

Learning Styles and Their Implications in Learning and Teaching

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Abstract—Learning style in SLA is one of the individual factors in SLA. This paper starts by stating the importance of studying learning styles. Then it quotes several definitions of learning style. The main part of it sums up the types and models of learning styles. Learning style is mainly divided into three categories: perceptual learning style, cognitive learning style and personality learning style. In the end, it states the implications of learning style for language learning and language teaching.

Index Terms—learning style, foreign language learning, foreign language teaching, implications

Ellis (2005) listed seven factors while explaining individual learner differences, namely beliefs, affective state, age, aptitude, learning style, motivation, and personality. Learning style is one of the individual learner differences. What is learning style, and to what extent it affects achievements or language proficiency. The paper attempts to explore about learning style and its implication for us.

I. THE IMPORTANCE TO STUDY LEARNING AND LEARNING STYLES FOR L2 TEACHERS

In the previous years, we had paid much attention to the aspects of teaching and teacher, such as teaching methodology, teaching materials, curriculum, etc. and there had been heatedly debated over the question “Which is the best teaching method?” Recent years the focus seems to have shifted from teaching to learning.

Cook (2000) in explaining the students’ contribution to learning points out “all successful teaching depends upon learning; there is no point in providing entertaining, lively, well-constructed language lessons if students do not learn. The proof of the teaching is in the learning.”(P.23). Most teachers have been trained to teach, not to think about second language learning. But we know everything that is achieved in the classroom depends eventually upon what goes on in the students’ minds. Indeed, learning is one aspect which cannot be ignored. To our joy, there has been much research in learning. As one factor of learning, the study of learning style also need to be paid due attention to. Oxford (2001) points out that “individual students’ learning styles and strategies can work together with – or conflict with – a given instructional methodology”.(p.45) Ellis (2005) proposes the concept of learner-instruction matching. In his opinion, the optimal type of instruction will be that which matches the individual learner’s preferred approach to learning. Whether from the perspective of learner-instruction matching or of the relationship of learning style and learning strategy, it is necessary to study learning style.

II. DEFINITION OF LEARNING STYLES

A. Definitions

With different educational and cultural background, different personalities, and different learning experience, everybody differs in his ways of learning a foreign language, which leads to different degrees of success. The different preferred ways all usually referred to as “learning style”.

The term “learning style” comes from general psychology. Ellis (2005) defines learning style as “the characteristic ways in which individuals orientate to problem-solving”.(p.4) Ellis quotes Keefe (1979)’s definition of learning style-the characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment. Learning style is a consistent way of functioning, which reflects underlying causes of behavior. Cornett defines learning style as the overall patterns that will give general direction to learning behavior while according to Dunn and Griggs, they define learning style as the biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others.

We cannot say which definition is better because each definition is made from one angle. It makes much sense to get the basic ideas of learning style.

B. The Range of Learning Style

Experts don’t see eye to eye with regard to what learning style is. It might be helpful if we sum up some shared characteristics from the above definitions. These may include the following points:

Learning style concerns with individual learners; learning style is the ways of learning; learning style is relatively

consistent or stable for individual learners; learning style is the favored or preferred way of learning for an individual learner.

C. *Distinctions with Learning Strategy*

Learning style and learning strategy are confusable concept. To make learning style clear in meaning, we may distinguish it from learning strategy. The former is one of the individual learner differences. According to Ellis (2005), individual learner differences including learning style “together with situational factors determine learners’ choice of learning strategies.” (p.52). According to Oxford, “language learning styles and strategies are among the main factors that help determine how and how well our students learn a second language”. (Oxford, 2001, p. 43). He refers to learning style as the “general approach” (Oxford, 2001, p. 44) and defines learning strategies as “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques”. (Oxford, 2001, p. 45). And he further points out “when learner consciously chooses strategies that fit his or her learning style ..., these strategies become a useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful self-regulation of learning.” (Oxford, 2001, p. 55)

What ever the relationship between learning style and learning strategy might be, it would be safe to point out that a learner’s learning style may predict his choice of learning strategy. And there is a problem of the match between learning strategy and learning style. A good match of learning strategy with learning style can bring about positive results.

III. LEARNING STYLE TYPES AND MODELS

Psychologists have identified a lot of learning styles. It is said that there are over seventy learning style models and each model is made up of at least two specific learning styles. Not all these models can be borrowed to explain the learning of a foreign language, after all language learning has its own characteristics. That is to say not all the learning style models are valid in explaining the phenomenon of learning a foreign language. The most frequently quoted models in the field of L2 learning include: ‘focuser’ and ‘scanner’, ‘serialists’ and ‘holists’, ‘impulsive’ and ‘reflective’, ‘divergent’ and ‘convergent’ thinkers, ‘field dependence’ and ‘field independence’, four perceptual learning modalities, global and analytic, and etc.

We can categorize these learning styles into three broad types: perceptual learning styles, cognitive learning styles, and personality learning styles.

A. *Perceptual Learning Styles*

Perceptual learning style also referred to as sensory learning style, concerns with the involvement of learner’s sense organs in the process of learning, such as eyes and ears. Learners employ their sense organs to process the stimuli from outside. There are five styles fall into this type, namely, visual learning (learn by seeing), auditory (learn by hearing), reading/writing (learn by processing text), tactile learners (learn by touching), and kinesthetic learning/practical learning (learn by doing).

Visual learners prefer to learn by reading books, seeing words, or looking at some teaching tools. They prefer to look at the written words on the blackboard than to only listen to the teacher. Therefore they like the teacher to write more than to talk more in classroom. The PPT presentation is suitable to these learners because it presents words, and pictures or charts. This type of learners will feel comfortable when teacher use the translation-grammar teaching approach.

Auditory learners, also referred to as verbal learners, prefer to learn by listening. For them, they may enjoy to have interactions with others by talking. They may dislike reading books. So in formal instruction settings, they would rather to listen more than to see more. A few teaching approaches may suit them, such as the oral approach, the situational approach, the audio-lingual approach, and communicative approach.

Tactile learners and kinesthetic learners are similar. The former prefer to learn by feeling or touching something with their hands while the later like movement. Learners of these two kinds will feel comfortable when teacher use the total physical response approach.

B. *Cognitive Learning Styles*

Cognitive learning styles include ‘focuser’ and ‘scanner’, ‘serialists’ and ‘holists’, ‘divergent’ and ‘convergent’ thinkers, ‘field dependence’ (global learner) and field independence’ (analytic learner). Some of them are over-lapping in meaning. And most important pair is field independence and field dependence, which has been investigated widely in relation to L2 language learning.

Field-independent learners, also known as analytic learners, can be described as the learners who would like to focus on details of a foreign language and to break down a whole thing into parts or pieces. They may ignore the whole picture when concentrating on details. They are good analysts. They would like to analyze a reading passage or a sentence into parts trying to get the exact meaning. For field-dependent learners, they are global learners. They would like to focus on whole thing of the learning material, whether a passage or a sentence. They are good at grasping the main points and the general structure.

Johnson (2003) points out “the field independent subjects seemed to be better learners”(p.32) when he mentions the tests carried out by Naiman et al. These tests involved personality and cognitive styles, among which only two are

reported to give positive correlations with language-learning success. One is tolerance of ambiguity and the other one is field-independence.

Ellis (2005) mentioned two hypotheses. One hypothesis suggests that “field-dependent learners do better in formal language learning, while field-independent learners do better in informal language learning.” (p.63) The other hypothesis suggests “field dependent learners will interact more and seek out more contact with other users of the L2”. (p.63) However, these two hypotheses are very controversial. As Ellis points out, “the research into field dependence/field independence has shed little light on the relationship between cognitive style and L2 learning.” (Ellis, 2001, p.66)

C. *Personality Learning Styles*

As far as I know, there are two types of learners in terms of personality: reflective learner and impulsive learner. Reflective learners prefer accuracy to fluency. They would like to think more carefully and more thoroughly before they speak or write or do any other production tasks. And they try to avoid making mistakes. They are careful learners. On the other hand, impulsive learners, as the name suggests, they are bold in character and they would like to take risks. They prefer fluency to accuracy. They probably make more mistakes than reflective learners.

D. *Learners of Compound Learning Styles*

Learners of compound learning styles refer to those who have more than one strong learning style. It is possible that a learner may be a visual learner and an impulsive learner at the same time. The research into this type of learner is limited. I think there are a few possible combination models and they remain to be testified.

IV. LEARNING STYLES' IMPLICATIONS TO LEARNING AND TEACHING

So far there is no strong evidence to illustrate which learning style is better than another. According to Ellis, Learners manifest different learning styles but it is not yet clear whether some styles result in faster and more learning than others. Even though, the models of learning style can still shed some light to the complicated process of learning.

In my opinion, to understand learning style is important for students as well as for teachers. For students, if they learn what type of learner they are, they can have a clearer picture of the learning process, and more consciousness of learning. With more consciousness of learning style, they may understand why they feel comfortable in learning one aspect while uncomfortable in learning another. And they will know what they are good at and why they lag behind others in learning. Thus they can adjust or modify their learning a little to the learning setting or teaching methods. Most importantly, they can decide to take their learning strategies on the basis of their learning style and analysis of their weaknesses and strengths. Learning strategies have more relation to the academic achievement than learning style. Besides, they can set practical learning goals suitable for themselves. For visual learners, they may become good readers. For auditory learners, they may become good at speaking and communicating.

Learning style is more or less fixed and it is not easy to change one's learning style as one cannot easily change one's personality, habit, or cognitive style. In this sense, it is more important for teacher to understand the theories of learning style and to get to know the students' learning style. As teachers, we have to remember that our students' learning style cannot be the same. It is the varied learning styles in a classroom that make the teaching difficult. On the basis of this, we have to adapt different teaching methods and we have to find out a balanced teaching approach. But firstly of all, we should make a survey to identify the learning style of our students. Based on the result of the survey, we will determine what the most popular learning style in that particular class and what are the least popular style in this class. We can grade them. Our teaching methods will cater to the differences of learning style. On the other hand, we can put students of the same or similar learning styles into one class and this will make teaching more student-oriented and easier to handle.

Haynes lists the activities fit for students of different learning style. For auditory learners, these activities include interviewing, debating, participating on a panel, giving oral reports, and participating in oral discussions of written material. For Visual Learners, these activities are suggested: computer graphic, maps, graphs, charts, cartoons, posters, diagrams, text with a lot of pictures. For tactile learners, some favorite activities include drawing, playing board games, and making models. For kinesthetic learners, playing games that involve the whole body, movement activities, making models, and setting up experiments. For global learners, choral reading, recorded books, story writing, computer programs, games, group activities. For analytic learners, information presented in sequential steps, teacher directed, clear goals and requirements.

Another implication may be that: one single teaching method or approach cannot work for all the students in a class. The popular communicative approach may not be suitable for students of visual learners or analytic learners. Task-based teaching approach may be a good choice if the tasks are designed carefully and the tasks can attract different type of learners.

Now learning strategy research is catching on and people in the field of EFL or ESL become more and more interested in learning strategy. Learning style research seems outdated due to the lack of convincing testing results. But it is worthwhile to review the basic ideas of learning style. Recognition of the diversity of learning style is important in our teaching practice. Language teachers should take the differences of learning style into account in the process of

teaching. They should teach in a balanced way according to the range of students' learning style. One teaching approach cannot work for everyone in a class. Different teaching approaches may be integrated and different tasks or activities may be done in classroom to please all the students and produce better teaching results.

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