

Learners' Attitudes to Self-Access Study: A cross-cultural survey¹

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Introduction

This article presents the rationale, method and results of a questionnaire which was administered in the Language Centre at the University of Newcastle¹, in order to test learners' attitudes to self-directed language learning. The study was prompted by a suspicion that autonomy in education is an ethnocentric goal. Hofstede's dimensions of culture provide the basis for the questionnaire, and make possible a number of predictions about learners' attitudes.

The nature of the study

If learner autonomy is desirable and learners are not born autonomous, then some degree of training for autonomy is necessary. In Green 1998, I argued that it would make sense that those learners who come from individualist, rather than collectivist societies, would be closer to autonomy and readier to accept it as a desirable goal in their learning. In a 1988 paper, Philip Riley expresses two anxieties about autonomous and self-directed schemes which I want to examine in some depth here. Riley's first doubt is that the principles and practices on which autonomous and self-directed learning schemes are based might be ethnocentric. His second anxiety is that there might be cultures which are somehow less favourable to these ideas and practices (Riley 1988: 13).

1. I would like to thank Philip Shaw for allowing me to administer the questionnaire.

Riley approaches part of these problems through Geert Hofstede's work on cultural differences. I want to follow his lead by examining what is meant by culture and cultural differences, and how this might affect learning strategies and attitudes. By looking at Hofstede's work it should be possible to make predictions about how learners from a certain cultural background will react to the availability of self-access resources. These expectations will then be tested by administering a questionnaire to learners from many different backgrounds, who are studying in the self-access centre at Newcastle University.

Cultural differences and attitudes to learning

Human behaviour is to some degree predictable. How accurate predictions will be is determined by how accurately the context of action is perceived, and how well the person's 'mental programming' is known (Hofstede 1980:14). By 'mental programming' is meant that part of the mind which is stable over time and which leads to the same person behaving in more or less the same way in a certain situation. Hofstede divides up mental programming into three levels: the universal, the collective, and the individual. The universal level of programming is shared by all or nearly all humankind, and is 'the biological "operating system" of the human body' (ibid., p.15). The individual level is the unique part of the mental programme and reflects the fact that no two people have the same personality. It 'provides for a wide range of alternative behaviours within the same collective culture' (ibid.). My main concern is with the collective level of mental programming which is shared by people belonging to a certain group, but is different from that of people belonging to other groups. The whole area of subjective human culture belongs to this level, which is relevant to this study because as Hofstede writes:

It includes the language in which we express ourselves...the physical distance we maintain from other people in order to feel comfortable, the way we perceive general human activities...and the ceremonials surrounding them. (ibid.)

The collective level contains the most learned elements and so concerns us most in the examination of learner autonomy and learning to learn.

Mental programmes are usually described in terms of values and culture. A value is a conception of the desirable which is

distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group [and] which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action. (Kluckhohn 1951: 395).

Values are acquired early in life and are non-rational. They are interrelated and form value systems. Those systems which are shared by the majority of the population form societal norms which lead to the development and maintenance of institutions with a particular structure and functional pattern. The family, and political and educational systems are among these institutions, and once established, their existence will reinforce the societal norms (Hofstede 1980: 26).

Value systems are one of the building bricks of national culture, the definition of which is problematical. Hofstede summarizes a number of sociological and anthropological definitions, before giving his own definition of culture as 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another' (ibid., pp.25-6). Although such brief definitions suggest that it is possible to encapsulate and quantify culture, it seems reasonable to adopt Hofstede's argument, as later on I will be working with his dimensions of

culture. Riley's definition of culture differs slightly in that it emphasizes the knowledge of what is appropriate behaviour in any given situation, but the notion of mental programming and the actual dissemination of such social knowledge is essential to the association of culture and education which Riley makes explicit:

Interaction and interactive discourse play a primary role in the transmission and distribution of social knowledge, and it is reasonable to assume that the ways in which that knowledge is distributed in a given culture will influence the way its members learn to learn. Learning is a social process and varies according to the nature of society in question. (Riley 1988: 20)

If the distribution of social knowledge, of culture itself, is influential in how people learn to learn, then all pedagogical ideas and practices (including beliefs about and degrees of reliance on autonomy and self-direction) are culture specific. Some cultures may be more open to ideas about learner autonomy than others, and those same cultures are likely to be the ones propagating such ideas, as they form the basis for the distribution of social knowledge in those societies.

The dimensions of national culture

In *Culture's Consequences* (1980) Hofstede identifies four dimensions of national culture. These were examined through the distribution and analysis of 116,000 questionnaires across forty different countries. Such a large scale study was made possible by Hofstede working through a major international company which he calls HERMES. The four dimensions which Hofstede identifies are

1. Individualism versus collectivism

2. Large or small power distance
3. Strong or weak uncertainty avoidance
4. Masculinity versus femininity

For each dimension and each country in which the questionnaire was administered, Hofstede calculated an index from his results. He then listed the countries in order from high index value to low, and provided the mean of all values. So for example, the USA has the highest Individualism Index (IDV) with a score of 91, and Venezuela has the lowest with 12. The mean is 51. Of the four dimensions, the first three are of particular interest in a study of learner attitudes to self-direction and autonomy.

The basic issue involved in Individualism is the relationship between the individual and the collectivity which prevails in a given society. Some cultures see individualism as 'a blessing and a source of well-being' (Hofstede 1980: 213) whereas in others it is seen as alienating. The relationship between the individual and the collectivity is intimately related to societal norms and hence to mental programming. A central element of the mental programme which has to do with individualism is the concept of self. A Western concept of 'personality' considers it as a separate entity distinct from culture and society, but for example the Chinese word for 'man' includes the person and his intimate societal and cultural environment which makes existence meaningful (ibid., p.215). In the 'Individualism Index' (IDV) which Hofstede calculates (ibid., p. 222) the Chinese majority countries, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, all have a very low index score (25, 20 and 17 respectively) while the USA, Australia and Great Britain have scores of 91, 90 and 89 respectively. These scores are witness to the great gulf between cultures in terms of individualism. At one end of the scale are the societies in which people are born into collectivities or

groups and who have strong ties with the group. The opinions and beliefs of the group are of greater importance than those of the individual, and such societies have low IDV values. Societies which have high IDV values place greater importance on the individual and his/her own self-interest, and on the freedom from group ties which enables this. Clearly these differences will have an impact on learners' attitudes to self-direction and autonomy, and indeed Hofstede notes a number of specific points of divergence in the educational field.

Low IDV countries	High IDV countries
Students consider it less socially acceptable to claim pursuing their own ends without minding others.	Students consider it socially acceptable to claim pursuing their own ends without minding others.
Duty in life appeals to students.	Enjoyment in life appeals to students.
Individual initiative is socially frowned on.	Individual initiative is socially encouraged.
More years of schooling needed to do a given job.	Fewer years of schooling needed to do a given job.

(ibid., pp.230-1)

When I come to consider the results of the questionnaire it will be of particular interest to look at the responses of the students from China and Chinese-majority countries in the light of these general characteristics.

Hofstede's second dimension is Power Distance for which he also calculates an index (PDI). The basic feature of PDI is inequality between two people, and how that is perceived by the less powerful of the two. Power is defined as the potential to determine the behaviour of another person, and power distance as the degree of inequality between a less and a more powerful individual, in which the two belong to the

same social system (Hofstede 1980: 98). Power distance is of significance in teaching because of the relationship between teacher and student; how the student perceives the inequality will govern to some extent how he/she takes to self-direction and autonomy, which often involve working without a teacher. It may be difficult to change the attitudes of a learner for whom the teacher has always been a figure of authority. In high PDI countries Hofstede shows that students are more dependent on teachers; there is more rote learning; the asking of questions is seldom encouraged; and teachers are more often supposed to be omniscient (ibid., p.126). Other consequences of a high PDI are shown below.

Low PDI countries	High PDI countries
Students put high value on independence.	Students put high value on conformity.
Authoritarian attitudes are a matter of personality.	Students show authoritarian attitudes as a social norm.
Close supervision negatively evaluated by subordinates.	Close supervision positively evaluated by subordinates.

(ibid., p.119)

Given these factors it might be expected that learners from cultures with high PDI values would have greater difficulties in accepting and fully exploiting a teacher who adopted the role of facilitator rather than instructor, and in accepting the consequences of the responsibility given to them in autonomous and self-directed learning. Again, these expectations will be tested in the questionnaire administered in Newcastle.

The third dimension of culture which interests us is Uncertainty Avoidance and its associated index (UAI). Uncertainty about the future is a universal fact which we try to cope with in a number of ways, including religion, law, technology and their associated rituals. Those societies with high UAI values try to beat the future through a proliferation of laws and rules and through religious and political ideologies (Riley 1988: 23). People in low UAI societies tend to feel more secure, and because they feel less threatened are more tolerant of behaviour and opinions which differ from their own. Consequences of UAI values which concern us are shown in the table below.

Low UAI countries	High UAI countries
Less emotional resistance to change.	More emotional resistance to change.
Strong achievement motivation.	Less achievement motivation.

(Hofstede 1980: 176-187)

One of the more important means of avoiding uncertainty is by the rituals of religion, law and organizations. One such ritual within organizations is the nomination of experts. Belief in experts is strongly determined by the national norm for uncertainty avoidance; for example the UK has a low UAI value and prefers generalized, non-specialist education for its managers. If this concept is related to the classroom one might predict that students from high UAI countries are more eager to have a teacher who acts as a specialist in possession of privileged knowledge. A specialist-teacher would reduce uncertainty and the possible insecurity and 'risk' that autonomy represents. These attitudes to the role of the teacher may also be relatively difficult to change.

The questionnaire

For many years it has generally been assumed that self-access centres are of great value to learners trying to improve their language skills. Self-access is a consequence of the drive towards individualization of learning and learner autonomy, but if there is a suspicion that these two goals are ethnocentric, then to what extent can such systems be said to be useful for learners from cultures which do not value individualism? The response of learners from different cultures to opportunities for self-directed learning must be explored, particularly as many self-access systems are set up to help overseas university students with their language proficiency (for a description of some self-access systems see Harding-Esch 1982; Riley and Zoppis 1985; St. John 1988; and Ward 1992). It may be that our concern for individual learner needs is too microscopic in its vision, and ignores the fact that many learners' value systems will not prioritize an individual's needs as a valid or desirable concern when compared with those of a group.

The questionnaire was designed to explore these anxieties about the possible ethnocentrism of autonomy and self-directed learning. Hofstede's dimensions of culture were used as a basis for formulating the questions, as they help to pinpoint areas for exploration, and provide a sound theoretical foundation for examining learner attitudes to autonomy, individual study and general education.

Forty questionnaires were distributed to postgraduate overseas students attending a pre-session English course at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. The course included taught sessions both morning and afternoon, with time allowed every afternoon for students to work in the self-access centre. There were 33 respondents in total, from a variety of cultural backgrounds: 3 Korean, 3 Taiwanese, 2 Chinese, and 4 Japanese (Group 1); 2 Iranians, 2 Omanis, 2 Libyans and one each from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan and Egypt (Group 2); 2

Brazilians, 2 Bangladeshis, 2 Mozambicans, and one each from Spain, Indonesia, Senegal, Germany and Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, the members of this third group were too culturally heterogeneous to make up an acceptable set. The related cultures of Group 1 had high PDI scores, high UAI scores and low IDV scores. Group 2 scores are derived from Hofstede's scores for Iran and Riley's observations (Riley 1988: 24-5). The PDI and UAI values are lower than those of Group 1 (PDI - 58 [mean 51]; UAI - 59 [mean 64]), and the IDV value is higher than Group 1 (IDV - 41 [mean 51]). Further support for the categorization of respondents in this way comes from a study of self-assessment in self-access learning by George Blue (1988). Two of the groups which Blue formed on the basis of divergences between student and tutor assessments closely mirror my two groups, and are relevant because accurate assessment is an essential element of effective self-directed learning. It was tempting to form a third group from some of the unused informants, citing another of Blue's groups as justification, but the cultural dimension scores were too divergent to warrant this. The characteristics of Groups 1 and 2 in terms of Hofstede's dimensions of culture are summarized below.

Learners' cultural characteristics

	Group 1	Group 2
IDV	low	mid
PDI	high	mid
UAI	high	mid

The grouping of related cultures is forced on us because Hofstede does not provide figures for all countries. The consequent loss of accuracy is regrettable but necessary, as I am now dealing with sections of the PDI, IDV and UAI scales, instead of specific points. However, this

more general approach is justifiable because the practicalities of self-access centres mean that catering for a specific culture would be impossibly expensive and time-consuming, whereas consideration of a group of related cultures and provision of special facilities may be possible if the characteristics of that group have been identified.

A number of techniques were used in the questionnaire. Rank-listing of items in order of importance from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important), and in terms of percentage; bipolarity judgements; Likert scale judgements; word selection; and a section for respondents' comments.

It is important to know a respondent's nationality so as to identify the background culture, and whether this has been affected by a lengthy stay in another culture, so the questionnaire began with questions to elicit this biographical information.

Results

Beginning with a general perspective it is useful to know whether a learner has a positive attitude towards independence, or places a high value on conformity in learning and prefers to work in a group. Hofstede identifies these as features of low and high PDI cultures respectively. Associated with this are the social attitudes to individual initiative, which is encouraged in high IDV countries and frowned on in low IDV countries. Item 1 was put to the learners in order to determine their attitudes to different modes of learning:

Here is a list of some of the situations in which you can learn English. Please number them in order of importance from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important).

In conversation with native speakers	
In class	
Reading in English	
Watching TV/listening to the radio	
Individual study	

(Q. 1)

One would expect learners who showed a high level of autonomy to consider learning in class to be of little importance in comparison with the other modes, and so rate it fifth. Other modes would be given a higher rating, with perhaps conversation and individual study preferred overall. Given the cultural characteristics of Groups 1 and 2, one would expect Group 2 respondents to approximate more to this description than their Group 1 colleagues. The following results were obtained (average scores):

TABLE 1 : Relative importance of learning situations

	GROUP 1	GROUP 2
In conversation	2.82	2.30
In class	2.00	4.00
Reading in English	3.45	2.90
TV/Radio	2.91	2.10
Individual study	3.18	3.70

It must be stressed at this point that the results obtained from such a small scale study should be treated with caution. Bearing this in mind, one can see that these results support the above predictions, in that the difference in learner character between Groups 1 and 2 is most significant in their response to the second option, in 'class' being the

favourite learning mode of Group 1 and the dispreferred mode of Group 2. The IDV value of Group 1 is weaker than that of Group 2 which would lead one to expect a discrepancy in this direction, with Group 1 learners conforming, and believing in the traditional importance of the classroom, but the size of the difference is none the less surprising. The individualism/conformity continuum is itself questioned by the Group 2 response which disprefers classroom work and individual study, suggesting an interpretation of the question on a continuum from formal study to leisure activities. In a subsequent item (No. 3) I explore whether learners are motivated by a sense of duty or enjoyment, and examine any correlation between the two sets of results.

The intention in Item 2(a) was to determine learners' preferences among the possible modes of working in the classroom itself, and part (b) was designed to cross-check their preferences with what they see as desirable practice in a well-planned class. This question was formulated using bipolarity judgements in part (a) because a rank-listing type question might have made it too easy for informants to doctor their answers, giving a false impression of consistency and defeating the object of part (b).

Here are some of the classroom situations in which you can learn English. For each pair of situations, please circle the one which you prefer.

- pair work / individual work
- small group work / whole class
- pair work / small group work
- whole class / pair work
- small group work / individual work
- individual work / whole class

(Q. 2a)

In a well-planned class, what percentage of the time do you think a good teacher should spend on each type of work? Please indicate your judgement in the table below.

	%
Whole group work	
Small group work	
Pair work	
Individual work	

(Q. 2b)

One would expect the learners in Group 1, from low IDV cultures, to prefer whole or small group work, with the Group 2 learners tending slightly more towards individual work. In the results that follow, part (a) results are an average of the importance given to each activity, translated onto a scale from 1 to 4. Part (b) results are an average of the time respondents thought should be spent on each activity.

TABLE 2 : Preference for and importance of different learning modes

	GROUP 1		GROUP 2	
	(a)	(b%)	(a)	(b%)
Whole class	3.45	20	2.83	39
Small group	1.45	26	2.33	22
Pair work	2.36	27	2.33	24
Individual work	2.72	27	2.50	15

The Group 1 results correlate in that the respondents thought that least time should be spent on (least preferred) whole class activities. However, the preference for small group work is not reflected in

percentage class time to be spent, but given equal value with pair and individual work. The results of Group 2 are interesting because they show that Arab learners consider that the most time should be spent on whole group activities, but that these are in fact the least preferred activities of the students. There is a discrepancy between what the learners consider to be socially desirable and what they actually prefer. A similar pattern emerges in Group 3, and overall, learners prefer small group and pair work to other modes, with whole class work consistently scoring last. It could be concluded that communicative activities are seen as the most useful, and that some more effort is needed if these learners are to become fully autonomous.

Having sketched an overall picture of learners' attitudes to the various modes of working, including individual study, it was felt desirable to make a more detailed analysis of their attitudes to self-access learning. Item 3 was designed using two different bases. The first comes from Maggie Jo St.John (1988) who proposes a continuum of attitudes from valuable to boring, and which I have adopted because it seems to be one way in which positive or negative attitudes to self-access might more usually be expressed. The second scale is derived from Hofstede who states that learners from low IDV countries are motivated by duty, and learners from high IDV countries by enjoyment. Five words were chosen to represent each scale, and respondents were given the opportunity to add two words not in the list, although only eight did so.

Here is a list of words which might describe the work you do in the self-access centre. Please circle those words which describe your opinion of the work. Circle as many words as you want, and please add two words that are not in the list.

useful	irrelevant	Others
boring	enjoyable
valuable	of little use
waste of time	interesting	
fun	necessary	

(Q. 3)

Among the students with the lowest IDV value culture (Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese) the self-access centre was considered useful by 11 out of 12. As all the other respondents circled 'useful', I must admit that to put 'useful' first on the list was to take advantage of the learners' good nature. Group 2 has an IDV value average of 41, below the mean for 40 countries which is 51, but markedly higher than that of Group 1 (27), so one might expect them to be more positive in their reactions to the self-access centre. The results obtained are presented in Tables 3a and 3b below.

TABLE 3a : Prompted descriptions of self-access: Group 1

	Korean	Japanese	Taiwanese	Chinese	Total
	[3]	[4]	[3]	[2]	[12]
Useful	3	4	3	1	11
Necessary	2	1	3	1	7
Valuable	2	1	1	1	5
Interesting	1	2	0	0	3
Boring	1	0	0	1	2
Enjoyable	0	1	1	0	2
Fun	0	1	0	0	1
Additions	effective fantastic				

TABLE 3b : Prompted description of self-access: Group 2

	Iran	Oman	Libya	Saudi	Yem.	Jordan	Egypt	Total
	[2]	[2]	[2]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[1]	[10]
Useful	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	10
Necessary	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	8
Interesting	2	1	1	0	0	1	1	6
Valuable	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Enjoyable	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	4
Boring	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
Fun	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	2
Irrelevant	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
Additions	fruitful accurate relaxing demanding practical							

Perhaps it is unnecessary to reiterate at this point that the results from such small groups can only be regarded as tentative, but it is interesting to note that learners from the Middle East with a higher IDV value than Group 1 learners, rate interest and enjoyment higher, as might be predicted from the IDV values. Of course, degrees of politeness cannot be accounted for on the basis of these data, which show a slight difference in the nature of the motivation of each group, and in their attitudes towards the self-access system. There is a very positive message for the providers of such systems: virtually all students consider them useful and necessary.

Success in the self-access centre is intimately linked to a learner's willingness to work alone in identifying, addressing and solving his/her own problems. Item 4 was formulated in the belief that perceived success in the self-access system is an indicator of a learner's readiness to take responsibility for his/her own learning. This notion was approached from four different directions within Item 4 (a-d).

Responses to all part of Item 4 were made on a five-point Likert scale, from 'strongly agree' with the statement (score 1) to 'strongly disagree' (score 5). Table 4 below shows the results.

- (a) I learn more in a taught class than in the self-access centre.
- (b) I do not need the teacher when I am working on self-access materials.
- (c) I learn a lot working by myself.
- (d) I prefer classwork to work in the self-access centre.

(Q. 4a-d)

Item 4(a) from the questionnaire asks learners to compare self-access work with classwork in terms of quantitative gain; Item 4(d) poses the same comparison but in general terms, asking for an expression of preference; Item 4(b) is designed to ascertain to what extent respondents rely on the teacher, given that students from low PDI cultures put high value on independence and react negatively to close supervision; and Item 4 (c) asks the learner to quantify how much he/she learns working individually. Finally, Item 4(e) explores a characteristic derived from Hofstede's observations about the IDV dimension of culture:

- (e) I prefer to study the material I need for my own purposes, not those of a group.

(Q. 4e)

In high IDV societies students consider it socially acceptable to claim pursuing their own ends without minding others. Students from low IDV cultures consider this to be less socially acceptable, and one would expect learners from low IDV/high PDI societies to prefer a formal, teacher-fronted classroom with much of the material chosen for

them. In the results to the Likert scale items (Numbers 4 & 5), a result close to 1 signifies agreement with the statement, and a result approaching 5 means disagreement with the statement.

TABLE 4 : Relative usefulness and preference for self-access mode

	GROUP 1	GROUP 2
(a) Learn more in a taught class	2.08	1.90
(b) No need for a teacher	3.67	3.30
(c) Learn a lot alone	2.58	2.70
(d) Prefer classwork to self-access	2.83	3.60
(e) Prefer to work on my own material	2.08	2.50

In response to 4(a) both Groups 1 and 2 agreed that they learn more in a taught class than in the self-access centre. In the case of Group 1 this is consistent with their response to Item 1 which favoured classwork over all other modes of learning. The response of Group 2 however, is not consistent across both questions. Group 2 learners expressed a preference for naturalistic modes of learning; via TV and radio, in conversation, and reading. Self-access learning provides the opportunity for at least some of these activities, but the classroom still triumphs over individual work even though it was the dispreferred mode of learning in response to Item 1.

The need for a teacher's presence is universal, according to the results to Item 4(b), although slightly stronger with Group 1 learners, in keeping with their lower IDV and higher PDI scores. These results justify the decision of the staff at Newcastle to have a teacher present at all times. Many of the comments in the open self-reporting section (Item 6) stressed the need for a teacher to help in identifying problems, and to provide direction and guidance.

None of the learners seemed fully convinced of the efficacy of the centre when in Item 4(c) they were asked how much they learn. If the premise that perceived success in a self-access system correlates with the degree of autonomy is correct, then these learners are not yet fully autonomous. This conclusion is borne out by other results, most notably those to Item 2 (see Table 2).

The ambivalent attitude of Group 2 respondents which has been noted above in the analysis of the response to Item 2, emerges again in Item 4(d). The learners do not prefer classwork to the self-access centre, although they profess to learn more in class. The general preference for self-directed learning expressed here is supported by their response to Item 2 in which the two modes are almost equally dispreferred, with individual study marginally preferred. Group 2 learners seem to prefer any mode over the classroom, and have a very negative attitude towards it, despite the fact that they believe they learn more there. These learners' desirable classroom seems very traditional, with almost 40% of the time spent on whole group activities which they do not like (see Table 2). They seem to view the classroom, and especially whole group work, as a foul-tasting medicine which does them good. This is perhaps the result of social conditioning which the learners cannot rid themselves of, despite their recognition that other modes of learning in and out of class are more beneficial.

The results to Item 4(e) are surprising because the Group 1 learners showed more interest in working on their own materials than Group 2, despite having a lower IDV value. This question also aimed to test the notion that some learners are unwilling to sacrifice the group's interests to their individual needs. One would predict that Group 1 contained some of this type of learner, but the results show that this is not the case; Group 1 learners are the keenest to work on their own material. A possible interpretation of the question as referring to

subject-specific material may go some way to explaining the inconsistency of these results.

It has been noted that the individual level of mental programming 'provides for a wide range of alternative behaviours within the same collective culture'. This informs the rationale behind Item 5, which is about general education. My aim was to determine whether individual students had progressive or conservative attitudes to education, irrespective of their background culture. Responses to all parts of Item 5 were made on a five-point Likert scale, from 'strongly agree' with the statement, to 'strongly disagree'.

- (a) Learning is experimental; the child should be taught to test alternatives for him/herself before accepting them.
- (b) The student-teacher relationship is the relationship between a student who needs direction, guidance and control, and a teacher who is an expert in supplying direction, guidance and control.
- (c) Learning is essentially a process of increasing one's store of information about the various fields of knowledge.
- (d) The goals of education should be dictated by the students' interests and needs, as well as by the larger demands of society.

(Q. 5a-d)

Items 5(a) and 5(d) expressed a liberal attitude to education, while the other two parts were meant to represent a more conservative viewpoint. Unfortunately, many of the respondents gave the same answer to all four statements, which demonstrates that the two poles which I had hoped to capture were not adequately defined in the questions. The results presented below show that there is an overall

tendency to agree with all statements.

TABLE 5 : Learners' attitudes to general education

	GROUP 1	GROUP 2
(a) Learning is experimental	2.50	2.22
(b) Teacher as expert	2.33	1.80
(c) Increase information	1.92	2.10
(d) Student needs considered	1.83	1.60

In each group the two statements which elicit the most agreement from learners come from opposite positions, which must mean that the statements were too general. The tendency to agree is interesting in itself, perhaps indicating the conformity which we have identified earlier, but this is really an attempt to salvage something from a poorly designed question.

Conclusion

The fields of cultural studies and learner attitudes are so large that such a small scale study cannot hope to make much impact. However, it is interesting to see that despite the limitations of this study, a number of the predictions which were made on the basis of Hofstede's dimensions of culture were borne out, and that on the whole the relative responses of the two main groups in the study were as expected. Group 1 learners from low IDV/high PDI cultures expressed a marked preference for classwork, and for working in groups within the classroom. They also seemed to be motivated in their self-directed learning by a sense of duty rather than enjoyment. Their need for a teacher in the self-access centre cannot be considered as significant, as all the informants expressed the same wish. Group 2 learners from mid

IDV/PDI cultures also exhibited behaviour which fulfilled earlier predictions, for example expressing more enjoyment in their self-directed learning than their Group 1 colleagues. The Group 2 learners showed some very ambivalent attitudes to self-directed learning, notably their belief that whole class work is a socially desirable mode of working, combined with personal preference for any other mode. These results, though not looked for, are none the less very interesting and reveal the possibility of internal battles between the learners' strong cultural background and individual preferences.

Not all my predictions were fulfilled, with a number of results being inconclusive. Some were the opposite of what was expected, for example the Group 1 learners' preference for working on their own material, which they favoured more than all other informants. Despite these inconsistencies and the small scale of the study, which means that it would not be wise to attribute too much significance to the findings, the degree of correlation between predictions and results suggests that it would be worthwhile to carry out further research in this area.

Future studies might improve on this one in a number of ways. It would make for a more rigorous study if the respondents to the questionnaire all figured in Hofstede's indices of the dimensions of culture, so that there would be no need for approximations, and if the groups of a single nationality were large enough to make the results more representative. This study has of necessity been cross-sectional, but it would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study working with the staff of the self-access centre as well as the learners. In this way the responses of the learners about their performance in the centre could be checked over time and correlated with staff perceptions. This would also enable an exploration of the degree to which learners from different cultures successfully exploit opportunities for self-directed learning, and how they progress towards autonomy.

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