

Learning Styles and Preferences of Jordanian EFL Graduate Students

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a comparative investigation into the learning styles of successful and unsuccessful language learners. Subjects of the study were seventeen graduate university students at Yarmouk University, Jordan. They were categorized as 'successful or 'unsuccessful' learners, on the basis of their final scores on their English examination administered at the end of the semester, and their oral presentations which they had to give during the semester to measure their ability of speaking, discussing and defending themselves in English appropriately. The subjects of the study completed a questionnaire through which data were collected on their learning styles and preferences as well as their patterns of language practice and use. Findings of the study showed that there were no significant relationship between the subjects' learning styles and their proficiency or achievement in English. The study also revealed some key differences in the subjects' learning styles.

Keywords: English; Learning styles; Effective language learner; Less effective language learner, Jordan.

1. Introduction

There has been a great interest in recent years in studying the factors that affect the learners abilities to be successful in learning a foreign or second language. Stern (1987, p. 360 -386) discussed some of those factors such as age, learning styles and strategies, motivation, attitudes, language aptitude and other cognitive factors like learner's auditory capacity, sound-symbol relations, grammatical abilities, and verbal memory learning strategies. Stern also claimed that those factors should be the central figure in any language teaching theory (p. 360).

Amongst those factors, the present study will try to spot some light on the learning styles as they differentiate people from each other thus they also differentiate the way people learn something. As EFL/ESL teachers, just like all other educators, we have to bear in mind that people differ consistently from each other in their preferences (e.g., emotional, environmental) for certain ways of processing information, and for the sake of serving the ultimate goal of teaching to borrow the words of (Sizoo, Arusa, &Wilfried, 2005, p. 527) " the highest priority of today's college educators should be making their students effective lifelong learners". Thus teachers should explore and investigate their students learning styles in order to use the appropriate teaching methods that suit the preferences of their students since they are the core of the whole teaching process. Students should be taught sometimes in the style they prefer, which keeps them from being too uncomfortable for learning to occur, and sometimes in their less preferred mode, which helps them develop the diverse strengths they will need to function effectively in their careers.

Unfortunately, traditional higher education is not structured to provide this balance, and severe mismatches commonly occur between the teaching styles of instructors and the learning styles of their students, with detrimental effects on the academic performance of the students and on their attitudes toward their education. (Felder, Felder, and Dietz, 2002, p.3)

2. Literature Review

This part will provide a review of the literature relevant to the research objectives and it will include a brief overview of the concept of learning style and a review of the related studies.

2.1. Learning styles

Learning styles are defined as " the particular way in which a learner tries to learn something. In second or foreign language learning, different learners may prefer different solutions to learning problems. For example, some may want explanations for grammatical rules; others may not need explanations. Some may feel writing down words or sentences helps them to remember them. Others may find they remember things better if they are associated with pictures." (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1997,p. 61)

Brown (2001, p. 210) tries to make a distinction between styles and strategies. He defines styles as those related to personality (such as extroversion, self -esteem, anxiety, or cognition such as left/right- brain orientation, ambiguity, tolerance, field sensitivity). While strategies are specific methods of approaching a problem or a task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end. Brown also claims that individuals may have various strategies while the styles seem to be more constant and predictable.

There is no agreement on the number or variety of learning styles though, and there are various ways

of classifying learning styles under different categories, For example, Christison (2003, cited in Wong & Nunan, p. 2011) distinguishes between cognitive style (field dependent versus field independent, analytic versus global, reflective versus impulsive); sensory style (visual versus auditory versus tactile versus kinesthetic) and personality styles (tolerance of ambiguity, right brain versus left brain dominance).

On the other hand, Willing (1994) identifies four major language learning styles: communicative, analytical, authority-oriented and concrete. His classification of those styles was derived from learners' strategy preferences. In the communicative style, the learners were defined by the following learning strategies: they like to learn by watching, listening to native speakers, talking to friends in English, watching television in English, using English out of class, learning new words by hearing them, and learning by conversation. In the analytical style, learners like studying grammar, English books and newspapers, they also like to study alone, find their own mistakes, and work on problems set by the teacher. In the authority-oriented style the learners prefer the teacher to explain everything, having their own textbook, writing everything in a notebook, studying grammar, learning by reading, and learning new words by seeing them. In the concrete style, learners tend to like games, pictures, film, video, using cassettes, talking in pairs, and practicing English outside class.

Felder, Felder, and Dietz (2002, p.3) assert that students with different type preferences tend to respond differently to different modes of instruction. For example extraverts like to work in settings that provide various activities and group work. On the other hand, introverts prefer settings that provide opportunities for internal processing. Sensors also like concrete learning experiences and well defined expectations and they do not like theories and mathematical models; While intuitive learners prefer the instruction that emphasizes conceptual understanding and deemphasizes memorization of facts, rote substitution in formulas, and repetitive calculations. Moreover, thinkers like logically organized presentations of course material and feedback related to their work; but feelers on the other hand, like instructors who establish a personal rapport with them and feedback that shows appreciation of their efforts. Judgers like well-structured instruction with clearly defined assignments, goals, and milestones; perceivers like to have choice and flexibility in their assignments and dislike having to observe rigid timelines.

2.2. Related Studies

Fu, (2009) carries out a study that aimed to investigate the present state of English vocabulary learning styles and teaching styles at a primary school in China, and to investigate the strategies of English vocabulary teaching used by teachers. He also, made suggestions for improvement and an attempt to put forward several practical vocabulary teaching strategies to meet the needs of different learning styles, which might reduce teaching and learning style conflicts. Results obtained from Fu's study indicated that the learning styles of many students and the teaching styles of many teachers do not match. The majority of students are visual learners, while most teachers, on the other hand, adopt the auditory teaching style. He also claimed that, in all academic classrooms, no matter what the subject is, there will be students with multiple learning styles. Thus there are academically diverse learners and teachers need to make curriculum choices that complement the interests, the needs and the strengths of students.

Furthermore, Putintseva's (2006) article reminds the teachers of the need to be aware of individual learning styles and learner diversity, and asserts that EFL/ESL teachers should be aware of their students' learning styles, as this can be useful for them.

On another hand, Tai, (2013) conducts a study to explore the preferred learning styles of adult EFL students in order to better understand their impact and shape on the language learning process and to help determine to design the curriculum and the instruction for classroom practice for higher achievement and increased motivation for learning. He claimed that adult EFL students vary in their perceptual learning style preferences. These differences influence adults learning motivation and success. Because of social and possibly biological influences, a number of differences i.e. gender exist in approaches to learning a second/foreign language. He concluded that the computer-assisted style was perceived by respondents as being the most preferred, while individual and visual styles were perceived as the least preferred. Moreover, he found that there were significant relationships between auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, and computer-assisted learning style and motivation in learning English.

Vaseghi, et al., (2013) examines the learning style preferences of 75 Iranian high school students. Their study was an attempt to identify the students' preferred learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group, and individual). Results obtained showed that students' learning style preferences were kinesthetic and tactile. While auditory, visual and individual were minor.

Vaseghi, et al., (2012) also describe the learning styles models, in particular Reid's Perceptual Learning Style Preference. They concluded that teachers should take in their consideration the differences in learning styles among students and enhance students' learning strategies for their successful learning. Moreover, they emphasize the need to enable students to be self-aware of both style and strategies, as students who know their learning style preferences are able to build their self-confidence and can reinforce their willingness to be risk-

takers. Their study also revealed that differences do exist in learning styles among the students from different gender and such differences should be taken into account when teaching foreign languages.

Bada and Okan (2000) also carry out a study that aimed at exploring students views as to how they prefer learning English derived from their belief that learners' preferences are of a crucial importance in the development of learners autonomy. Results of their study revealed significant results suggesting a need for a closer co-operation between students and teachers as to how learning activities should be arranged and implemented in the classroom.

3. Significance of the Study

As there are few researches in which the learning style preferences of EFL Jordanian graduate students investigated, this study attempts to fill this gap. The present study basically aims to investigate whether EFL Jordanian students' language learning styles had an influence on their abilities of writing and speaking in English. The problem with EFL learners lies in fact on their limited chance of using English since most of them do not use it in their daily life and the majority of them only use English inside the classrooms where they are supposed to convey their ideas both in written or oral forms accurately and fluently. Although many studies in the field showed that better academic performance by EFL learners can be obtained when teachers develop a good relationship with the learners through using the appropriate behaviors, strategies and attitudes (Decker, Dona,& Christenson,2007; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering,2003; Hall &Hall, 2003; Bender,2003; Rogers & Renard, 1999), it is well acknowledged that the learners role in learning is much more important than the role of the teachers and many factors play significant roles in this respect such as motivation, attitudes, learning strategies and learning styles.

In addition to all these factors, no one can deny the importance of English learning nowadays, as it definitely brings a lot of benefits to its learner since it has become the official language of science and commerce all over the world. From the above discussion stems the significance of this study as many Arab students dream to learn English because it opens avenues for them to get better future jobs either in the Arab world or in foreign countries such as working in translation, English teaching, accounting, or other fields that require good mastery of English.

4. Questions of the study

1. Is there a significant relationship between EFL Jordanian students' language learning styles and their proficiency in English?
2. Is there a significant relationship between EFL Jordanian students' language learning styles and their achievement in English?
3. What Language learning styles preferences do EFL Jordanian students enjoy?

5. Methodology

This study was conducted to investigate the relationship between Jordanian EFL students' learning styles and their level of proficiency and achievement in English as a foreign language. To achieve this objective, the researcher adapted a questionnaire from (Brown, 2001:212) as a research tool.

5.1. Participants

The participants of the study were purposefully chosen from a section of graduate students registered in the first semester of the academic year 2014/2015 in graduate English course taught at the English department, Yarmouk University, which was namely, *An Introduction to Semantics*. There were 13 female students and only one male in this section who fill in the questionnaire as the researcher wanted to analyze their learning styles in learning English. In addition to this the students belong to two different majors which were translation and linguistics. Table 1 below shows the distribution of the participants.

Table 1: Number and Percentages of the Participants of the Study.

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	13	92.9
	Male	1	7.1
	Total	14	100.0
Major	Linguistics	10	71.4
	Translation	4	28.6
	Total	14	100.0

5.2. Instruments

The primary method of inquiry used in this study was a questionnaire. It consisted of ten statements. In front of each statement there are five choices which describe students' learning styles. The researcher adopted this questionnaire from (Brown, 2001, p. 212).

The next method was a presentation done by each student in which they introduce and discuss one topic required in their course requirements. Their instructor who is a professor in linguistics, gave each student a mark and some notes on their speaking and their ability to discuss and deliver messages accurately and fluently in English. The aim of this method is to gain a clear insight of students' proficiency in English.

The last method was a final exam prepared by the instructor. This exam gave the final mark each student deserves at the end of the semester. The aim of this exam is to give a vivid impression of students' achievement in English.

5.3. Data collection

Giving the description of the instruments used in this study, this part presents the procedures used in the administration process. In September, 2014 the researcher started carrying out the main study at Yarmouk University. Before administering the questionnaire, permission was sought from the professor who taught the course and the time was arranged with him. Prior to distributing the questionnaire, the students were informed of the objectives and significance of the research. They were also requested to state their true and honest responses. Moreover, the subjects were able to ask for any clarifications they might have. Then, the questionnaire was administered. The professor of the course kept writing his notes on students' presentations by describing their performance regarding their pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, content and their ability to hold a discussion. Then their marks in the final exam were also considered as the mean of achievement evaluation.

5.4. Data analysis

The present study basically ought to identify whether EFL students' learning styles have an effect on their proficiency and achievement in English, so the data collected from their responses on the questionnaire items was analyzed in terms of means, using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and percentages and frequencies were also computed. To see if there are any significant relationships between students' learning styles and their proficiency and achievement in English, Pearson Correlations were computed.

6. Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1

The first research question sought to investigate if there is any significant relationship between students' learning styles and their achievement in English. To answer this question Pearson Correlation was computed. Table 2 below shows that.

Table (2): Pearson Correlation Between Students' Learning Styles and their Achievement in English.

Variable	Pearson Correlation	Significance
Students' learning styles	0.14	0.63
Achievement		

As seen from Table (2), the correlation coefficient scores between students' learning styles and their achievement in English is (0.14) by sig (0.63). Thus the data proves that there is no statistically significant relationship between students' learning styles and their achievement in English.

Research Question 2

The second research question aimed to investigate if there is any significant relationship between students' learning styles and their proficiency in English. To answer this question Pearson Correlation was also computed. Table 3 below presents that.

Table (3): Pearson Correlation Between Students' Learning Styles and their Proficiency in English.

Variable	Pearson Correlation	Significance
Students' learning styles	0.22	0.43
Students' Proficiency level		

Results obtained from Table (3) show that there is no statistically significant relationship between students' learning styles and their proficiency in English, since the correlation coefficient value was (0.22) by sig (0.43).

Students' proficiency in English was determined by their professor in terms of their abilities to discuss, speak and write accurately and fluently in English. Their professor kept in his mind the fact that the subjects are graduate students of English, therefore, they are supposed to be proficient. Table 4 illustrates students' distribution according to their proficiency level in English from their professor's evaluation.

Table (4) : Frequency and Percentage of Students' Proficiency Level in English.

Students' Proficiency Level	Frequency	Percentage
Good	6	42.9
Poor	8	57.1
Total	14	100.0

Table (4), shows that most of the students are poor in English as their percentage reached (57.1%), while the percentage for the good students was (42.9%).

Research Question 3

The third research question sought to identify the learning styles preferences that EFL Jordanian students enjoy. To answer this question a questionnaire adopted from Brown, (2001,p. 212) was used. See table 5 below.

Table (5): Types and Frequencies of EFL Jordanian Students' Learning Styles.

Learning Style	Frequency					
	A	B	C	D	E	
1. I don't mind if people laugh at me when I speak.	1	2	2	3	6	I get embarrassed if people laugh at me when I speak.
2. I like to try out new words and structures that I am not completely sure of.	3	3	1	3	4	I like to use only the language that I am certain is correct.
3. I feel confident in my ability to succeed in learning this language.	8	5	1	0	0	I feel quite uncertain about my ability to succeed in learning this language.
4. I want to learn this language because of what I can personally gain from it.	9	3	2	0	0	I am learning this language only because someone else is requiring it.
5. I really enjoy working with other people in groups.	6	2	1	2	3	I would much rather work alone than with others.
6. I like to "absorb" language and get the general gist of what is said or written.	2	4	2	3	3	I like to analyze the many details of language and understand exactly what is said or written.
7. If there is an abundance of language to master, I try to take things one step at a time.	1	6	2	3	2	I am very annoyed by an abundance of language material presented all at once.
8. I am not overly conscious of myself when I speak.	1	3	1	5	4	I monitor myself closely and consciously when I speak.
9. When I make mistakes, I try to use them to learn something about the language.	4	5	1	4	0	When I make a mistake, it annoys me because that's a symbol of how poor my performance is.

**A and E indicate that the sentence is very much like you. B and D indicate that the sentence is somewhat descriptive of you. C indicates that you have no inclination one way or another.

From Table 5, it is clear that the learning styles or preferences of the subjects of the study vary. As for the first statement, *I don't mind if people laugh at me when I speak*, the data show that most of the students tend to be shy and sensitive to other people's reactions towards them. Since six of the subjects resort to (E), a choice that indicate personal traits of shyness, low level of risk taking and low self-esteem. This learning preference is unfortunately negative and needs changing in order to be successful learner. This result is explainable because most of the subjects, 13 out of 14, are females and females in our society are more shy than males.

Results related to the second statement, *I like to try out new words and structures that I am not completely sure of*, reveal that students were almost equally divided between those who are high risk takers and those who enjoy high self-esteem on the one hand and those who do not have these qualities on the other.

However, in their response to the third statement, *I feel confident in my ability to succeed in learning this language*, most students indicated that they enjoy high confidence in their ability to learn English. In spite of this perceived confidence many of them did not show high self-esteem as the response to the previous statement show. This high confidence might be derived from the fact that they are internally motivated to learn English to fulfill their personal goals as their responses on the fourth statement, *I want to learn this language because of what I can personally gain from it*, revealed.

Moreover, students' responses to the fifth statement, *I really enjoy working with other people in groups*, show that the majority like to work in groups which expresses that most of them are extroverts rather than introverts. However, results obtained from their responses to the sixth statement, *I like to "absorb" language and get the general gist of what is said or written*, reveal that students were almost equally divided between those who use their left brain on the one side and those who use their right brain on the other side. Responses to the

seventh statement, *If there is an abundance of language to master, I try to take things one step at a time*, also show that the students are divided between being left brain users and right brain users.

Results of the eighth statement, *I am not overly conscious of myself when I speak*, reveal that most of the students enjoy a reflective learning style as they think carefully before they speak and try not to make mistakes. On the contrary, students' responses to the ninth statement, *When I make mistakes, I try to use them to learn something about the language*, show that they enjoy high self-confidence and high risk takers because they are willing to learn from their mistakes to be better.

Responses to the last statement, *I find ways to continue learning the language outside the classroom*, support the results obtained from the fourth statement that show that the students are highly intrinsically motivated to learn English as they try to use it outside the classroom.

7. Conclusions

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this study's findings. First, the data obtained from this study proves that there is no statistically significant relationship between students' learning styles and their achievement in English, as most of the students were considered poor in English. This result is reasonable in some way because not all good students have the chance to complete their graduate studies, only those who are able to pay for the university have the chance to enroll in graduate programs. Consequently, some of them withdraw from the program or change their major to an easier one.

Furthermore, the data also show that there is no significant relationship between students' learning styles and their proficiency in English. This finding may be explained in two ways. On the one hand, it is well acknowledged that most of the students are considered poor achievers in English and this is clear from the data as 57.1% of them were classified as poor or weak students. On the other hand, most of the study subjects were females. And females in our culture are usually shy and conservative. They even speak in low voice and try to keep silent a matter that affects their participation and ability to discuss topics in classes. This of course has a negative effect on their proficiency results.

Finally, the study also reveals that the participants use different learning styles or preferences for learning and there is no right or wrong classifications as everyone uses the appropriate learning style that brings some degree of learning as an out come at the end. For example some of the participants are shy and sensitive, while others are high risk takers and others enjoy high self-esteem. Some have high confidence in their ability to learn English and are extroverts and they are highly internally motivated to learn English to fulfill their personal goals. In addition, they are equally divided between those who use their left brain on the one side and those who use their right brain on the other side. On the other side, most of the students enjoy a reflective learning style as they think carefully before they speak and try not to make mistakes.

To sum up, "there is not a " one-size fits all" approach to teaching and learning, to use Jorgensen (2006) words.

8. Recommendations

Effective language teaching and learning can only be achieved when teachers are aware of their learners' needs, capabilities, potentials, and preferences in meeting these needs.

Based up on the conclusions of the present study, the following recommendations are offered: First, all EFL university students should complete the learning style inventory at the beginning of each academic year to assist students and faculty members in identifying characteristics critical to the learning process. Second, all faculty members should implement a continuous process of adopting and adapting instructional activities and strategies that suit the learning styles of their students. Third, there is a call for a step forward towards a teacher-student co-operation in designing syllabuses, doing weekly course planning, and classroom management. Finally, it is recommended to repeat this study using a larger sample that has more male students since this study suffers from the small number of the participants a matter that hinders the generalization of its findings.

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