

How Individuals with Collectivistic Cultural Background Activate Independent Self-construal and Curriculum Design

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Abstract—In this essay, what is individualism, collectivism and self-construal will be discussed in the first part. Moreover, students' cultural backgrounds and meets, as well as how these factors shape the cultural learning will be explored. Then, the knowledge about self-concepts and communication behaviours will be demonstrated. Also, the reasons for the selection and sequencing of activities and outcomes will be instructed. In the final part, the outlines of lessons will be established with logical flow. On the whole, this essay mainly focuses on how the independent self-construal functions within individuals with a collectivistic background by means of field research. In addition, the process of language learning is also a process of culture learning, which imposes conscious and subconscious impact on the formation of individual's self-construal.

Index Terms—Individuals, collectivistic, independent, self-construal, curriculum.

I. RESEARCH QUESTION

How a group of 12 Chinese Australian teenagers activate independent self-construal in a Chinese classroom through conversational styles.

Purpose: to make a preparation for further development in a genuine understanding of self-concepts and communication behaviours.

Cross-cultural research done in recent years found that many East Asians including Chinese subjects raised or educated in individualistic culture, used to be labeled as typical collectivists, scored higher than many Westerners including British and American counterparts on independent self-construal. As most studies aimed at developing new measurement of self-construals to measure views of the self-based on quantitative data [1], how individuals with collectivistic cultural background activate independent self-construal in real specific situations is little studied. To gain a better understanding of how the independent self-construal functions within an individual with collectivistic background, field research must be employed.

This observation was conducted in a common language socialization setting, a Chinese classroom, to interpret how a group of 12 Chinese Australian teenagers demonstrate the

independent self-construal through verbal interactions with the teacher.

II. CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

A. Individualism/Collectivism (I/C)

The notion of individualism and collectivism has been “the most important dimension of cultural difference in social behaviour across the diverse cultures of the world [2]. Yet most prior studies focused on the different behaviours influenced by I/C at a cultural level and overemphasized the unique characteristics of each value tendency. I/C were assumed mutually exclusive and were opposite poles of a value dimension. A reliance on only cultural-level I/C to explain individual communication behaviours is limited and can lead to erroneous conclusions [3].

To understand individual communication behaviour, both culture-level I/C as well as individual-level factors that mediate the influence of culture must be taken into consideration [4]. Self-construals is one of the individual-level factors that mediates the influence of cultural I/C on communication behaviour.

B. Self-construal (Concepts)

Self-construal is the individual-level equivalent of cultural-level individualism and collectivism [5]. Self-construal is one's self image and is composed of an independent and an interdependent self [6]. The independent self-construal involves the view that an individual is a unique entity with an individuated repertoire of feelings, cognitions, and motivations. The interdependent self-construal involves an emphasis on the importance of relational or ingroup connectedness.

Gudykunst *et al.*, Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, and Yee-Jung [7] argue that independent self-construal is predominantly associated with people of individualistic cultures, while interdependent self-construal is predominantly associated with people of collectivistic cultures. However, both dimensions of self exist within each individual regardless of cultural identity.

C. Self-construal and Conversational Styles

The central focus of conversational styles relates to the manner in which a message is conducted. Results show that different dimensions of self-construals positively correlate with concerns for interaction goals which regulate people's conversational styles [8].

1) Participants

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The subjects are 12 Chinese Australian teenagers from a Chinese classroom at Sydney-China Yucai School, an officially authorized school offering Chinese language classes at weekends. Students will be allocated to different classes according to their Chinese levels. The 12 students including 4 girls and 8 boys aged between 13 and 17 are at an intermediate and high level in listening, speaking and reading; yet a relatively low level in writing.

All of them have lived in Sydney for at least 10 years. Ten of them have been living here since they were born. Two were born in China and came here when they were four years old as dependents of migrated parents.

All the participants have learned Chinese either at Yucai School or other Chinese language schools for 2-8 years.

2) Methods

Data collection and analysis are based on a 90-minute non-participant classroom observation as Table I.

TABLE I: THE DATA OF RESEARCH

Categories	Notes
Seating arrangements	Row style
Size of the space	12 for each;
- number of desks	more were separated at the back;
- space for activities	No space for group activities; narrow;
-	
Decorations	No;
- wall display	3; two in the front; one at the back
- notice board	

TABLE II: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE -CONVERSATIONAL STYLES WHEN INTERACTING WITH TEACHER

Categories	Notes	Others
Writing activity	Missed first 30-min interaction between T & Ss.	Sleeping; dillydallying
- goals	asking how to write in Chinese (filial piety; reciprocity; responsible; industrious; respect; care; love; obey)	
- styles		
15-min break	actively seeking teacher's attention by interrupting others' questions;	
- goals	direct;	
- styles		
Text learning:		
- goals		
- styles		

The Chinese class takes place on every Sunday morning from 10 to 12. Before I entered the site, I had expected there would be wall displays such as paintings and calligraphy implying Chinese traditional values. Yet, the classroom was rented by the Yucai School from Marrickville High School, as it doesn't have its own school building. As a result, it is not

tailored for Chinese learning. From the math formula and graphs on three notice boards, it could be inferred that it is a math classroom. It was set in a typical row style with light yellow desks and chairs.

Self-construals are reflected through people's verbal communication styles which can be observed and analyzed. The classroom observation was conducted to examine the classroom interactions between the students and the teacher, which reflected the students' independent self-construal. Meanwhile the teaching strategies were observed, the role of which in the future development of students' self-construals cannot be neglected.

TABLE III: TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE-TEACHING STRATEGIES INFLUENCING STUDENTS' CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL VALUES AND SELF-CONSTRUALS

Categories	Notes
Writing activity	
- purpose	Practice writing in Chinese
- topics	1. What I want to achieve most 2. Reasons for obeying your parents
- reflection of individualistic/c collectivistic value	1: "I" centered; individualism 2. "we" centered; collectivism
Text learning	Yet topic itself cannot determine an individual's self-construals which will be reflected through what will be produced for the topics.
- objective	
- source of texts	To read the text fluently and understand the theme of <i>the Precious Textbooks</i>
- themes	From the textbook currently used in Chinese elementary schools; Perseverance; thriftiness; Study hard to make contribution to our country;
- Vocabulary	Perseverance; thriftiness; heart-stirring; take the initiative; sacrifice;
- Reflection of individualistic/c collectivistic values	Typical collectivistic values: group interest is always higher than personal interest; be ready to sacrifice own interest/life for other's benefits;
Closure:	
- assignment	Grammar exercise

Also, a small-group interview was conducted during the 15-minute break on their language preference at home and reasons for learning Chinese; however the focus of the interview was not on what was said, but rather on how what was said was to be said.

Focus of the Observation as Table II.

Interactions between teacher & Students: Students' verbal

styles when communicating with teacher during the lecture and the 15-minute interview;

Relationship between Teacher and students;

Teaching strategies: Teaching activities affecting students' construction of cultural values and self-concepts;

Data recording: Descriptive field notes;

3) Procedures

- 1) Designing a non-participant observation instrument with general categories to collect data relevant to the topic.
- 2) Gaining permission to observe in a Chinese classroom.
- 3) Obtaining general information from the teacher about teaching and learning styles.
- 4) Revising the instrument.
- 5) Collecting data: observing and drawing observed behaviour under pre-set general categories with descriptive field notes (sitting at the back of the classroom); conducting a small-group interview in the 15-minute break;
- 6) Analyzing data based on the field notes; analysis and physical Environment

I expected that target language cultural content would be covered by the activities and materials arranged by the teacher. The data showed that this was indeed the case as Table III.

The class consisted two sessions – writing and text learning. The goal of the writing exercise was to let students practice writing in Chinese. They could choose either one of the two topics: *What I Want to Achieve Most and Reasons for Obeying Your Parents*. Different cultural values were embedded in the topics. Superficially, the first topic emphasized “I” culture (individualism); whereas the second can be linked to “We” culture (collectivism). However the individual's self-concepts cannot be reflected only by which topic he/she chooses, more importantly by the inner thought produced for the topic.

In the second session, text learning, the goal is to read the text fluently as well as understanding the theme of the text. The text is from a textbook which is currently used in China's elementary school. The text depicts a soldier sacrificed his own life to protect children's textbooks in 1947 when China was in the midst of civil war. The words appearing several times in the text “Perseverance; thriftiness; heart-stirring; take the initiative; sacrifice” have been popular for at least 30 years in China since 1940s. And the theme reflected by the text --- group interest is always higher than personal interest and be ready to sacrifice own interest/life for other's benefits, had been advocated by Chinese mass media for several decades and had been playing a determining role in the construction of collectivistic value among Chinese people [9].

Language learning cannot be separated from cultural learning. The process of language learning is also a process of culture learning, which imposes conscious and subconscious influence on the formation of individual's self-construals. The data collected in this Chinese classroom from the teacher's perspective demonstrated that the traditional collectivism has been integrated into Chinese teaching, which has and will contribute to their construction of collectivistic value.

This paper examined the factors from the teacher's perspective in a Chinese classroom that contribute to the students' collectivistic value construction which in turn

promotes the development of the interdependent self-construal within them. However the influence on the development of interdependent self-construal cannot be confined to the factors in the Chinese classroom [10]. Instead, the influence comes from multi sources --- interactions with their families, relatives, friends or other people with collectivistic cultural background, which have not been examined.

III. OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT

Operational definitions

A. Physical Environment

- seating arrangements (circular arrangement/row style);
- size of the space (number of the desks; amount of space for group activities);
- decoration (wall-display; notice board);

B. Students' Perspective: Conversational Styles When Interacting with Teacher

(goals – clarity; efficiency; avoiding hurting teacher's face; avoiding negative evaluation; minimizing imposition;)

(styles – direct; explicit; direct imperative; indirect; implicit;)

- Writing activity
- 15-minute break
- Text learning

C. Relationship between the Teacher and the Students

- mode of address (Ss-T; T-Ss);
- atmosphere (equal/hierarchical)

D. Teacher's Perspective: Teaching Strategies Influencing Students' Construction of Cultural Values and Self-construals

1) Writing activity

- purpose
- topics
- reflection of individualistic/collectivistic values

2) Text learning

- objective
- types of texts
- themes
- vocabulary
- reflection of individualistic/collectivistic values

3) Closure

- assignment

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