analyzing the methods for research, the results and future implications in this area.

Keywords: learning styles, educational culture, cultural dimensions, communist education, language learning.

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The research origins on the concepts of learning style and cultural education were traced in the literature review five decades ago, these two contributing to a better correlation between the teaching styles and the learning outcomes. In order to provide additional evidence, this paper is divided in two main sections: the theoretical background focusing on a short review, followed by an empirical study where data is collected and processed and the results are interpreted correlating the learning styles with the cultural- learning.

Within a brief introduction, the authors define the learning styles and the educational culture in the context of Romanian students attending Adult Education Centers where they learn Spanish as a foreign language considering the fall of the communist regime in 1989. The theoretical background gathers information related to the main concepts expounded in this study, defining the cultural dimensions according to Hofstede (2001), although more recent studies (Hofstede et al., 2010, Hofstede, 2011) include Indulgence versus Restraint as the gratification versus control of human wishes. Also of note is the brief history of the instruments developed aiming to distinguish between the students' learning styles, mentioning Kolb's LSI (Learning Style Inventory), Honey and Mumford's model LSQ (Learning Styles Questionnaire) and CHAEA (Cuestionario Honey Alonso de Estilos de Aprendizaje) that help extricate between active, reflector, theorist and pragmatist learner. No argument regarding the preference for CHAEA is accessible, so, on these accounts the study of Escurra (2011: 71) provides empiric evidence in favor of CHAEA as a valid and reliable test in the attempt to distinguish between the learning styles. The literature review incorporates various learning-style proponents, but given the authors' setting on CHAEA, the description of learners' characteristics according to their learning style is presented in Table 1:

Learning styles	Characteristics
Activist	Passionate, improviser, audacious, and spontaneous, impulsive;
Reflector	Prudent, meticulous, careful, amenable, investigative, and exhaustive;
Theorist	Systematic, rational, objective, critical, and structured;
Pragmatist	Experimenter, applied, direct, operative, and convincing.

Table 1. Learning styles according to Alonso, Gallego & Honey (2012, 71-74)

Of particular interest is the Cuestionario de Cultura Educativa or CCE according to Morera (2010) as an instrument for cultural dimensions measurement including the most salient items. As the study implicates the former and actual Romanian cultural aspects, a liaison between these items and the Romanian communism and democracy may avoid misunderstandings (e.g. “Students allowed to contradict teachers” – specific to actual society / “Teacher never contradicted” – specific to communism, while “The system rewards academic performance” – specific for both societies).

Another critical aspect is related to the evidence that the learning styles encompass at least 21 different variables, including each individual's environmental, emotional, sociological, physiological, and cognitive processing preferences (Dunn et al., 2006:7). To this extent, previous studies indicated that gender, age, and cultural heritage affects the learners' learning style (Charlesworth, 2008; De Vita, 2010; Song et al., 2011). Very related to this study is the research proposed by Charlesworth (2008) who examined the relationship between learning style and culture. Honey and Mumford's learning style questionnaire was used to identify students' preferences, involving forty one Chinese students, 34 Indonesians students, and 38 French students. The data quantified statistically significant differences between learning styles, stating that Indonesian students scored high on the reflector scale, Chinese students scored high on the theorists scale, and French students scored high on the pragmatist scale, concluding that cultural backgrounds affect students' learning styles. On similar premises, Jia-Ying (2011) explored the influence of cultural background on students' learning styles. The study focused on differences between East and Western classroom cultures. A total of 20 graduate students in the U.S. from China, Japan, Taiwan, and Korea were interviewed for this study. The results signal that East Asian students adhere to collectivist values. So, research findings suggest that various learning preferences do exist in cultural learning. Thus, multi-style teaching strategies are recommended to reach students' objectives.

In addition, various authors (Reinicke, et al, 2008; López Aguado, 2011) state that they didn't discover correlations between gender and the learning style (males- pragmatic style or female-reflective style). On the contrary, Heriberto et al., (2015: 121) in a study with a sample of 338 students from University Center for Economic and Administrative Sciences, University of Guadalajara attained results showing that the male students displayed a greater preference for the active and pragmatic learning styles, while with regard to the theoretical and the pragmatic styles students undergoing degrees in tourism showed a preference for the former, while the marketing students preferred the latter. All these studies and similar research studies are critical in the attempt to establish the variables within the empirical section and must be presented in the literature review.

The present article continues with the empirical part of the study, mentioning the sample of 189 Romanian students from 14 centers where they learn Spanish but no information is provided related to students' age, gender or level of study. Important data is also missing regarding the two groups divided by the cutting point 1980 (number of informants per group, average age, gender). As the cutting point is set to the year 1980, maybe a gap of time could provide better evidence for the first hypothesis (learning styles before and after the revolution). Considering the inertial systems, nothing can change instantly, not even the education system, so after the regime changing, a transition period followed that lasted more than 10 years until visible modifications appeared (curriculum, student books, teachers' training). So maybe participants who graduated before 1989 and participants who attended school after 2000 could represent a better sample for the aimed objective.

The instruments are 2 questionnaires distributed in aula and on-line. Due to the fact that the participants' affective factors cannot be avoided, triangulation is suggested as fundamental for validity. On the other side the two-ways distribution- in aula and online- may influence the results and should be avoided by eliminating the online distribution as it concerns only 20 informants. Another critical issue that is not detailed at all is the control of the variables that can produce distortion of the results. Without doubt, the hypothesis clearly stated- also not encountered- would help clarify the variables.

The section Analysis of the data is in fact the methodology (data recollection and processing). Within the next chapter the information is processed with One- Way ANOVA. In the Table 2 only 182 participants are involved instead of 189 as claimed and the results, as the authors assume, may indicate a change in the education paradigm, although the revolution was followed by a transition period when adjustments were done progressively. Regarding the learning styles and educational culture: in case of the activists the authors describe the activists' characteristics, related to items B11 and B14, but B11 is "Teachers expect students to find their own path /Students expect the teacher to outline the paths" so it is not clear at all which of the two opposite characteristics are defined by B11. The idea that activists could not behave "within the Romanian communist educational system which marked the procedures, tasks and activities to be followed" may be just speculation, as the activists exist in all cultures. It is true that the methodology improved towards students' autonomy and active participation but even during the communism, the tasks and the activities were directed to students where the activists played their role. Similar arguments can be applied for the other learning styles as they coexist in a group, even though the percentage may vary according to cultural education or other factors. In support for this idea Liang (2013) compared Chinese and Canadian university students' learning styles in order to determine if there are differences in learning style preferences between these two cultural groups by using Kolb's Learning Inventory. The data revealed that, overall, Chinese and Canadian ESL university students' learning styles were similar.

The results related to cultural dimensions are presented as follows:

- Collectivism/Individualism- especially the B2 item (attitudes to lifelong learning) are correlated to reality as in the communism the idea of lifelong learning did not exist. Related to item B4 intended to measure the oral participation of students, the results indicate a transition period which seems to reflect the actual attitude in the aula.
- Power distance- Reflectors and activists have obtained closer scores towards low power distance (

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= 3,34; 2,44) after the 90s, showing a tendency to students' oral participation in the classroom which is evident.

- Uncertainty avoidance- The mean score of B13 for the communist period (

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= 4,50) shows the real teachers' role as information carriers and providers. The mean score that dropped significantly (

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= 3,43) after the revolution shows a medium level of uncertainty avoidance, a transition period with teachers from the former regime that couldn't change which is valid for language teachers in the classroom, too.

- Masculinity/Femininity- item B22 as part of the culture of "excellence" in which performance has priority over social adaptation and item B24 that expresses a tendency towards a more masculine educational system which may be true with small differences as the system didn't change the rules. The authors find paradoxically that in this competitive environment, failure in school (item B25) appears to be less important after the 1990s than in the previous decades, but it is not, as a university degree doesn't offer a well-paid job neither a decent job and many times the graduates work in underqualified fields, so the education doesn't add value and partially, the public perception is that a degree means just losing time and money.
- Long term orientation- item B30 indicates that having a good time is the most rewarded thing among students (low-level orientation). In item B34 after the Revolution new approaches are gradually developed towards a more interdisciplinary methodology but still an alternation or coexistence of both realities may be the truth, as in many schools teachers suggest language books edited abroad.

Limitations must be considered when interpreting the results of this study. A first limitation is related to the choice of variables, as literature review displays that age, gender, qualification, level of study, national culture can impact the learning style and all these factors are difficult to control. A second set of limitations relates to the measuring instruments. According to Ainciburu (2010: 97) the questionnaires used by other authors do not insure the validity and if they are translated another validation is imperative.

In conclusion, the study is valuable for Romanian students in their attempt to learn Spanish in a more effective way and

also for teachers who can adapt their methodology so as to fit the students' needs. A final reflection regarding the pedagogical inferences was expected considering the applied linguistics character. On the other side, more recent bibliography would reflect the actual theoretical background. In the future, other studies with a better control of variables may reveal additional information in this area.

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