Chapter 8
Cross-Cultural Differences in Learning Style and Learning Skills:
A Comparison of Japan, Thailand, and the USA

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aimed to understand how learning style and learning skills differ among three countries—Japan, Thailand, and the United States—as viewed through Kolb's experiential learning theory. The study consisted of 300 undergraduates, with 100 freshmen from each country. Results indicated that Japanese students depended the most on a feeling mode rather than a thinking mode, followed by Thai students; Americans, in contrast, strongly preferred to learn from a thinking mode. Of the 12 learning skills analyzed, nine differed by both learning style (converging or diverging) and country, while three were affected only by country. Thais showed the highest level of most learning skills, Americans were in the middle, and Japanese exhibited the lowest level of all 12 skills. A converging learning style influenced learning skill development more than a diverging learning style. This study offers theoretical and practical implications.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization increasingly requires higher education institutions to teach their students the skills and knowledge necessary to address cross-cultural issues and to becomea global talent in a dynamic global context (Stewart, 2012). Because global businesspersons have to work effectively with their host and third country's partners in intercultural situations (Adler & Gundersen, 2008), an important role of the university is to help students learn about their international counterparts within a class or more broadly inside or outside their campus. Clearly, student opportunities for cross-cultural learning are growing. According to reports from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013), the number of students studying abroad more than doubled between 2000 and 2011 and tripled between 1990 and 2011. The rate of international students continues to increase at all levels of higher education (OECD, 2015), which enhances the possibility for cross-cultural interactions and learning opportunities. With this background, it is crucial to understand the effect of different cultural backgrounds on learning.

Research on how different people perceive and behave across countries is not new. For example, in the context of employees, Hofstede (1997) proposed cultural dimensions based on values and beliefs in countries, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) revealed various cultural management classifications, and House et al. (2004) presented cultural leadership categorizations. When considering the context of universities as learning environments, it seems important to understand how learning styles or approaches differ based on students' cultures and countries. Although it is known that learning style varies with countries and cultures (see Auyeung & Sand, 1996; Barmeyer, 2004; Heffernan et al., 2010; Joy & Kolb, 2009; Yamazaki, 2005; Yamazaki & Kayes, 2010), few studies have been conducted on undergraduates' learning styles across countries, except for Auyeung and Sand's (1996) comparative examination of Australian and Chinese accounting undergraduates, Barmeyer's (2004) research that investigated French, German, and Quebec undergraduates, and a more recent study conducted by Heffernan et al. (2010) comparing Australian and Chinese students in an Australian university.Because formation of a learning style is influenced by contextual differences,such as educational background, career choice (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005), and career stages (Yamazaki & Umemura, 2017), it is meaningful to focus on the context of undergraduates' learning environmentsas a particular context when examining cross-cultural learning styles.Accordingly, this study sought to understand undergraduates' learning style differences across cultures and countries.

Learning abilities, especially for promising young executives, are greatly in demand for global effectiveness and success with expatriation (Spreitzer et al., 1997). As a result of learning in a cross-cultural working environment, individuals acquire and utilize skills to deal with challenging jobs and situations. Such skills typically include communicating with locals (Caligiuri, 2000; Stening & Hammer, 1992), being sensitive to others' needs (Hawes & Kealey, 1981; Tung, 1998), and building trust with counterparts (Sinangil & Ones, 1997; Arthur & Bennett, 1995). Furthermore, it is also reported that relationship, goal setting, and action skills listed in a general competency model are required for host country managers working for global corporations in Asia (Yamazaki, 2014). Regardless of the positions people take as an expatriate or a host country national, they have to learn and develop certain skills to apply to a global job situation. Consistently, according to a view of leadership development, key skills and competencies are important in job situations (Wickramasinghe & De Zoyza, 2009).Because universities have a role in fostering students' development into promising global business persons (Stewart, 2012),understanding the skills developed by students from different countries is an initial step. While a large number of expatriate

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