

## Culture and Approaches to Learning and Teaching

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### Abstract

The focus of the current study is on *approaches* to learning and teaching rather than a study of learning styles and the impact of a particular style on how students perform. Arguably learning styles and the impact of a particular style on how a student performs has been a topic of discussion for years particularly in language learning; less attention has been given to how approaches to learning are influenced by cultural attitudes, beliefs and structures and the subsequent influence of these approaches on how students cope in education. The current piece of research was undertaken as an initial exploratory work to examine the question of whether or not learning approaches developed in early learning experiences and evolving from a particular cultural view impact on and prepare students for subsequent learning. Cultures differ in how they perceive knowledge and learning and in the expectations they have from the outcomes of learning. Background information is provided on approaches to learning within the cultural context and a tried and tested instrument used to measure learners' approaches delivered through an online survey. Results are presented, discussed and the appropriateness of these approaches to the current university learning environment is considered.

*Keywords:* cultural approaches, individualism, collectivism, power distance, uncertainty

## 1. Introduction

Since the early 1980s, teaching and learning through the medium of English in foreign language environments have been influenced largely by the communicative approach to language acquisition. Consequently, little attention has been given to the context of learners and the prior linguistic and cultural approaches to learning that learners bring to the learning situation. It is assumed that if students are subjected to a learning approach based on principles that promise to make them analytical learners that they will metamorphose into efficient language users and critical thinkers. The current research considers students who take third level education through English in an environment where English is not their primary language of communication and where they are also expected to adopt an analytical discursive approach to learning. The participants are all Arabic speaking students in the UAE.

## 2. Literature Review

In the past four decades, much work has been conducted on students' learning styles and the impact of these on the quality and quantity of learning. The focus is on an individual's preferred learning style in terms of visual, auditory, or kinesthetic, what Manikutty et al (2007) refer to as learning through experience. The focus of the current study is not on learning styles but on *approaches* to learning, the difference between the two being one of individual style preferences as opposed to specific situational approaches. Manikutty et al (2007) explains that learning style is an individual issue and concerned with "a more general and higher level of preferences for particular modes of learning" while a learning approach is seen as referring to "more situation specific competencies required for effective learning" (72). The research explores the question of whether or not learning approaches developed in early learning experiences and evolving from a particular cultural view impact on and prepare students for subsequent learning. Culture, as Rebecca Oxford (1990:441) points out, "is not the single determinant, and although many other influences intervene, culture often does play a significant role in learning" as students adopt, often unconsciously, many of the practices from the culture in which they grow up.

Cultures differ in how they present knowledge and the expectations they have of students. Most research on learning styles and approaches has been done from a "western, white, middle-class perspective and value system" (Claxton & Murrell, 1987, 71), particularly from the North American perspective and it is often assumed that this is the goal to which all educational systems should aspire. Even if we accept the validity of such an approach, can we achieve the desired objective simply by ignoring where our students come from? Guild & Garger (1985), argue that approaches to learning differ according to students' cultural backgrounds. If this is the case, it is vital that we take these backgrounds and approaches into consideration when working with our students. Similarly, Fensham (1972) points out the significance of 'prior knowledge for subsequent learning'. He claims that the available literature of the time paid little attention to the negative impact of prior learning and points to some negative aspects of prior learning. Rote memorization is identified, along with inclusion of irrelevant details and distortion of information as the main negative impacts. It is interesting that the same claims can be made about the influence of prior learning almost 40 years later.

It is not true to say today that little has been done in the way of research in the field of learning approaches as the 1970s saw the beginning of serious investigation but what one can say is that there has been little application of the findings in a meaningful way. Research in the area of learning approaches as impacted by culture dates back to the 1970s (Entwistle and Wilson 1970) and is ongoing. Work on defining different cultural approaches to learning occurs in the research of Pask (1976), Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle (2005). Some research has been done on third

level students who undertake post-graduate degrees in an English medium society. This work was motivated primarily by the observation of the difficulties some students meet while adapting to a new and western oriented educational environment. A 1993 study by Ken Hyland on Japanese learners in a New Zealand tertiary college suggests that Japanese schools do not rate independence, creativity or completion of imaginative tasks too highly. Classes were found to be teacher centered, traditional in teaching methodologies with success measured by examination outcomes and grades. Memorization and rote learning were found to be very important to the Japanese students and consequently these third level Japanese students in NZ were found not to be able to take advantage of a system that required them to do extensive reading and writing.

In his study on a group of Arab Muslim students at Canada's University of Alberta, Mostafa (2006) refers to the perceived "infallibility" (40) of supervisors and teachers in some cultures, whose commands and directives students are expected to follow. He cites Wisker (2005, p. 192) who points to the fact that students move to foreign universities with this kind of "culturally-influenced constructions of knowledge." Abukhattala (2004) as cited in Mostafa (2006) points out that Arab Muslim students found difficulties in "student-teacher relationship, teaching methodology, democratic dialogue in classrooms and classroom interactions" (49) in Western universities. Participants in Mostafa's research pointed to the reliance on rational, objective knowledge, independent learning expectations, informal learning patterns, attitudes to authority and little scope for memorization as obstacles to their success in Western institutions.

In the UAE, approaches to learning research dates back to Farquharson's 1989 analysis of Arab students' learning styles and approaches to learning in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Later research (Barakat 1993; Bel Fekih 1993; Kaylani 1996; Richardson, 2004) has reinforced the early findings that general cultural factors and approaches to learning in early education affect subsequent learning. In her analysis of textbooks in use in UAE government schools, O'Brien (2010) points out that though there is abundant communicative material in the textbooks, the approach in terms of correct output of syntactic and grammatical testing is based on a repetition of a given pattern, a learning approach she claims leads to rote memorization tasks that are fine at lower language levels but not a successful approach for manipulating the complexities of a multi-layered text.

There has also been much criticism of reform that depends too much on importing ideas from outside just because they have proven to be successful in other countries. Al Reyes (1996:16) criticized educational reform that has focused only on curriculum and in his view, the adoption of a curriculum that is "based on theories that have proven their validity" in other educational environments is not good enough in the UAE. Bax (1999:505) points out that the UAE can take ideas from outside but suggests that two things should be taken seriously: "We need to look closely at the particular context we are working with, including all its cultural, social and political complexities and we need to tailor our approach to suit that context."

Harrison (1990) also criticizes the approach to teaching and learning in the UAE schools pointing out that a communicative syllabus is not really feasible in the learning environment because of the unavailability of properly trained teachers to deliver the curriculum in an effective manner. He argues that the lack of individual freedom along with an inability or reluctance to cultivate an individual learning approach has implications for the effective use of any communicative materials. The predominant methodology for the teaching of English in secondary schools is traditional memorization patterns (Osterloh 1986, McKay 1992, Wallace 1996, Mawgeed 1999) producing as Al Reyes (1996:18) explains "passive communicators rather than active participants" in the learning process. This is a learning approach that permeates all

subject areas in the school including classical Arabic but is now being addressed by the Ministry of Education in the UAE.

More recent research on the impact of cultural approaches to learning and language ability on students' performance in an online course in Zayed University (Martin 2006, 10) concludes that *"it is likely that students from this Emirati culture will feel more comfortable in a controlled and task oriented environment"*. Nevertheless Martin also points out that students enjoyed the challenge of a new approach to learning when it was set up in the right way. Findings from the various studies both general and specific to the Arab and Emirati worlds inform the current study.

### 3. Theoretical framework of survey

Manikutty et al (2007) revived the issue of influence of prior learning in their article, 'Does Culture influence learning style in higher education?' and points to the importance of acknowledging the context in which learning takes place. They cite Hall who in 1990 explained that educational systems emerge from the cultures in which they are "embedded" (Manikutty et al, 2007, 71) and reflect the values of that culture. At tertiary level in the UAE, the system reflects more the values, approaches and methodologies of the North American system than any local Arab system. In that respect, there is validity in considering the issues raised by Manikutty et al (2007) about "the migration of students seeking higher education abroad" (71) but in this situation the migration is of a system into a country's tertiary education sector.

Manikutty et al (2007) define the difference between learning styles and learning approaches at the outset. Learning styles research is based on the work of Kolb (1984) (Manikutty et al, 2007, 72) while learning approaches is seen as referring to "more situation specific competencies required for effective learning" (Manikutty et al, 2007,72). Manikutty et al set out to develop a theoretical framework around approaches to learning that can be tried and tested. They argue that culture and cultural values of countries/societies influence approaches to learning and impact future learning. They base the framework on Hofstede's (2001) definition of culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category from another." (Manikutty et al, 2007, 73) The five dimensions along which one culture differs from another are: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and individualism vs. collectivism.

- ▶ **Power distance** refers to how equitably power is distributed in a society and how willing members are to accept discrepancies in power distribution. This can be seen in teacher student relationships though, complicated in a Gulf environment by the perception of the distance between all guest workers and the local population.
- ▶ **Uncertainty avoidance** refers to the amount of uncertainty and speculation tolerated within a society. Societies with a very clearly defined interpretation of reality generally display a 'low tolerance to ambiguity' (Manikutty et al, 2007, 74) and have definite rules that may be rigidly enforced leading to a conformity and predictability in behavior among its members. Such a dimension may lead to demands for clear signposts for educational tasks and inability to undertake independent learning. Learner behavior in such an environment is often highly predictable.
- ▶ Hofstede uses the gender-laden terms of **masculinity and femininity** to describe aggressive versus passive roles of participants in the learning experience. Masculinity represents aggressive and active roles in learning while femininity defines passivity. Learners in some male dominated societies may display many of the features of

Hofstede's (2001) femininity by producing passive learners, as is the case in Japan and Korea.

- ▶ **Long-term versus short term orientation** describes how long members are willing to wait for gratification of their material, social and emotional needs. In long-term oriented societies, goals are not with the here and now and this type of society reflects an adherence to tradition. Modern life has added its complications to this dimension as cultures, and students in particular, expect quite speedy gratification for effort while at the same time adhering strictly to existing traditions.
- ▶ **Individualism Vs collectivism** describes the extent to which individuals are independent and look after themselves or are still bound up with the family group and friends. Such differences in upbringing during childhood years have repercussions for adult behavior. In an educational context, a collectivistic oriented approach leads to the common belief that one should provide support for one's fellow group members. This may lead to cheating, plagiarism and compromise in assignments and examinations.

These cultural characteristics combine with individual personalities and when applied to learning give rise to a theory of learning approaches that considers not just the personality and experiential learning of the individual but also the influence of the learning environment where learning takes place. The three main categories of learning identified by researchers (Entwistle & Wilson 1970, 1977, Marton & Saljo 1976, Entwistle 1992, Entwistle & Tait 1995, Tait, Entwistle & McCune 1998) and considered as influential in how learners learn are: deep, surface apathetic and strategic. These categories influence the learner by defining the factors that motivate him/her as either intrinsic or extrinsic. These in turn result from a vision within the society and culture of what learning and knowledge are about and how success and failure are defined and viewed in the society.

Deep learning (Marton, Hounsell, Entwistle, 2005) describes a learning process whereby learners seek knowledge for its own sake, are interested in ideas, are able to make connections between facts and ideas and use evidence as support for views and opinions. Such learners are more likely to emerge from a culture where they are encouraged to deal with discrepancies, can tolerate ambiguity and make independent learning decisions. Surface apathetic learners see no clear purpose in what they are doing, fail to comprehend and understand much of what they are doing, are limited by the syllabus and motivated primarily by a fear of failure. Such learners are likely to lack independence and intrinsic motivation and take a passive approach to learning. Strategic approach learners have an organized approach to learning, manage their time, are motivated, and able to monitor and direct their own progress and learning. Such learners are generally extrinsically motivated and learning has a functional value for them.

#### 4. Study – participants and survey instrument

The current study was undertaken to investigate the approaches to learning and teaching manifested by groups of learners in a third level university in the UAE with a view to measuring the appropriateness of these approaches with the requirements of the university. Students (mostly aged between 17 to 24) enter the university after graduating from high school. Approaches to learning in the government secondary schools are still quite traditional with the emphasis on memorizing from notes for examinations, rote learning. The medium of instruction in schools is Arabic. A growing number of students attend English medium schools and though a small percentage display greater ability in writing, the major difference between these students and those from the government schools can be seen in their ability to communicate orally. When

students enter university they take a foundation English course to reach the required IELTS Band 5, followed by three semesters of academic writing courses leading to the selection of a discipline for their graduate studies. The medium of instruction throughout the university is English although students study courses in Arabic and Islam. A fundamental requirement to a university career is the ability to analyze, think critically, and make informed academic decisions through reading and writing. Overall, university requirements are a challenge for many of the students and it is of value to conduct an investigation into approaches to learning by students and to investigate the appropriateness of these approaches to the requirements of the university.

An inventory developed by Entwistle, McCune & Hounsell (2002) and available online ([www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk](http://www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk)) was considered suitable as an instrument of investigation to be adapted for the study, particularly as the developers cite research by Prosser & Trigwell (1997) who point out that “approaches to studying and perceptions of teaching are two of the most direct influences on the quality of student learning” (28). They argue that university students bring experiences and approaches with them that affect how they make sense of subsequent learning. It is essential to understand this in order to help students succeed at university and adapt to the approach required of them.

The adapted research instrument consists of three parts, the first of which asked a general question on what learning is with a range of suggestions and a second part of 52 questions designed to identify students as deep, surface or strategic learners based on their responses. A final question allowed students to give an opinion on their overall performance as learners. The instrument was presented in an online format through one of the commercially available survey sites and 300 students from foundation to the level participated in the study. It was presented in both English and Arabic to ensure participants’ comprehension of questions. It should be stressed here that the study is an exploratory work and requires more follow-up.

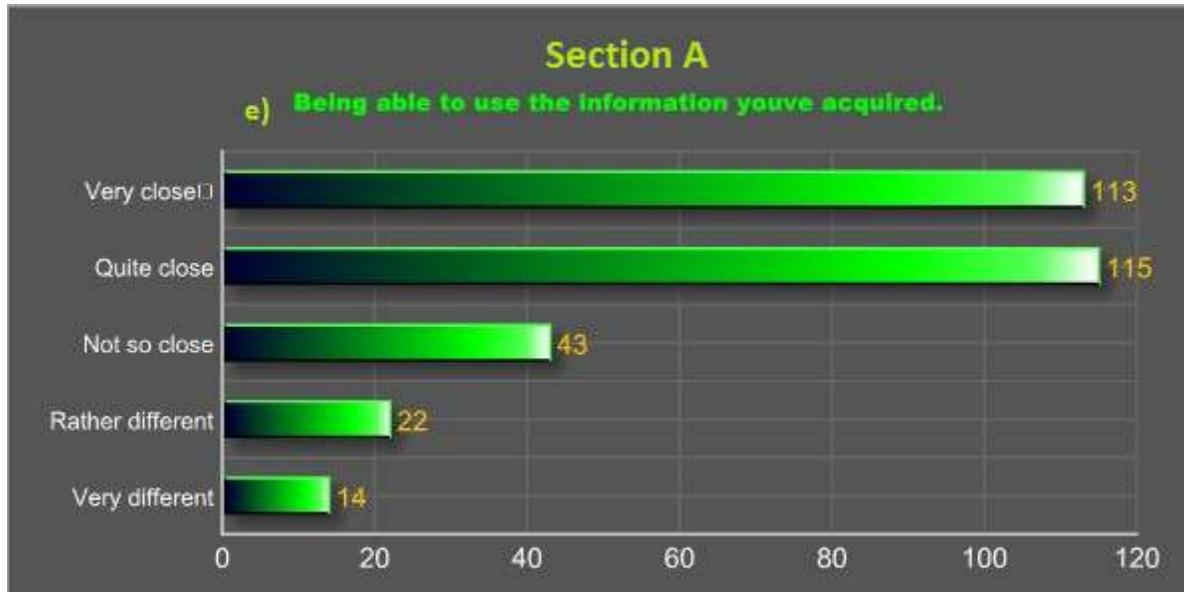
## 5. Results

It was hypothesized that the students were likely to display many more surface apathetic approaches to learning rather than deep or strategic. This, however, was found not to be the case and overall the responses indicate a more complex situation. The initial question on the students’ perception of what learning is, yielded two main interpretations: 1) to help a student develop as a person (84%) and, 2) to build up knowledge by acquiring facts and information (78%). The following discussion focuses on the main patterns that emerged from responses on the three approaches to learning identified by Entwistle et al.

### Deep approach items

One set of deep approach items to learning seeks to probe the importance of understanding and meaning to students. Four items (4, 17, 30, 43) are employed to gauge approaches, the first of which is a general question on the importance of understanding the meaning of what is being learnt; two items look at the importance of meaning in reading and the fourth the need to understand what lies behind an assignment or project before tackling it. It is interesting to observe that the general question receives a high level of agreement from participants (Figure 1) whereas the more specific focus on how one seeks meaning in reading and assignments suggests that students are not fully engaged in these activities.

**Figure 1:** Importance of understanding meaning in text

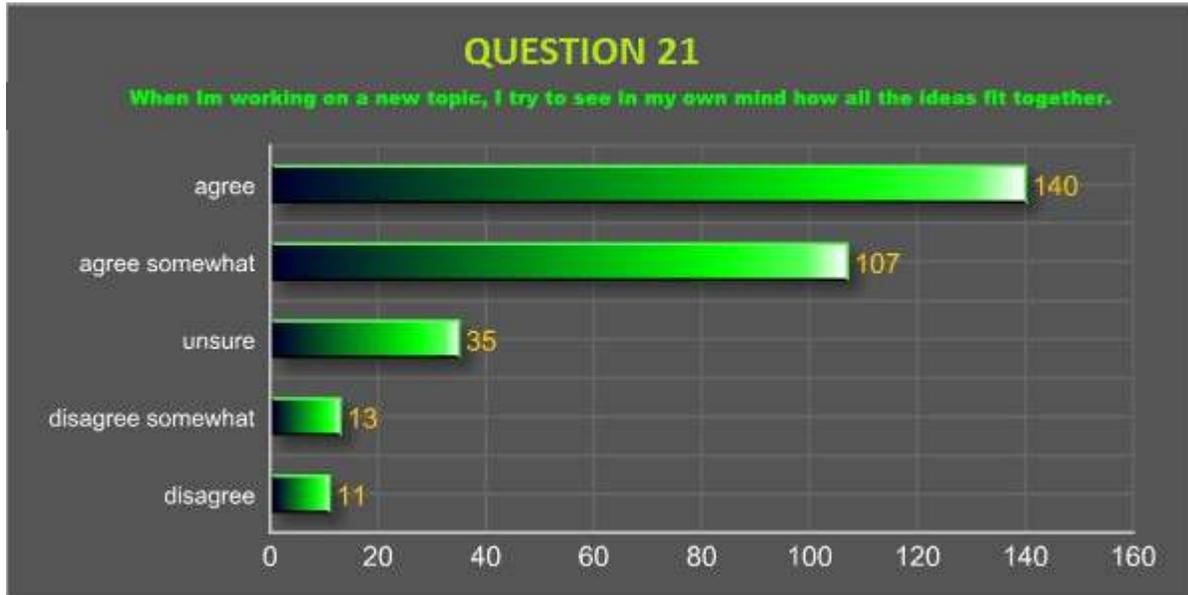


**Figure 2:** Response details on understanding text meaning

Item	Very close/ quite close
17. When I am reading an article of a book, I try to find out for myself exactly what the author means.	62%
30. When I am reading I stop from time to time to reflect on what I am trying to learn	67%
43. Before tackling an assignment or project, I first try to work out what lies behind it.	52%

A second category of deep approach items explores how students try to relate ideas to each other. The following graph shows responses to one of the items (21) and the table provides evidence on the other three items (11, 33, 46).

**Figure 3: Relating text ideas to each other**



**Figure 4 Importance of contextualizing and relating ideas from texts**

Item	Very close/ quite close
11. I try to relate ideas I come across to those in other topics and courses whenever possible.	70%
33. Ideas in course books and articles set me on long chains of thoughts of my own.	53%
46. I like to play around with ideas of my own even if they don't get me very far.	61%

It is clear from the results, that students work at understanding and connecting the ideas in a given assignment but appear not to be as capable of doing this when dealing generally with ideas and in particular with ideas from books.

A third deep approach category with four items (9, 23, 36, 49) generated a general response of around 68%. These items look at how students use evidence, question what they hear and examine ideas in detail. In terms of interest in ideas as outlined in the final category of deep approach, evidence suggests (figure 5) that engaging with ideas and following them up is important to around 58% - 62%.

**Figure 5: Critical evaluation of and interest in academic ideas**

Item	Very close/ quite close
13. Regularly I find myself thinking about ideas from lectures when I am doing other things.	60%
26. I find that studying academic subjects can be quite exciting.	58%
39. I find some of the ideas I come across in lectures really gripping.	60%
52. Sometimes I get hooked on academic topics and I want to keep on studying them.	62%

**Surface apathetic**

Surface apathetic approach items are also organized into four main categories: lack of purpose, unrelated memorizing, syllabus boundedness and fear of failure. Items that appear to be significant are discussed here. The area that presents the most problems for students, it appears, is that of fear of failure. Many students appear to be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work to be done as indicated in the following table.

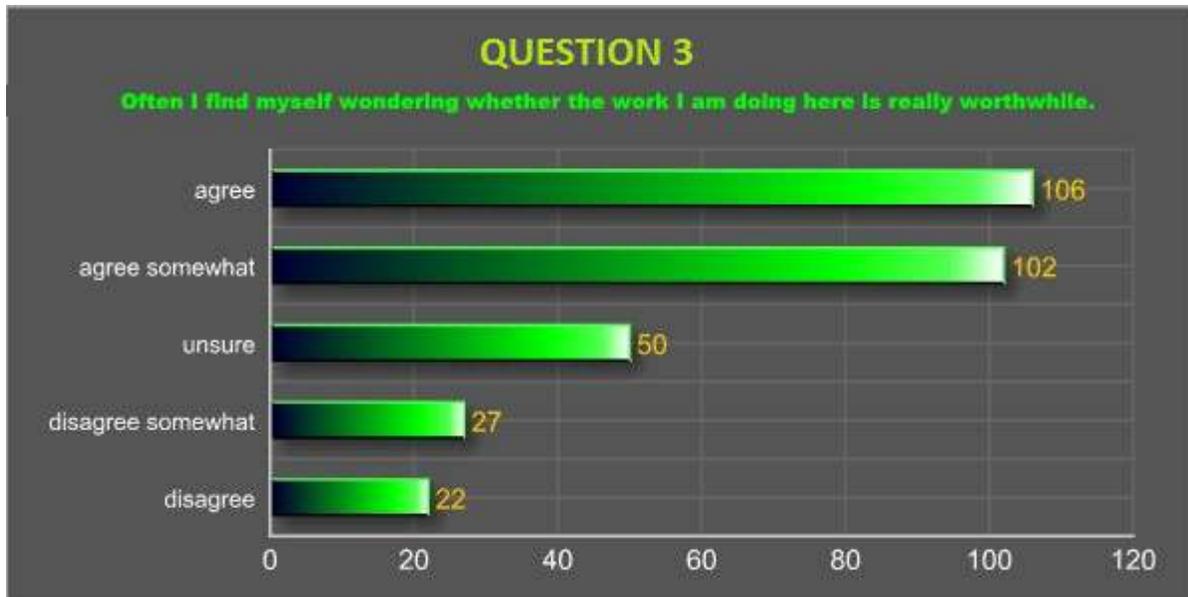
**Figure 6: Effect of amount of work on students**

Items	Very close/ quite close
8. Often I feel I am drowning in the sheer amount of work we're having to cope with.	70%
22. I often worry whether I will be able to cope with the work properly.	75%
35. I often seem to panic if I get behind in my work.	65%
48. Often I lie awake worrying about the work I don't get done.	67%

It appears from the results that about two thirds of the students suffer from anxiety attacks about the amount of work they have to do.

Another interesting result is that of sense of purpose about the work students are doing.

**Figure 7: Sense of purpose in academic work**



Almost 70% of students question the purpose of the work they are doing at the university. Two other items related to syllabus boundedness are of interest.

**Figure 8: Dependence on instructions and examinations**

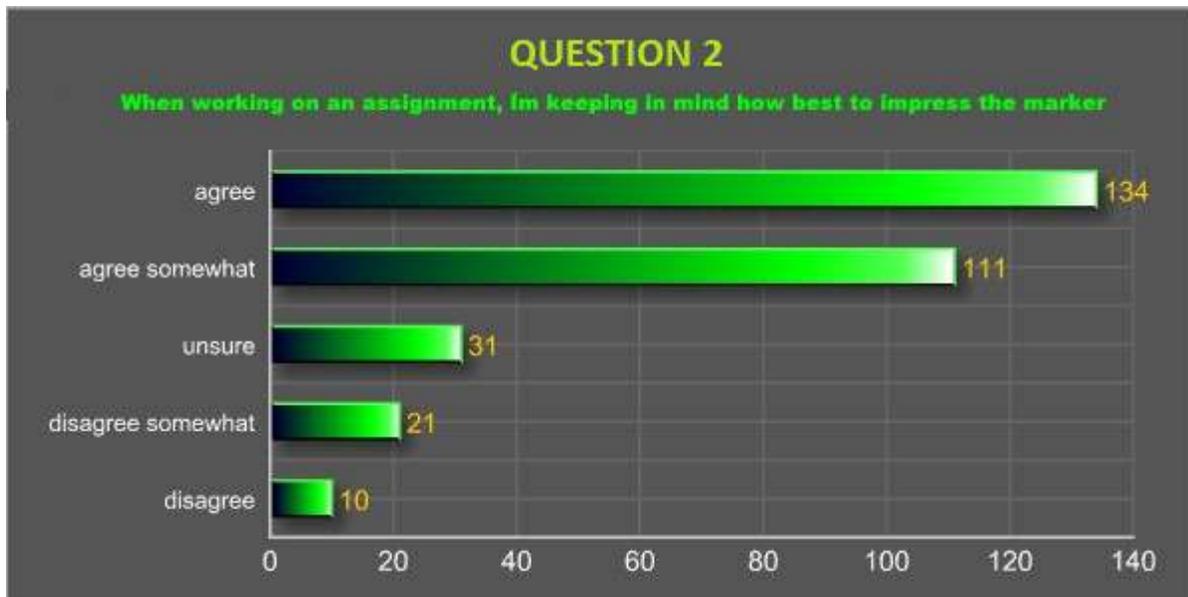
Items	Very close/ quite close
38. I gear my study closely to what is required for assignments and exams.	75%
51. I like to be told precisely what to for essays and assignments.	78%

Interestingly, the responses on the question of memorizing generated about 30% agreement among the participants. Though students are often seen as memorizing and repeating, this does not seem to be their perception of their approach. One reason might be that the required assignments do not allow much scope for memorization.

**Strategic approach**

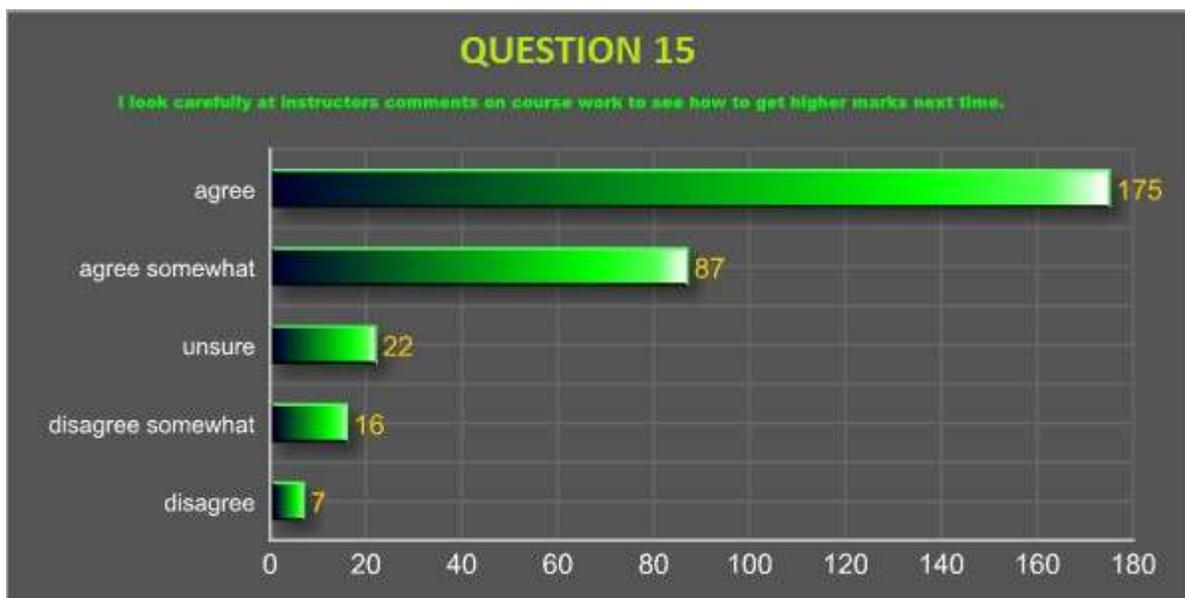
This category looks at how students organize their learning, manage time, respond to assignment requirements, view achievement and monitor their effectiveness. The most interesting results in this section are in the responses to alertness to assessment as indicated in the following two graphs. Question 2 looked at how students feel it is important to impress the marker when doing an assignment.

**Figure 9: Motivated by desire to impress marker**



Question 15 shows the percentage of students who examine markers' comments to figure out how they can get higher grades on the following assignment

**Figure 10:** *Influence of markers' comments on students*



The other category that yields the highest results of all in the survey is that of achieving. Three of the items here generated responses of 80% to 90% as illustrated in the following table.

**Figure 11:** *Importance of achievement in courses*

Items	Very close/ quite close
10. It is important to me to feel that I am doing as well as I can on the courses here.	90%
24. I feel that I am getting on well and that makes me put more effort into the course.	81%
37. I put an effort into studying because I am determined to do well.	85%

However in terms of time management, it is clear from results in this category that, on average, about 50 – 55% students may face some challenges in this area. Similarly, monitoring effectiveness seems to be important to about 60% of students. Overall, less than 70% of students see themselves as doing well in their university courses.

**Summary of results**

The results show that the students, in general, view themselves as engaged with ideas though not necessarily able to effectively engage with ideas in reading texts and with those required in assignments. It also appears that students may feel overwhelmed by the amount of work they have to cope with throughout the university and they question their purpose in doing this work which perhaps leads to fear of failure that is a real problem for students. Generally, less than 70% of students perceive themselves as doing well in their university courses. The majority also feel they need close guidance and support when undertaking essays and assignments. It is also interesting to note that rote learning or memorization does not feature greatly as a learning strategy, though much has been written about the prevalence of rote memorization as one of the

main approaches to learning in the Gulf context. In particular, students can be said to show a strategic approach to learning as the focus in assignments is overwhelmingly on how to get a good grade. Motivation can be defined as of the extrinsic type as almost all students cite doing well and getting a good grade as of primary importance. If we want to classify learners according to one of the three accepted categories, it would appear that they have a strategic approach to learning. It is commonly acknowledged that this approach guides many students who do international MBAs and can have a positive impact on learning. Where students need quite a lot of support is in developing a more independent, self-reliant approach to learning and this should be in-built into materials and methods in any course.

## 6. Limitations

This short piece of research, as indicated already, is an initial exploratory work and needs extensive follow up. However, no formal research has been undertaken before in the UAE educational system on the effects of culture on learning approaches and hence this study is an original contribution in the area. Limitations of time and method of presenting the survey prevented the comparison of results across the three academic levels. Some of the results confirm perceptions about the presence of an approach or approaches to learning that may not always facilitate the approach required at the university particularly in terms of independent questioning, engaging critically with reading texts, exploring and developing academic texts based on analysis and evidence. There is clearly scope for further study as a valuable tool to inform revision of courses and learning approaches at the university and as a tool with great input potential for revisions to programs in primary and secondary schools.

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