

An Analytic Survey of the Learning Styles of students in the Department of English / College of Arts / Ahlulbait University

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Abstract

This paper aims at analyzing the different learning styles of the first year students in the Department of English / College of Arts / Ahlulbait University .

It defines the concept of learning, discusses briefly the factors affecting learning process with or without teacher's control; pointing out the characteristics of good language learning. Types of learning styles are tackled as well.

To asses students' learning styles, they were offered a designed questionnaire of the "Learning Style Survey" , adapted by Julie Chi and Andrew Cohen from Rebecca L. Oxford's (1993) and 'Style Analysis Survey' in Reid (1995), cited in Schmitt (2002: 188).

After analyzing the results, some issues are presented concerning the teachers' attitudes towards having such various learners with such different learning styles, all in one group .

Introduction

First, it is appropriate to be reminded of the distinction between the two terms: 'acquisition' and 'learning'. Most linguists used to describe a child as acquiring his native language, whereas an adult as learning a foreign language. This distinction implies different connotations.

Falk (1978:363) views acquisition as "a natural, unconscious, untaught and probably unreachable process, while learning is somewhat artificial, usually conscious and possibly dependent on instruction and study."

The language learner must have at least a full mastery of the basic properties of the linguistic system of the foreign language i.e. phonology, syntax, lexicon, and the writing system. Yule (2003: 191) points out that the term 'learning' applies to "a conscious process of accumulating knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of a language."

Previous discussions about language learning focused on the best techniques and beneficial teaching materials for the teacher to practise in learning situations. The learner was considered as a container for pouring language knowledge. This coincides with behaviorist theories which view learning as merely a result of practice and conditioning.

Yet, researchers have recognized that learners are not 'empty vessels' to be filled by knowledge from the teacher. They carry great personal equipment to the language course.

To be precise, in the early 1970s, linguists and language specialists realized that learners are active participants in the learning process. This new insight urged them to search for all the components related to learners' manner in learning a foreign language. Studies were carried out in many fields such as learner 'motivation', 'strategies', and 'styles'.

Thus, in recent years, there has been a great shift from 'teacher centered' to 'learner - centered' teaching as a consequence of humanistic and communicative theories. So to understand foreign language learning, it is necessary to comprehend the linguistic properties of the language added to the physical, psychological, and sociological characteristics of the learner. The learner is the core of the learning process.

2. Factors Affecting the Language Learning

Achieving success in learning a foreign language is based on various factors such as the linguistic and professional ability of the teacher, the adequacy of teaching methods, the proper quality of textbooks, the size of the learner group, sufficient exposure to language practice, the duration of the language course, and other forthcoming ones. But the most important one is the characteristics of the language learner, which are classified into two groups: within teachers' control and without as classified by Cohen and Dornyei, in their article, "Focus on the Language Learner: Motivation, Styles and Strategies", cited in Schmitt (2002: 170) , These factors will be discussed briefly except the factor "learning styles" , the main concern of this paper.

2.1. Factors without Teachers' Control

They include age, gender and aptitude. The traditional view was the younger a learner starts to learn a foreign language, the faster and easier he learns i.e, achieving success in learning. However, recent researches have pointed out that the previous view is valid only in environments where learners are exposed to the foreign language constantly and naturally.

The second factor i.e. 'gender' is a well - known one. Girls are consistently found to be better than their male peers in language learning.

The third important individual difference is language 'aptitude' .This 'ability' or 'gift', as it is termed by linguists, implies that a learner with a high aptitude will learn the foreign language quickly and easily, and vice versa.

Richards et al (1992: 198) state that language aptitude is thought to be "a combination of various abilities: the ability to identify sound patterns of the foreign language, recognize the different grammatical functions of words in sentences, and infer language rules".

It is worth to say that having no aptitude does not mean that a person is unable to learn a foreign language. He can learn it by having high motivation, using effective language learning strategies; and possessing a decisive will.

2.2. Factors within Teachers' Control

They involve 'motivation', 'learner strategies', and 'learning styles'.

A. Motivation

This factor is known as a kind of internal drive pushing a person to do a variety of things to achieve the thing he wants.

Harmer (2002:51) distinguishes between two types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic i.e. coming from outside and from inside. Thus, the extrinsic motivation is caused by outside factors such as passing an exam, wishing to get financial reward, or thinking of doing something in the future. On the contrary, the intrinsic motivation is within the learner himself, either enjoying the learning process or wishing to be better.

Another distinction is presented by Hudson (2000: 171) 'integrative' and 'instrumental'. The integrative motivation is the desire of the learner to integrate into the society of speakers of the foreign language. He wants to learn a foreign language to communicate with its speakers who completely have a different culture. On the other hand, the instrumental motivation is the desire of the learner to get something practical or concrete from his learning. He wants to achieve a goal such as getting a job, receiving higher payment, or having a better school or social status.

This type of motivation has been observed obviously among immigrants to England and USA where English is the language of the majority.

Motivation is considered the vital factor in the learning process, without it nothing can be done. It is of much importance for both: the learner as well as the teacher. And as Rogers (1996:66) states that motivation is "as much a matter of concern for the teacher as it is for the learner". He continues (ibid) that motivation depends as much on the attitudes of the teacher as well as on the attitudes of the learners. Teachers can promote learners motivation consciously in a positive direction by using certain methods; bearing in mind that motivation to learn a foreign language is very different from other subjects.

B. Learning Strategies

Oxford, in her article, "Language Learning Strategies", as cited in Carter and Nunan (2001: 166), considers learning strategies as:

Operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information, specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self - directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations.

Thus, learners may employ a number of strategies to improve their performance. As mentioned before, studies in the mid - 1970s focused on the characteristics of language learners. Rubin (1975) in her article "What the 'good language learner' can teach us", finds "successful language learners have employed certain strategies and exposed special personality attributes. She identifies the following characteristics of the "good language learner":

- 1 - He is good, willing, and accurate guesser.
- 2 - He has a strong drive to communicate.
- 3 - He is not afraid to try to construct sentences he has never heard before i.e. uninhibited and willing to make mistakes.
- 4 - He focuses on form by looking at new patterns and using analysis.
- 5 - He takes advantage for opportunities to practise.
- 6 - He monitors his own speech as well as of others.
- 7 - He pays attention to meaning.

Researchers are trying to prove a hypothesis which states that all language learners whether native or foreign pass through the same types of difficulties, and make the same kinds of mistakes. Consequently, this will enhance the notion of 'Universal Learning Strategy'.

As regards the types of learning strategies, they are classified in various ways. Richards et al (1992:60) classify them into two types: 'cognitive' and 'metacognitive'. The cognitive strategy refers to the processes and behavior used by learners to improve their ability to learn especially classroom tasks and activities. The metacognitive type refers to thinking about the mental processes used by learners in the learning process, monitoring learning while it is occurring and evaluating learning after being achieved.

Another classification is presented by Schmitt (2002: 178) categorizing learning strategies into two types: 'Language learning strategies', and 'Language use strategies'. The first type refers to thoughts and behaviors used consciously or semi - consciously by learners to improve their comprehension of the foreign language. The second type refers to strategies to use the language that has been learned. This type includes four sub - sets of strategies: retrieval, rehearsal, communication and cover.

There is a third type added to the two general types i.e. 'self motivating strategies'. This type can be used by learners to promote or sustain their motivation.

No more details are to be given on both factors: motivation and learning strategies since the main concern of this paper is the third factor within teachers control to learning styles.

c. Learning styles.

Most linguists point out that learning styles refer to the special ways used by learners trying to learn the foreign language. It is known that learners approach this process in a different manner i.e. each learner has his own particular style in learning. The learning styles reveal these differences.

These styles are classified differently. Wright (1987: 117-18) presents four different learner styles within a group:

- 1 - 'Enthusiast' is the type of learner who considers the teacher as a point of reference; concerning himself with the goals of the learning group.
- 2 - 'Oracular' is the type of learner who focuses on the teacher but preferring to satisfy his personal goals.
- 3 - 'Participator' is the learner who concentrates more on group goals and solidarity.
- 4 - 'Rebel' is the learner who is interested mainly in satisfying his own goals.

Researchers have presented various learning styles, giving some attributes to different learners found in the classroom. Willing (1987) as cited in Skehan (1998:247:50) presents four types for learner styles:

- 1 - 'Convergers' are the type of learners who are solitary in their nature i.e. avoiding groups. They are independent and confident of their own abilities. Besides, being able to analyze and impose their own structures on learning. They tend to be cool and pragmatic.
- 2 - 'Conformists' are learners who prefer learning about the language more than using it They depend on their teachers i.e. doing what they are told. Moreover, they feel happy when working in non communicative classrooms.
- 3 - 'Concrete' learners are students who enjoy language use and language as communication not as a system. They like to participate in social activities of learning as well as to learn from direct experience. In addition, they enjoy games and group work.
- 4 - 'Communicative' learners are students who enjoy social interaction with other speakers. They like to use the language; feeling comfort out of class due to a degree of confidence urging them to take risks. Yet, they are very happy when working guided by a teacher.

In surveying these types of learning styles, it has been noticed that there is no sufficient type which describes learners' characteristics fully. There is no a type which coincides with one learner thoroughly.

Researchers continued working in this field to find a useful framework for learning styles. The following learners styles presented by (Reid, 1995; Ehrman, 1996) cited in Scmitt (2002: 177), are considered appropriate and beneficial to understand learning process. They are presented as follows:

- 1 - Being visual, auditory or tactile.
- 2 - Being extroverted versus introverted.
- 3 -Being more abstract and intuitive versus more concrete and thinking in step - by - step process.
- 4 - Preferring to be open versus closure - oriented.
- 5 - Being more synthesizing versus being more analytic.
- 6 -Being more global versus more particular.

An example is presented here to illustrate the role of styles in language learning and language use. A task of a reading text about 400 words, concerning a new mob. company on

the market, is giving by a teacher to his students. The teacher asks them to do three activities related to the text. First, writing out the main idea of the passage in one or two sentences then responding to an inference item, and finally summarizing the key points of the passage.

Following the previous distinctions, it has been noticed that learners who are more concrete - sequential will check the headings and sub headings in the text, whereas the abstract - intuitive learners will skip around the text, searching for key words. Both groups will understand the main idea but using different styles. Concerning the inference item, learners who are more abstract - intuitive may take some clues from the text, whereas the more concrete sequential learners may concentrate on the clues in the text; yet they feel troubled because the answer is not found in the text.

According to the third activity, the more global and synthesizing learners will enjoy summarizing the text whereas analytic learners do not as they are inclined to concentrate on details.

2. 3. Other Affective Factors

In addition to the factors mentioned before: with or without teachers' control, other affective factors are to be considered. Hayes et al (1976: 163) presents the "affective domain", which includes the following variables:

- 1 - The emotional response of the student towards himself, his peers and his teachers. His interaction with them is involved as well. Moreover, his physical surroundings may affect his response, being positive or negative towards learning process. .
- 2 - The student's reaction to the language he is learning. Sometimes a student may experience 'language shock' due to its lack of status. It may be the language of an oppressor or it is different, to a large extent, from his native language.
- 3 - The student's reaction to the culture of the people who speak the foreign language he is learning. Sometimes students suffer a 'cultural shock', which consequently cause a negative reaction to learning the language of that culture.

Thus, positive or negative feelings towards the foreign language may produce impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning. The degree of importance given to that foreign language in addition to its social status may affect greatly the attitudes of learners towards that language as well.

Harmer (2002:52) points out that the society where a learner lives influences learning a foreign language deeply i.e. whether learning of English, for example, is important or not, added to his peers' outlook about it . He continues (ibid) that attitudes of people near to the learner such as his parents, older siblings and his peers will affect the task of learning a foreign language greatly whether they are critical or enthusiastic. Besides, the teacher who is the cornerstone in the teaching I learning process, creating enthusiasm and sustaining motivation by using an appropriate method to match all learners needs.

3. The Questionnaire

Thirty - five students of the first year in the Department of English were offered the shortened version of the 'Learning Style Survey', mentioned previously, to evaluate their general approach to learning.

The questionnaire consists of six parts. Each part contains three items on every learning preference. The students' task is to fill in the questionnaire by circling the response for each item. The responses are as follows: 'Never' equals 0, 'Rarely' equals 1, 'Sometimes' equals 2, 'Often' equals 3, and 'Always' equals 4.

By totaling the points based on the scores given, the overall learning preferences for each student are demonstrated. The scores will be interpreted by giving general descriptions

of the students learning style preferences i.e. giving an idea about each student tendencies during learning process.

4. Interpreting Responses

Following the scoring scheme given with the version, the results have been as follows:

Part 1 How to use physical senses.

(7) Students are of a visual type preference which implies that they depend mostly on the sense of sight. The best learning is achieved through visual means such as books, video, charts and pictures.

(1) Student is an auditory learner. He/She prefers listening and speaking activities such as discussions, debates, audio tapes, role - plays and lectures.

(1) Student is of a tactile type. He/She likes to make projects and to work with objects .Besides, preferring games, building models and conducting experiments.

Part 2 How to expose oneself to learning situations.

It is astonishing that no student is an extroverted learner i.e. a learner who enjoys social and interactive learning tasks such as games, conversations, discussions, debates, role - plays and simulations.

The researcher thinks that it is perhaps due to some psychological factors i.e. being shy of their male peers, although very few in number, owing to the short duration of the first course.

(2) Students only are introverted i.e. they like to work independently such as reading alone or learning by the computer, except working with an intimate person.

Part 3 How to handle possibilities.

(18) Students are concrete - sequential learners, which constitute the highest percentage among other learner preferences. They are present oriented. They want to know their exact position within learning process at every moment. In addition they prefer one - step - at - a time activities.

This demonstrates a common phenomenon at present. It shows the students' practicality and prudence in tackling language learning task.

No student is of the intuitive type i.e. a learner who is more future oriented, preferring to speculate about possibilities. In addition, this learner enjoys abstract thinking and avoids step - by - step learning; contrary to the concrete - sequential learners. .

Part 4 . How to approach tasks

(7) Students are of closure - oriented type. They concentrate carefully on all learning tasks, and plan in advance for assignments. But, they want clear direction to achieve these tasks.

(3) Students are of an open type. They are interested in discovering learning, trying to get information naturally. Contrary to the closure type, they prefer to enjoy the learning process, not bothering about the rules or the deadlines of assignments.

Part 5 How to deal with ideas,

(6) Students are synthesizing learners. They like to summarize the material. Besides, they enjoy guessing meanings and predicting results. Moreover, they are alert enough to notice similarities very quickly.

(I) student is of an analytic type which means he/she is very efficient in logical analysis as well as in contrasting tasks. This learner is inclined to focus on grammar rules.

Part 6 How to deal with input.

(4) Students are of a global type. They enjoy getting the main idea.

Besides, they feel relaxed to communicate with others even without knowing all the words or concepts.

(8) Students are particular learners. They focus more on details, consequently, remembering very well all the specific points about any topic presented in the learning process.

Through surveying learners' style preferences, it has been noticed that (12) students are of more than one learning style preference simultaneously. (9) Students are of two learning preferences, whereas (2) students are of three learning preferences. It is astonishing to find (1) student with four learning preferences. More than this, having two contrary preferences at the same time. For example, a learner who is closure - oriented and open or synthesizing and analytic at the same time. Two other learners are global and particular in dealing with part 6.

It is thought that variety of styles used by a learner with the same degree of preference is an evidence of the learners' capability to switch codes at any time to match their needs in learning process. Moreover, it shows their awareness of selecting the preferences which fit the particular language tasks they are offered. In addition, these types of students have the ability to combine these preferences as needed.

5 . Recommendations

Teachers play a vital role in learning process. The more teachers know about their students learning strategy preferences as well as their favored learning styles, the more effective their instruction will be achieved. This knowledge enables them to attune their teaching to the specific needs of their students.

The teachers' task is very complex, trying to satisfy many students with different strategies and various learning styles all in one group. In this case, it is appropriate for the teachers to recognize their students as individuals and as members of a group.

The teachers must be aware of these individual differences when practising language activities which require putting students into pairs or groups, thus adapting practice and balancing the interests of the individual as well as of the group.

It is worth noting that these factors i.e. motivation, styles and strategies are interrelated so the teachers are to concentrate on them, being within their control, to increase the effectiveness of their teaching.

Different learning behaviors are to be valued and it is better to have a compromise between teachers' beliefs in learning and the learners' preferences.

Yet, it is worth to say that it is not possible for the teacher to cater for each preference in all learning situations, but within a period of time, it is ensured that all efforts are directed both for the whole group as well as for the individuals.

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