

The Passive Language Learners and Their Creativity: Students' Perceptions and Misconceptions

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Abstract

As the majority of students are often regarded by teachers and consider themselves as passive learners, empirical evidence should be provided to help both teachers and students gain better understanding of the learning styles and approaches being employed by most Vietnamese students of English language. This paper examines (1) the widely held misconception of a passive language learner from the students' perspectives and (2) the creativity of the 'presumably' passive language learners. Non-first-year students learning English as a foreign language at Ton Duc Thang University (TDTU) responded to a survey of five questions showing their perceptions and behaviors with reference to their learning styles. The students' creative performance through a translation test were also evaluated. The results suggest that there is a real need to help students reconsider what a passive learner is since the students' perceptions and their learning behaviors are in consistent, meanwhile they could produce a relatively high level of creativity in their translation works.

Keywords: Passive language learners, creative, perception, misconception, Ton Duc Thang University

1. Introduction Asian learning styles and approaches

There has been a common misconception that Asian learners adopt passive learning styles and thus tend to be passive learners who seek to receive knowledge passively from the teacher and do not want to participate in group-work activities (Samuelowicz, 1987, p. 125; Ballard, 1987; Noesjirwan, 1970). According to many researchers who hold the 'Western view', it is claimed that "Asian students, however from societies and educational systems much higher in power distance, adopt passive learning styles and avoid debate or criticism of the material raised in class." (Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones, & Callan, 1991). In addition, Asian learners are thought to be heavily dependent on rote-learning and lack of critical thinking (Samuelowicz, 1987; Ballard, 1987). Responding to these claims, research shows that these are nothing but just stereotypes and misconceptions. Chalmers & Volet (1997) point out that it is not sensible to associate Asian learners' quietness in class with passive learning. They argue that "being quiet does not necessarily mean being mentally passive" and the reason for being quiet lies in the different cultural beliefs. They explain that Asian learners really appreciate the time in class, therefore, they normally avoid wasting time such as asking questions or challenging other people's arguments in classrooms. There is another thing that limits their participation in class as well – the constraints of using a foreign language. Indeed, it is quite difficult for Asian learners to process the spoken language and produce it at the same time, thus, they prefer focusing on understanding the lectures rather than taking part in conversations and discussions. Little wood (2000) also

confirms these explanations in his investigation. He concludes that Asian learners are not “obedient listeners” and they, in fact, love doing group work activities. Regarding the misconception of viewing Asian learners as rote-learners who adopt a surface approach to learning, Chalmers & Volet (1997), Biggs (1994), and Kember (2000) criticise this view for not distinguishing between memory-based learning strategies and surface learning. They argue that sometimes a deep learning approach requires an initial memorised input and the fact that Asian learners prefer using these approaches in order to facilitate their deep understanding. As they suggest, Asian learners need to memorise the information thoroughly before they could progress to deeper understanding and it is a matter of choosing a learning approach that could fit their own preference. Therefore, it is completely misleading to assume that they are not learning and just memorising. In fact, it has been proved that the “use of memorisation strategies such as rote-learning can be an effective strategy because it reduces the memory load when students are learning in a language different from their first language” (Chalmers & Volet, 1997).

As the findings of many recent research continue to cast doubt on these stereotypes, the preconceptions of Asian learners as passive and rote learners need to be dismissed and re-examined (Watkins, Reghi, & Astilla, 1991).

In Vietnam, most EFL teachers encourage their students to acquire active learning approaches while the majority of undergraduate students are regarded as passive or very passive by their teachers. Teachers also claim that failure to adopt an appropriate active learning style obviously results in poor academic performance and language development. The apparently passive students in Vietnam also share many common characteristics with the Asian language learners, yet no research have been done on showing whether this claim is true or not since the academic performance of those labeled passive students, in reality, does not always match with the teachers’ claim. That is to say, some stereotypically passive students sometimes get better results than those marked active ones.

The current paper aims to present evidence for the misconception of the so-called passive language learners from students’ perspectives in Vietnamese context. The results of the current research hopefully help both teachers and students gain better understanding of the choice of learning styles at Ton Duc Thang University and in larger context, Vietnam.

2. Research Objectives

- 2.1 To discover the dominant learning style, either active or passive, adopted by Vietnamese learners of English at Ton Duc Thang University, Vietnam (TDTU);
- 2.2 To investigate the students’ perception of a passive language learner;
- 2.3 To investigate the level of creativity by Vietnamese learners of English at TDTU, who adopt the passive learning styles and approaches.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Population and Samples

72 respondents were from the total population of 600 undergraduates who were studying English language as their major at TDTU, in their second, third or fourth year of the undergraduate program and willing to participate in the study. They were surveyed on their learning styles and behaviors, which helped test the research objectives 2.1 & 2.2.

The focus group consists of 10 participants from the surveyed group as to support the investigation of Research Objective 2.3. The 10 students chosen were all classified as the perceived passive learners with the following criteria: (1) They did not have “never” or “rarely” responses to the first four questions in the survey. (2) They considered themselves passive learners when being surveyed.

3.2 Research Instruments

A questionnaire with five questions was employed in the study as to figure out TDTU students' dominant learning styles and their perception of a passive learner. The questionnaire used four-scale answers in each question, ranging from high frequency to low frequency of class participation, so that the respondents were unable to position themselves in the middle.

A translation test was also employed to measure the level of the creativity of the students' translation works. The test was conducted in the faculty's office and lasted for 60 minutes.

3.3 Data collection

Designing and administering the questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed on the basis of the research objectives. It was then made accessible online via Google Forms. All the students were encouraged to complete the questionnaire.

Designing the translation test

While the questionnaire responses were accumulating, a 60-minute translation test was designed by adapting a newspaper article. A suggested translation text was also prepared afterwards.

Collecting data from Google Forms

After the due date, the online questionnaire was closed and stopped receiving responses. A summary and individual reports of the responses collected were then generated by Google Forms for statistical data analysis.

Administering the translation test

All the collected responses were filtered in order to eliminate all participants who think they are active learners or who display absolutely passive behavior (responded to questions 1 through 4 with “never” or “rarely”) from taking the translation test.

Random sampling was performed to pick out 25 percent of the remaining group of participants for the translation test. They were contacted and informed of the test date. All of them took the test at the Faculty's office at TDTU.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire were encoded using Likert-scale before being analyzed statistically by IBM SPSS version 22. Statistics employed were frequency, percentage, Mode, and Median.

The data collected from the translation test were analyzed qualitatively with Translation Quality Assessment Tool For Health Education Materials (Hablamos Juntos, 2009) employed as assessment framework.

4. Research Results

The results are presented according to the research objectives as follows:

4.1 The dominant learning style adopted by Vietnamese learners of English at TDTU.

Questions 1 to 4 of the questionnaire require students to self-report their own in-class learning behavior and level of participation. The responses may fall under any of these category: (1.00) never, (2.00) rarely, (3.00) quite often, (4.00) very often. The first two categories represent passive learning styles while the other two are indication of active learning styles.

*Table 1
Most common and typical answers to questions 1 to 4 of the questionnaire*

		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
N	Valid	71	72	71	71
	Missing	1	0	1	1
Median		3.00	3.00	2.00	2.00
Mode		2	3	2	2

In Table 1, the Medians indicate that “Rarely” and “Quite often” are the most typical responses in the data. The Mode shows that “Rarely” is repeatedly the most common answer to questions 1, 3, and 4.

The frequency of each response was calculated and is presented in Table 2.

*Table 2
Frequencies of the responses*

Response		Frequency				Total
		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
Valid	Never	3	0	6	4	13
		4.2%	0.0%	8.3%	5.6%	4.5%
	Rarely	30	10	32	47	119
		41.7%	13.9%	44.4%	65.3%	41.3%
Quite often	28	37	27	18	110	
	38.9%	51.4%	37.5%	25.0%	38.2%	
Very often	10	25	6	2	43	
	13.9%	34.7%	8.3%	2.8%	14.9%	
Total		71	72	71	71	285
		98.6%	100.0%	98.6%	98.6%	99.0%
Missing	System	1	0	1	1	3
		1.4%	0.0%	1.4%	1.4%	1.0%
Total		72	72	72	72	288
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		%	%	%	%	100.0%

As shown in Table 2, “Rarely” accounts for the most of all the valid responses (41.3%) with “Quite often” coming close in second (38.2%). However, the total of “Quite often” and “Very often” account for 53.1% of all the valid responses, outnumbering that of “Never” and “Rarely”.

4.2 The students’ perception of passive language learners

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked if they consider themselves active or passive learners. The percentage of the responses are presented below in Fig.1.

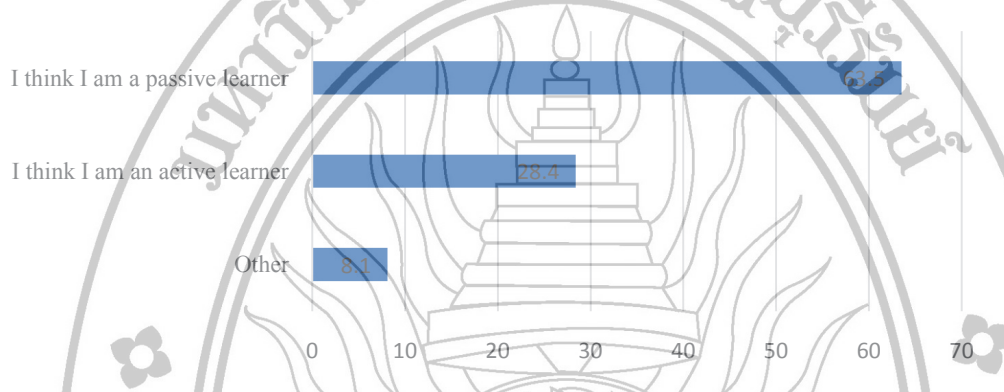


Figure. 1 The students’ perception of their learning style (%)

The chart shows well over half of the students identify themselves as passive learners. There are about twice as many students who think they are passive learners as those who think they are active learners.

4.3 The level of creativity of the students who adopt the passive learning styles and approaches

An in-depth descriptive analysis of 10 answers to the translation test was performed to evaluate the creativity of the sampled students. Their translation works and creativity were assessed and categorized under 4 quality criteria, each of which consists of 4 category ratings ranging from (a) very poor to (d) very good. Ratings (a) and (b) represent low levels of creativity while (c) and (d) indicate high levels of creativity. Summary of the results are presented below in Table 3.

Table 3
Assessment summary and categorization of the 10 translations

Quality criterion	N	Category rating			
		a	b	c	d
1. Functional and textual adequacy	10	0	0	3	7
2. Target language	10	0	4	5	1
3. Non-specialized content (Meaning)	10	1	6	2	1
4. Specialized content and Terminology	10	1	3	5	1

Table 3 shows high frequency of ratings (c) and (d) of all the quality criteria except for non-specialized content. Functional and textual adequacy is the criterion under which the students' performance was the best with 7 out of 10 achieving rating (d) and none scoring below rating (c). However, in translating non-specialized content, more than half of the students could only score rating (b).

5. Discussions

5.1 The dominant learning style adopted by Vietnamese learners of English at TDTU

At first glance, "Rarely" appears to be the most common answer to the questionnaire with the highest frequency in the valid data. However, the comparison of the responses under active and passive categories indicates a tendency of the students towards active learning style. Moreover, the frequency of "Very often" outnumbers that of "Never" by three to one. Therefore, active learning style is slightly the predominantly adopted learning style of the students, which is opposed to teachers' common beliefs.

5.2 The students' perception of passive language learners

Despite the dominance of active learning style, most of the students perceived themselves as passive learners. Evidently, many students were unaware of their learning styles and learning style preferences. Indeed, there were some of the students who exhibited typical behavior of an active language learner yet identified themselves as passive ones. At this point, there seems to be a popular misconception about what a passive language learner is among the students.

5.3 The level of creativity of the students who adopt the passive learning styles and approaches

In the translation test, although under time pressure, the students managed to yield satisfactory results. The students' good awareness of the purpose, function, target audience of the article, as well as the appropriate level of formality were frequently observed in the data. With regard to specialized content, half of the students successfully translated most of the terminologies, meaning that they could manage quite well with an unfamiliar subject which required creativity. However, 7 out of 10 students only achieved low ratings in translating non-specialized content, principally due to some misunderstanding of the original text. It can be concluded from the analysis and the results that most of the students demonstrated fairly high level of creativity.

6. Conclusions

The current research aims to discover the predominant learning style of the students at TDTU. The results reveal that most of the students at TDTU adopt active language learning style. This confirms the study by Ramburuth & McCormick (2001) which suggested that the Asian international students may not be very different from their native Australian counterparts in their overall approaches to learning. The finding also agrees with Littlewood's conclusion that Asian students would prefer active learning style (2000). Hence, Vietnamese tertiary students are not as passive as they may be stereotyped.

The results, nonetheless, give clues about a widely held misconception by the students at TDTU who perceive themselves as passive language learners while their

behavior might not necessarily always suggest the same. This provides evidence to support Clenton's argument that students may pigeonhole themselves (1998).

A translation test was employed to assess the creativity level of the students who adopt passive learning styles. The results from the descriptive analysis reveal that the students whose learning styles are generally regarded as passive demonstrated relatively high level of creativity. It is sensible, however, that those who adopt absolute learning styles may not have similar outcomes.

7. Recommendations

The misconception about passive language learners among the students at TDTU gives rise to the need for students to develop awareness of their own learning style preferences which can inform them of their learning habits and the strengths and weaknesses of their learning strategies (Li, 2012), and enable them to optimize their learning strategies. It is also recommended that educators as well as education authorities be more respectful of students' learning styles (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001) and strive to encourage students to develop their personal learning styles.

This study can serve as the basis for further discussions about the correlation between learning styles and creative performance. Similar research need to be carried out at other educational institutions or in other geographical, social, and cultural contexts.

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