

Different Learning Styles of L2 Learners

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Abstract.

Learners differ in their learning styles. In general, types of information are learned and processed in numerous and various ways. Language, as one type of this wide range of information, is specifically a particular case since it relates to the most important human communication means. In this paper, the researcher intends to shed light on learners' different styles in learning language in general, and their styles in learning L2, whether it is a second or a foreign language, in particular. The paper stresses the importance of distinguishing learners' different styles in learning languages. The researcher would also concentrate on the necessity of matching the various learners' styles and the educators' teaching strategies in order to develop the students' potentials in learning L2. The paper also presents some implications that may contribute to helping educators and curricula designers identify students' diverse learning styles; and consequently assist their students to understand and modify their own learning styles and achieve a better and higher level of proficiency in L2 learning.

Introduction.

Research indicates that each of us has/ her own preferred way of learning, that is determined by his/her culture, educational background, and personality. Various learning styles have been categorized by language researchers in numerous ways. If a learner prefers using his/her senses in learning, then he belongs to those who practice the perceptual style: visual, tactile, kinesthetic, or auditory. Other learners prefer the cognitive style: field – dependent, and field- independent. Some learners are called reflective, while others are termed as impulsive; this category has been examined by researchers in terms of personality in which the personality of the learners is focused on as a determiner of the learning style a learner adopts. The ways in which an individual acquires, retains, and retrieves information are collectively termed as the individual's learning style.

The way we things in general and in the particular approach we adopt when dealing with problems is said to depend on a somewhat mysterious link between personality and cognition, this link is referred to as cognitive style. When cognitive styles are related to an educational context, they are generally referred to as "learning styles", cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment (Keefe, 1971).

Oxford (1989) believes that the term learning style is used to encompass for aspects of the person: cognitive style, i.e preferred or habitual patterns of mental functioning; patterns of attitudes and interests that affect what an individual will pay most attention to in a learning situation; a tendency to seek situations compatible with one's own learning patterns; and a tendency to use certain learning strategies and avoid others. Learning style is a blend of cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements.

Various researchers have identified different dimensions of learning styles. One of the dimensions which is "analytic vs. global" seems to be closely allied with field independence vs. dependence". Cooperation vs. competition" is another dimension of language learning style. Reid (1987) found that in the language classroom, learners rarely report using cooperative behaviors; and he attributes this to the belief that some instructional methodologies often preclude cooperation and foster competition. "Tolerance for ambiguity" is another style dimension of language learning in which language learning can be difficult and at times ambiguous endeavor, and students who can more readily tolerate ambiguity often show the best language performance. The Myers-Briggs Type indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985) contributes four more dimensions of learning styles: extraversion vs. introversion, sensing vs. intuition, thinking vs. feeling, and judging vs. perceiving. Several of these dimensions appear to significantly influence how students choose to learn languages. Other important style aspects that may relate to language learning performance are leveling-sharpening of detail, reflectivity-impulsivity, and constricted- flexible thinking.

Reid (1987) quotes Keefe's (1979 a) description of learners' styles as one of the factors that account for some of the differences in how students learn. He describes learning styles as cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment. He states that interest and research in second language learning styles have focused on cognitive styles (with some behavioral applications) and on conscious learning strategies. Other studies have concentrated on the role of affective elements and cognitive styles in academic achievement. Reid (1987) also indicates that there is no published research that describes the perceptual learning style preferences of NNSs. ESL/EFL instructors often use methods and materials that have been developed with the learning needs of native speakers of English in mind.

Kinsella (1996) describes a learning style as multidimensional. Its elements can be classified into five –

stimulus categories: environmental elements (sound, light, temperature, design); physical elements (motivation, persistence, responsibility); sociological elements (self, partner, team, mentor, varied) and psychological elements (global/ analytical, impulsive/ reflective). Thus, we can say that learning styles include affective and physiological domains, besides the cognitive domain.

Learners can be classified as sensing or intuitive. In his theory of psychological types, Jung (1971) introduced sensation and intuition as the two ways in which people tend to perceive the world. Sensing involves observing, gathering data through the senses; intuition involves indirect perception by way of the subconscious – accessing memory, speculations, and imagining. Felder and Henriques (1995) distinguish sensors by the fact that they tend to be concrete and methodical, whereas intuitors are believed to be abstract and imaginative. They also believe that sensors like facts, data, and experimentations; intuitors deal better with principles, concepts, and theories. Sensors are patient with detail but do not like complications; intuitors are bored by detail and welcome complications. Sensors are more inclined than intuitors to rely on memorization as a learning strategy and are more comfortable learning and following rules and standard procedures. Intuitors like variety, dislike repetition, and tend to be better equipped than sensors to accommodate new concepts and exceptions to rules. Sensors are careful but may be slow; intuitors are quick but may be careless.

Brown (1994) believes that students usually learn more effectively when they learn through their own initiatives. When their learning styles are matched with appropriate approaches in teaching, then their motivation, performances, and achievements, will increase and be enhanced. Thus, researchers and educators try to establish optimal environmental and psychological climates that foster learning by allowing students to learn in accordance with their own preferred learning styles. Research on learning styles is based on the assumption that learners receive information through their senses and prefer some senses to others in specific situations (O'Brien 1989, Oxford and Ehrman 1993, Kroonenburg 1995). Researchers caution that stress, frustration, and burnout may occur when students are subjected to over extended periods of time to teaching styles inconsistent with their learning style preferences (Smith and Renzulli, 1984).

Research on learning styles in particular on L2 learning still very much limited. Research on learning and teaching styles and specifically the match or otherwise between them is still very much under-researched in ESL and EFL. The findings of some studies propose that mismatches often occur and have bad effects on students' learning and attitudes. The findings of past studies explained that a learner's achievement in any class is determined by factors such as native ability, and the level of congruence between learners' learning styles and teachers' teaching styles. Many studies have been done to investigate the relationship between learning style and academic achievement. Matching and mismatching between teaching and learning styles exist in any academic setting, at least to a certain extent. Some studies have also found that congruence (matching) between teaching and learning styles has a positive impact on achievement and satisfaction. A mismatch is said to occur when students' preferred methods of processing information are not aligned with the teachers' preferred styles of teaching. When mismatching exist between learning styles of most students in a class and the teaching style of the teacher, the students may become bored and inattentive, do poorly on tests, get discouraged about the course, the curriculum, and themselves, and in some cases change to other curricula or drop out of school (Naimi, Siraj, Ahmed, Shaqholo, 2010).

A study conducted by Naimi, Siraj, Ahmed, and Shaquli (2010) suggests that it is crucial for teachers to have knowledge about learner preferences in their classes to consider in their teaching design. The students show a positive response and higher achievement when their learning preferences and needs are accommodated by their lecturers or teachers. Based on findings, it is hypothesized that the different learning styles dimensions have their own preferences in terms of technology usage. The researchers also shed light on findings of studies on English Language Learning which indicated that in order to be effective ESL/EFL teachers, one should have knowledge about the learners' learning needs, individual differences in learning, the required teaching methods, learners' preferences as well as the necessary teaching materials required to meet learners' needs in the educational setting.

Kenner and Weinerman (2010) indicate that adult learners bring learning styles and life experiences that may either be critical foundations for future success or deeply entrenched beliefs that hinder learning in the academic environment. These learning styles and background experiences should be taken into consideration while teaching if we want to have proficient L2 learners. Thus, success can be achieved by relating students' existing life experiences and their different learning styles to proper teaching methodology applied by L2 educators and curricula designers.

Not only face – to – face students' learning styles have to be of a major interest by L2 teachers; web-based courses' students also have a various set of learning styles that need to be focused on through the process of teaching. Rakap (2010) indicates that many researchers stated that in order to provide appropriate learning opportunities to students, improve their motivation and maximize their learning in web-based courses, it is important to identify their learning styles and adapt teaching methods that meet the diverse needs of learners. He states that the characteristics of learners who enroll in online programs have not been investigated extensively;

and the relationship between web- based learning and learning styles of individuals who enroll in online courses has received little attention in the literature.

The importance of Distinguishing Different Learning Styles that L2 Learners Use in the Process of Learning

Teachers should be aware of the ways their students acquire, retain, and retrieve information. This enables them to follow certain teaching strategies that can enhance the abilities and the attitudes of their students, especially in learning another language. Learning styles can be dichotomous in terms of dimensions. What type of information does the student preferentially perceive: sensory- sights, sound, physical sensation, or intuitive- memories, ideas, insight?. Through which modality is sensory information most effectively perceived: visual- pictures, diagrams, graphs, demonstration, or verbal- written and spoken words and formulas?. How does the student prefer to process information: actively, through engagement in physical activity or discussion, or reflectively- through introspection?. How does the student progress toward understanding: sequentially- in a logical progression of small incremental steps, or globally – in large jumps, holistically?. With which organization of information is the student most comfortable: inductive- facts and observation are given, underlying principles are inferred, or deductive – principles are given, consequences and applications are deduced? (Felder, Henriques, 1995).

The importance of distinguishing different learning styles that L2 learners use in the process of learning is of a great value for both teachers and learners. Teachers gear their teaching methodologies and techniques toward a better adjustment with their various students' learning styles. Moreover, teachers can avoid mismatching the learners' styles with their own teaching strategies; which results in a more successful educational environment that can be relaxing and fruitful for both learners and teachers.

Types of styles.

Styles are classified in this manner:

a. learning styles related to personality.

1. Reflective learners.

Learners like to think about language and how to convey their message accurately. They tend not to make so many mistakes because they take time in formulating what they want to say. Brown (1994) believes that a reflective learner exercises patience. This might be due to the learner's tendency towards accuracy which requires more effort and time to be fully achieved. Reflective processing involves examining and manipulating the information introspectively; and reflective learners learn well in situations that provide them with opportunities to think about the information being presented. The more opportunities students have to both participate and reflect in class, the better they will learn new material and the longer they are likely to retain it (Kolb, 1984).

Reflective students are more analytical in their problem – solving approach and do not have the same level of difficulty with delayed gratification as impulsive students.

2. Impulsive learners.

Learners take risks with the language. They are more concerned with speaking and expressing themselves, paying less attention to the rules of language and making more mistakes. They seem unable to pay attention and have trouble focusing which might be due to attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and boys are twice as girls to struggle. These characteristics make it difficult for students to succeed in traditional classroom. Not all students who act impulsively have ADD/ADHD, but classroom strategies designed to help students with ADD/ADHD can also help other impulsive students. Impulsive students are unlikely to work to change their behavior if they do not understand how their behavior is having a negative impact on them. They are set off by a lack of structure.

Impulsive learners are frequently described as students who rush through assignments, frequently missing the correct answers. In addition, impulsive students do not consider as many alternative answers when presented with open-ended questions as compared to reflective students. They also have a more global approach to information processing and do not identify the parts of a whole as readily as their peers.

3. Active learners.

Active learners learn well in situations that enable them to do something physical. Active processing involves doing something in the external world with the information-discussing it or explaining it or testing it in some way. An active learner is someone with more of a natural tendency toward reflective observation.

B. Perceptual style.

1. Visual learners.

Learners enjoy reading and prefer to see the words that they are learning. They also like to learn by looking at pictures, flashcards, diagrams, flow charts, time lines, films, and demonstrations- rather than in spoken or written words. Many people extract and retain more information from visual presentations than from written or spoken prose (Dale, 1969). Recent studies of learning styles in foreign language education consistently

place reading in the visual category, implying that instructors can meet the needs of visual learners solely by relying on written instructional material. Certainly visual learners learn better if they see and hear words in the target language. The challenge to language instructors is to devise ways of augmenting their verbal classroom presentation with non-verbal visual material- for example, showing photographs, drawings, sketches, and cartoons to reinforce presentation of vocabulary words, and using films, videotapes, and dramatization to illustrate lessons in dialogue and pronunciation (Felder & Henriques, 1995).

Visual learners can also be divided into visual – verbal and visual-nonverbal learners. Those who have visual – verbal preferences process input better when words are the primary vehicle of communication; visual-nonverbal learners benefit from other types of visual information such as maps, graphs, charts, and pictures. Teachers; for example, can ask their students how they prefer to receive directions to a new address. Would they prefer to find the location on a map, or would they cope better with step-by-step verbal directions?. Non – verbal learners will prefer the first choice while verbal learners will prefer the second one (Hedgcock & Ferris 2009).

2. Auditory learners.

Learners prefer to learn by listening. They enjoy conversations and the chance for interactions with others. They don't need to see words written down and tend to benefit most from traditional teaching techniques. Many teachers use a lecture – style forum, presenting information by talking to their students. Regulating voice tone, inflection, and body language will help all students maintain interest and attention. Auditory learners succeed when directions are read aloud, speeches are required, or information is presented and requested verbally.

3. Kinesthetic learners.

Learners like movement and need frequent breaks in desk activities. It can be described as a total physical involvement with a learning situation. Most of the school population excel through kinesthetic means: touching, feeling, experiencing the material at hand. “Children enter kindergarten as kinesthetic and tactual learners, moving and touching everything as they learn. By second or third grade, some students have become visual learners. During the late elementary years some students, primarily females, become auditory learners. Many adults, especially males, maintain kinesthetic and actual strengths throughout their lives (Stafford & Kenneth, 1993).

Kinesthetic learners are most successful when totally engaged with the learning activity. They acquire information fastest when participating in a science lab, drama presentation, skit, field trip, dance, or other active activity. Because of the high numbers of kinesthetic learners, education is shifting toward a more hands – on approach; manipulative and other “props” are incorporated into almost every school subject, from physical education to language arts. Hands – on teaching techniques are gaining recognition because they address the challenging needs of auditory and visual learners.

4. Tactile learners.

Learners learn by touching and manipulating objects – this known as “hands – on” work such as building models or doing laboratory experiments. Tactile learners prefer opportunities where they can actually do something physically with the information they are to learn. Tactile learners experience learning by doing different types of activities such as: preparing multimedia projects, constructing models, art- related activities (such as drawing, painting and sculpting), making diagrams, mind maps, webs; playing games and simulations, role- playing, collecting rocks, flags, stamps; experiments, dance- related activities such as folk dances, singing, rhythmic movements, creative dance; and note making.

C. Cognitive style.

1. Field independent learner, (FI), (also called analytic).

Learners like to concentrate on the details of language, such as grammar rules and enjoy taking apart words and sentences. They are sometimes unable to see “the big structure”. Brown (1994) states that field-independent learners focus on the relevant details and not distracted by unnecessary details. FI hinges on the perceptual skill of “seeing the forest for the trees”. A person who can easily recognize the hidden castle or human face in 3-D posters and a child who can spot the monkeys camouflaged within the trees and leaves of an exotic forest in coloring books tend toward a field – independent style; the “field” may be perceptual or it may be abstract, such as a set of ideas, thoughts, or feeling from which the task is to perceive specific subset (Brown 1994). FI learning style is important for L2 learning. The FI learner excels in classroom learning which involves analysis, attention to details, and mastering of exercises, drills, and other focused activities (Wyss, 2002).

Wyss (2002) demonstrates some researchers' listings of the principal characteristics of FL style learner in terms of impersonal orientation (i.e reliance on internal frame of reference in processing information); analytic (i.e perceives a field in terms of its component parts; parts are distinguished from background); independent (i.e sense of separate identity); socially sensitive (i.e greater skill in interpersonal/ social relationships). Felder & Henriques (1995) describe I learners as “sequential learners” who absorb information and acquire understanding of material in small connected chunks; and can function with incomplete understanding of course material, but they may lack a grasp of the broad context of a body of knowledge and its interrelationships with other subjects

and disciplines.

FI learners activate the left hemisphere of the brain since it deals with language through analysis and abstraction, while the right hemisphere recognizes language as more global auditory or visual patterns (Willing, 1988).

2. Field- Dependent learners (FD), (also called global).

Learners focus on the whole picture and do not care so much about the details. Learners tend to be “dependent” on the total field so that the parts embedded within the field are not easily perceived, though that total field is perceived most clearly as a unified whole (Brown, 1994). The FD learner seems to achieve a higher degree of success in everyday language situations beyond the constraints of the classroom; tasks requiring interpersonal communication skills (Wyss, 2002). Researchers have listed the principal characteristics of the FD style learner in terms of personal orientation (i.e reliance on external frame of reference in processing information); holistic (i.e perceives field as a whole; parts are fused with background); dependent (i.e the self view is derived from others); not so socially aware (i.e less skilled in interpersonal/ social relationships (Wyss, 2002).

Global learners take information in seemingly unconnected fragments and achieve understanding in large holistic leaps. Before global learners can master the details of a subject they need to understand how the material being presented relates to their prior knowledge and experience, a perspective that relatively few instructors routinely provide. Consequently, strongly global learner may appear slow and do poorly on homework and tests until they grasp the total picture (Felder & Henriques, 1995).

Hedgcock & Ferris (2009) note that these descriptions of global and analytical learning styles represent continua rather than strict dichotomies. They also indicate that students/ learners can and should make adjustments to their preferred styles when circumstances require such adaptation.

Implication for the instruction of process that can be beneficial for L2 teachers.

A point no educational psychologist would dispute is that students learn more when information is presented in a variety of modes than when only a single mode is used (Felder & Henriques, 1995). What must be done to achieve effective foreign language learning is to balance instructional methods, somehow structuring the class so that all learning styles are simultaneously – or at least sequentially – accommodated (Oxford, 1990).

It is useful for teachers to put their students into various categories in terms of learning styles. Many people will not find it difficult to identify their preferred learning styles; some may feel that their style varies according to the learning situation and the language task. Awareness of students’ preferred learning styles may help to explain why some aspects of language seem more difficult than others. For example, an analytic learner will not feel comfortable doing a language activity which involves a lot of unstructured, spontaneous speech without any concern for grammatical correctness. A field – dependent learner; on the other hand, focuses solely on communicative meaning of the sentences, not on their value in practicing grammar. Thus, Reid (1987) suggests that curricula designers can devise alternative instructional situations to accommodate the variations in learning styles that may exist in a classroom.

Learners who are in position to choose how they acquire a new language can ensure that their preferred style matches the teaching methodology of the particular language course they want to enroll in. For example, reflective learners may not fare so well in purely conversational classes and auditory learners will probably want to avoid a course with a heavy reading requirement. Of course many learners have no such choice. In general, however, language teachers are aware of the range of learning styles in their classrooms and try to find activities that will at least please all the students at some time during the course. Felder and Henriques (1995) believe that mismatches often occur between the learning styles of students in a language class and the teaching style of the instructor, with unfortunate effects on the quality of the students’ learning and on their attitudes toward the class and the subject.

Reid (1987) suggests that if educators can assume that learning styles are adaptable, that learning style preferences can be identified and modified, and that conscious or subconscious learning styles can become conscious learning strategies, then students, native speakers of English as well as NNSs should be exposed to the concept of learning styles. Consequently, students should have the opportunities to assess their own learning style preferences and should be encouraged to diversify those preferences. Moreover, students will be able to sample unfamiliar teaching and learning styles.

Smith and Renzulli (1984) believe that a teacher who can purposefully exhibit a wide range of teaching styles is potentially able to accomplish more than a teacher whose repertoire is relatively limited. Students can also enhance their learning power by being aware of style areas in which they feel less comfortable. Similarly, teachers can identify strong style patterns in their classes and make effective use of such information by devising lesson plans which accommodate individual learning style preferences. Of course, designing and implementing the curricular alternatives require skills in a variety of teaching styles as well as the ability to manage the complexities of such a classroom

For non native speakers NNSs the concept of learning style preferences may be completely new. The fact that the students learn in different ways and the possibility that students can adapt to a variety of instructional modes may come both as a surprise and a relief. Moreover, the understanding and use of different teaching styles by the instructor, as well as the awareness of individual learning styles by the student, may influence success in the classroom. Both teachers and students involved in identifying and using information on learning styles should proceed with caution and be aware that no single diagnostic instrument can solve all learning problems (Reid, 1987).

ESL/EFL class can provide students with the opportunities to experience the effectiveness of diverse class presentations. The appropriate use of multi-media, like video recording, slide presentation, overhead projection, and realia, together with selective hands – on activities, has made lessons interesting and motivating to students (Kng, 1999).

Teachers should help students discover their own learning preferences and provide constructive feedback about the advantages and disadvantages of various styles. Also, teachers should respect the learners' present preferences and encourage their development, while at the same time creating opportunities for students to experiment with different ways of learning.

Instructors may use instruments and activities specially designed for L2 learner such as Willing's activity work sheets (1989) and Kinsella's classroom work style survey (1996) to identify students' learning styles. Although this kind of assessment is not comprehensive, it does indicate students' preferred general learning habits. It also helps students understand their own learning styles so that they can capitalize on their strengths. As a result students can enhance their learning power by being aware of the style areas in which they feel less comfortable, and by working on their development, thus, providing avenues to foster their intellectual growth (Eliason, 1995).

Kang (1999) emphasizes that educators should employ instruments to identify students' learning styles and provide instructional alternatives to address their differences. Teachers should plan lessons to match students' learning styles while at the same time encouraging students to diversify their learning style preferences. He also offers advice to ESL/EFL educators to make the teaching/ learning process successful by understanding and respecting their students' diverse learning styles and making efforts to create optimal learning environments for them.

While presenting materials, teachers should provide colorful and motivating activities, personalized self-reflection tasks, some forms of cooperative learning, and powerful learning strategies to encourage self-direction in learning. Teachers should also consciously develop students' learning strategies to help students approach challenging learning tasks. For example, teachers can let students use cognitive strategies such as note – taking and summarizing to sort and organize language information and prepare them for speech and written production. Teachers can have students apply compensation strategies such as guessing to comprehend a listening or reading passage and using circulation to communicate their ideas despite their knowledge gaps (Oxford, 1990).

Similarly, teachers can use the survey results to identify strong style patterns in their classes, which they should consider when designing learning tasks. This helps teachers assess students' learning styles and made them more aware of their strengths and weaknesses in learning so that they could effectively use their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses.

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