

3. Learning styles: an approach to individual differences

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the concept of "learning style" and to show its value in understanding the role of individual differences in the language classroom. I will start by mentioning reasons why it is worth investigating learning styles. I will then provide a definition and possible descriptions of learning styles. After that, I will briefly describe ways in which we can obtain information about our students' styles. Finally, I will discuss the problems connected with the use of that information in the language classroom.

2. Why learn more about "learning styles"?

For some time now the importance of training learners in managing their own learning process has been recognised, and syllabuses and language programmes often include an element of "learner training", often in the form of more or less direct instruction in the acquisition and use of learning strategies. However, the effectiveness of these efforts is often limited by the recognition that learners respond to strategy training in very different ways, so that the same strategy can be accepted, refused or ignored by different learners, and even by the same learner working in different contexts. In a way, then, the personal ways different learners tackle tasks in the classroom, their own individual approaches to learning, are perhaps more important than the provision of a fixed set of strategies as part of a syllabus. Therefore, the value of investigating individual differences in the language classroom can hardly be underestimated.

Another good reason for learning more about our students' learning styles is the fact that this may lead us to learn more about our own learning styles. Since what we think and do as teachers reflects what we have been thinking and doing as learners, there is a chance that an investigation into our students' learning styles will also turn into a greater awareness of our own teaching styles.

3. What are learning styles?

Learning styles are just a subset of a much wider range of individual differences affecting the process of language learning. Age, aptitude, motivation, general intelligence, sensory preferences and sociocultural conditions are all examples of other important factors influencing the way learners react to classroom instruction (you might want to read Skehan 1989 on this). Thus by considering learning styles we are by no means suggesting that they are the only, or even the most important, influence on the learning process.

We might tentatively define a learning style as a learner's general approach to learning, her or his typical and consistent way of reacting to learning tasks. Perhaps one of the ways of

clarifying the concept of "learning style" is by contrasting it with other related concepts, like "personality", "learning strategies" and "techniques". If we wanted to order these concepts on a vertical line, we could place "personality" at the top, since this concept refers to our very general, basic individual character structure. Further down the line we might place "learning style", the preferred approach that we consistently adopt in our learning experiences. This approach affects our choice of "learning strategies", or the steps or operations that we perform to make our learning quicker, better and more efficient. Finally, at the bottom of our ideal vertical line we would place "techniques" or "tactics", the concrete behaviours that actually take place when a particular strategy is adopted.

Let me provide an example. As we move from the top to the bottom of the line, we move from general to specific, from stable to unstable, from less changeable to more changeable features. As teachers we stand very few chances of modifying our students' personality - and indeed it is neither our aim nor our wish to do so. When we are concerned with learning style, we enter the more specific realm of learning, and, although we might not be able or indeed might not wish to change a student's analytical learning style into a synthetic one, we could try to find ways of making the most of this particular student's strengths while reducing the influence of his weaknesses - quite an intriguing task, as we shall soon see. Teaching learning strategies, like using inference or deduction, is comparatively easier, and teaching the practical techniques to implement such strategies, like recognising prefixes and suffixes in unknown words, or making the most of cognates in finding out word meanings, is even easier.

There is not a single, established set of descriptive terms to describe learning styles - in fact, styles are usually described in terms of a number of polar oppositions. Let me list a few examples (there is a comprehensive overview of such oppositions in Schmock 1988):

analytical vs synthetic: "analytical" people tend to focus on form and accuracy, looking out for patterns and regularities in the language input, and preferring to plan the language they have to produce; on the other hand, "synthetic" people tend to focus on meaning and fluency, collecting examples of language use rather than building patterns, and preferring to correct the language they have produced rather than planning it in the first place;

sequential/systematic vs random/intuitive: people favouring the former style like to work through a task step-by-step, closely monitoring their comprehension or production; people favouring the latter style like learning "by feel".

These two broad kinds of polar oppositions clearly refer to features, or preferences for particular uses of our mental processes. However, the concept of "learning style", as opposed to the more limited concept of "cognitive style", allows for social and affective features to be taken into consideration as well, thus enabling us to build up a more comprehensive picture of an individual's overall learning approach. We could then draw other interesting distinctions, e.g.

reflective vs impulsive: "reflective" people tend to be cautious, to remain within the task, to like organized learning and predictable paths; "impulsive" people are more prepared to take risks, to experiment with language, and therefore to go beyond the task and explore different paths;

anxious vs relaxed: "anxious" learners tend to have problems tolerating the ambiguity which they daily experience in the use of language; they may tend to be inhibited, introverted and perhaps a little rigid; "relaxed" people, on the other hand, can tolerate ambiguity better; they may tend to be uninhibited, extroverted and perhaps a little more flexible;

individual- vs group-oriented: the former learners are likely to be independent also in terms of self-esteem and personal identity; they tend to work on the basis of intrinsic motivation, and may like to establish their own working plan; on the other hand, group-oriented people may be more dependent on a group or an external authority to define their personal identity and social role; they tend to be motivated by extrinsic motivations; they may benefit by being provided with a clearly described working plan.

Defining learning styles in terms of polar oppositions can be a useful and practical way of identifying features which might otherwise be difficult to describe. However, a few words of warning are necessary.

a) all "labels" we may use to describe learners must be understood to be descriptive, not prescriptive. In other words, oppositions like "analytical/synthetic" or "anxious/relaxed" need to be taken as neutral terms, having no positive or negative implications in themselves. Besides, we shall soon see that all learning styles can be positive for language learning, depending on the task and the learning context;

b) these "labels" describe relative tendencies rather than absolute realities. Each learner may find her or his place along a continuum between, e.g., systematic and intuitive, and many learners indeed show what we might call a balanced learning style: they may be able to make use of different approaches according to the task and the subject matter to be learned;

c) it is useful to consider learning styles as a cluster of cognitive, social and affective features: this will prevent us from unduly separating what is really one whole structure - the basic individual personality of a learner - and may serve to remind us that what is involved in the learning process is the whole person, and not just her or his mental mechanisms.

4. How can we get information about students' learning styles?

This can be done in two basic ways. On one hand, we can design questionnaires, tests and interviews - several questionnaire formats are now available if we want to make use of a

ready-made tool (see for example the ones included in Cornoldi et al. 1993, Davis et al. 1994, Ellis-Sinclair 1989, Willing 1989). An alternative approach would consist in carrying out observations of individuals and groups on the basis of a prepared grid or observation chart. We could obviously make use of both approaches, by combining and comparing the data obtained through the use of, e.g., a questionnaire with the comments and evaluations provided by the students themselves and/or by one or more external observers.

During the academic years 1993/94 and 1994/95 I carried out a pilot survey of learning styles by developing a questionnaire which included five main polar oppositions (analytical vs synthetic; form-dependent vs communication-oriented, to measure the degree of autonomy and personal responsibility for one's learning; and individual- vs group-oriented). Three basic sensory/modality preferences (i.e. visual, auditory and kinesthetic) were added to the five basic polar oppositions.

For each of these eight parameters a set of questions was designed, asking students to rate their individual preferences on a five-point scale, as is shown by the following example which refers to the analytical vs synthetic opposition:

		Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Hardly ever
1	I need to understand every single word when I read a text.	0	1	2	3	4
2	I like to see several examples of a structure first; then I can formulate a rule.	4	3	2	1	0
3	I tend to use my mother tongue in order to understand or speak English.	0	1	2	3	4
4	I pay more attention to vocabulary rather than grammar in language tasks.	4	3	2	1	0
5	I feel uneasy if I don't understand how a structure works or the exact meaning of a word	0	1	2	3	4
6	I try to understand the meaning of unknown words by looking at the context.	4	3	2	1	0
7	I prefer rules to be clearly explained to me before I use them in oral or written tasks.	0	1	2	3	4

8	When I start reading or listening to a text I feel satisfied if I understand the main ideas.	4	3	2	1	0
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This pilot questionnaire was administered to about twenty-five classes of various high schools. (Here I wish to thank all the friends and colleagues who kindly helped me in this project.) The students answered to questionnaire individually and anonymously, calculated their scores and read the interpretations of the scores which were provided with the questionnaire itself. This was usually followed by a class discussion with the teacher and myself, the results were usually shared with the students in a further class discussion.

There were two basic objectives in this survey:

- a) to raise teachers' and students' awareness of learning styles;
- b) to verify the distribution of learning styles in the classroom, as a first step in planning possible further actions.

I will briefly report on the preliminary results obtained so far in this pilot survey.

As for the first, rather general objective, the reactions were usually very positive, in the sense that the survey provided an opportunity for teachers and students together to think about and discuss a rather neglected issue in language teaching and learning. As such, the value of the questionnaire was not so much as a tool for academic research, as rather a useful device to improve the quality of communication in the classroom.

As for the second, more specific objective, the questionnaire revealed individual students or groups of students who definitely show a particular learning style - these, of course, are the people who may need more specific attention. Comparisons between classes were also made, with some classes being more heterogeneous (i.e. showing a wider range of styles) than others. However, perhaps more surprisingly, many students in most classes showed a balanced or versatile learning style - in other words, they seemed to place themselves towards the middle of the "continuum" represented by each scale.

This, of course, raises an interesting question. Do "balanced" students automatically enjoy the privileged position of having equal access to, e.g., both analytical and synthetic ways of processing information? Or do they still need to be trained in the use of both ways, thus having to learn which way is more appropriate according to the learning task they have to carry out and the subject matter they have to study? This leads us to the more general question of what to do with the information we can gather about our students' learning styles.

5. How can we use the information about learning styles?

The preliminary results of the pilot survey mentioned above seem to point to a rather

intriguing question: should we accommodate learning styles or should we try to change them? That is to say, should we simply recognise that certain students have specific preferred approaches to learning, and adapt our teaching to them, or should we rather ask our students to adapt their styles to a variety of different teaching materials and activities?

Far from being a purely academic issue, this question raises important pedagogic considerations. For a start, it is useful to stress once again that all styles represent positive approaches to learning, depending on the task, the learning context, and the purpose of the activity. For example, the orientation to form is certainly helpful whenever considerable demands are made on accuracy, as in many test-taking situations or, simply, in tackling grammar or "reflection on language" exercises; on the other hand, an orientation to communication is valuable when conveying the message is the only or most important objective, as in most face-to-face interactions and in many "freer" oral learning tasks.

This also means that different tasks may require the activation of different styles or approaches to learning, and that a learner's preferred approach may not be the most suitable in a certain learning context.

Therefore, if we only decided to adapt materials and activities to suit our students' preferred styles, we might run the risk of reinforcing their strong points without, however, helping them to overcome their limitations. The concept of a balanced approach is perhaps most relevant here: on the one hand, we need to ensure that each of our students makes the most of her or his preferred style; on the other hand, we need to provide opportunities for students to increase their flexibility to tasks which may require a different approach.

It seems to me that such a balanced approach requires that students (and teachers)

- a) become aware of their preferred ways of learning;
- b) understand the requirements of the tasks they have to perform;
- c) practise appropriate learning strategies, particularly to cope with those tasks which require an approach which they do not feel comfortable with.

Let me provide an example. To suit both our form-oriented and our communication-oriented learners, we will probably offer them both accuracy-focussed and fluency-focussed activities - by doing this, we will be providing varied learning opportunities to suit different learning styles. However, in order to increase our students' flexibility, it will obviously be necessary to ask our form-oriented learners to cope with the demands of, say, an oral, real-time interaction task, and our communication-oriented learners to cope with the demands of, say, a grammar task implying subtle differences in tense usage. It is at this stage that learning strategies may offer some valuable help. Our form-oriented learners could benefit from being given some guided practice in communication strategies like asking for help, checking that you have understood, checking that others have understood you, and the like. Conversely, our communication-oriented learners could benefit from being given some graded practice in analysing the language and making decisions on the basis of careful observation of language input.

6. Conclusion

Such a "balanced" approach to coping with learning styles in the classroom would help our learners to capitalise on their strengths while at the same time dealing with their weaknesses. For teachers, it would mean providing opportunities not just to accommodate the tasks to the learners, but also to accommodate the learners to the tasks.

I am not claiming that this approach would be easy to implement. However, there are at least three areas in which more research and more small-scale classroom projects could help in this respect:

- a) the investigation of teachers' learning styles, which may account, at least partially, for their choice of teaching styles;
- b) the evaluation of teaching materials, to assess how well they cater for different learning styles;
- c) the analysis of tasks, to clarify how they are perceived by learners, what demands they make on different styles, and what kind of strategies may be more appropriate in different contexts.

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