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Importance of Learning Styles: How does Students' Awareness of Learning Styles affect their Proficiency in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Abstract

The concept of "learning styles" has been the topic of discussion in pedagogical areas for many years. Many authors have done many research to find out whether learning styles have an impact to the way students learn languages. It is claimed by many researchers that some instructors may adjust their teaching approach to better match the learning type of a particular student or group of students. On the other hand, others have suggested that a misalignment of learning and teaching styles stimulates and challenges students to grow academically. This study aims to determine whether the awareness of learning styles has an influence on acquiring languages or not. The questionnaires, interviews, in-class and out of class activities were conducted to identify students' learning styles. The results have shown that after being aware of their own learning styles students can learn English better without obstacles. Moreover, it was concluded that it is wise for teachers' if they change their way of teaching in accordance with their students' learning preferences. Further research is needed to identify other factors that could impact students' learning styles and SLA.

Keywords: Learning Styles, Awareness of Learning Preferences, Teaching Approaches, SLA, L2, Field-Dependent and Field-independent Learners, Visual, Kinesthetic, Tactile, Academic Performance, Learning Strategies.

Introduction

Language Learning Style (LLS) is one of the significant concepts of SLA. As everyone possesses different characteristics, the way we learn languages varies. According to Reid (1987) it is "A term which describes the difference among learners in using one or more senses to comprehend, organize, and retain experience" (p.89). Language researchers categorized different learning styles in numerous ways. If a learner uses his senses in learning, he can be considered as visual, tactile, kinesthetic, or

auditory learner. Based on the personality, some learners are termed as impulsive and reflective learners. Moreover, some people can be field-dependent and field-independent learners if they practice cognitive style in learning. However, from our own experience as a teacher, we can say that most learners do not know exactly what their learning styles are.

This case study aims to examine the importance of learning styles in language acquisition process. More specifically, it strives to identify whether knowing different styles helps students to success in learning L2. For example,

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while learning grammar should students know different learning styles in order to enhance their grammar, or is it useful to apply different styles for writing or speaking? This case study also tries to answer the following questions:

- How does students' awareness of learning styles affect their proficiency in SLA?
- Does knowing more about students' learning styles help teachers to teach effectively?

By this research, we have intended to prove how important it is for language learners to be aware of various learning styles and to adopt these styles according to their preference into target language process. So far, there have been several research on the topic by well-known scholars. We hope that this case study will benefit both English teachers and learners. This study helps teachers realize the importance of learning styles and being aware of students' preferred learning style. Regarding the students, this study can help them to identify their learning styles and be familiar with various learning styles and create an appropriate system of learning strategies for themselves so as to achieve success in language learning. While conducting the research it is crucial to consider the age, level, the purpose and the motivation of the learner.

Literature Review

While doing extensive research on Language Learning Styles we realized that in the process of learning, whether it is a foreign language or any other subject matter, certain ways must be used so as to achieve the result learner wish for. According to Oxford (1995) learning style is a "general approach to language learning". Many other definitions of learning styles were given by well-known researchers. Kolb (1984) describes learning styles as the ways in which people generate ideas, rules and values which direct them in new situations (cited in Loo, 2004). A learning style is multidimensional (Kinsella, 1996). Its elements can be divided into five stimulus categories: environmental, emotional, physical, sociological and psychological elements (Reiff, 1992). More specifically, learning styles consist of not only the cognitive, but also the affective and physiological domains (Oxford, Hollaway, Horton-Murillo 1992).

For decades, enthusiastic supporters have hailed the importance of learning styles for both teachers and learners in the process of second language acquisition (SLA). Most of these studies were conducted in terms of the relationship between learning styles and learning strategies, learning styles and academic performance of students, the importance of language learning style preferences and others.

To begin with, Bidabadi and Yamat (2010) examined preferences of Iranian EFL learners in the language learning styles and their implications on the teaching and learning as well as the designs of the textbooks. A group of 92 Iranian EFL freshman university students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course participated in the study. A set of questionnaires adopted from Willing (1988) was used. It was found that majority of students considered themselves as communicative learners. They prefer to learn English by listening to native speakers since they believe this would be the most beneficial for their needs in relation to English language learning. This enabled them to improve their pronunciation. It was also concluded that there are no distinct preferred learning styles for Iranian male and female learners. Regarding teachers, it was suggested that they should introduce diverse learning styles to students in order to know their way of learning a foreign language. Overall, the results indicated that students should be encouraged to find out their suitable learning style preferences to make learning easier for them (Bidabadi & Yamat, 2010). On the same note, in a study conducted by Tavares and Gloria (2007) on eight teachers of English as a foreign language in the U.S, it was found that kinesthetic and extroverts are among the most learning styles favored. Classroom recordings, questionnaire, and a guided interview were tools to collect the data. The results showed that second language teachers also have learning style preferences. However, in that research, it was suggested teachers should use a variety of teaching activities which match every student's learning style in the class (Tavares & Gloria, 2007).

There was also another study which highlighted the correlation between learning styles and learning strategies which was investigated by Pei-xin (2016). 250 students from Binzhou University were selected. The students were asked to complete two questionnaires: One was "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)" developed by Oxford (1990) and the other was "Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSP)" from Joy Reid (1984). The key finding from the study was that kinesthetic styles were the most preferred by participants as these two styles enabled learners to completely experience language. The Chinese students like to study individually was another interesting finding which can be concluded that culture also influences the learning style of learners. Additionally, some language learning styles such as visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic styles have strong impact on the choice of certain learning strategy preferences. It was also discovered that learners should be

aware of their own learning styles and learning strategies to correlate these two in the classroom with the help of their teachers (Pei-xin 2016).

Asadipiran (2016) aimed to identify preferred perceptual learning styles of Iranian young learners through questionnaire. It was discovered that the most preferred learning style was visual which is the followed by tactile learning style and then auditory, individual and kinesthetic learning styles. The least preferred learning style of respondents is group learning style.

From these studies, it can be concluded that learners achieve a strong proficiency in acquiring second language acquisition when learning styles are linked with learning strategies as well as matched with teaching styles. Moreover, teachers play a vital role for helping students to identify their preferred style of learning and introduce other styles to them in order to make process of learning languages easier and at the same time enjoyable. However, in most studies it is also suggested that further research must be conducted on the role of learning styles while learning second language.

Participant Profile

In order to conduct the case study, we chose a young learner who is interested in learning languages but have some difficulties in choosing appropriate way to learn English fluently. M, participant is 16 years old and she studies at school.

To begin with her L1 background, her native language is Uzbek since she was grown up in Uzbek environment. The Participant started speaking in her native language since her childhood. Even though her parents only speak in Uzbek, she is bilingual as she can speak Russian and English languages.

M started to learn English from the 5th grade at school when she was 13 years old but she did not understand the language. She had difficulties in acquiring target language at school. She said that it was because of her teacher's style and methods. It did not match with her learning style. Thus, her parents decided to find tutor for her. Her tutor used Grammar Translation Method and she taught a lot of grammar rules. She also learned English through translating texts word-for-word from the book. Since she enjoys learning grammar, this approach was useful for her. When she reached a pre-intermediate level, she decided to change her tutor, because learning only grammar did not enhance her speaking skills. After that she continued learning L2 with another tutor with a group. Soon, she was able to speak English since her teacher used a lot of interactive games to improve the

student's speaking skills. Now, she reached intermediate level.

While interviewing her, we realized that the participant is very keen on learning new things about English. She also mentioned that mostly her dreams motivate her to learn English. She wants to acquire English fluently as she wants to enter the university, get a good job and travel in English speaking countries. These factors push her to learn English.

As for what helps her to learn, she often watches the educational and tutorial videos. Moreover, she learns best in a group when there is competition. She does not prefer to study individually. Besides, she finds learning new words the most difficult. She thinks that she has not got ability to learn new vocabulary, because even though she used many approaches to learn new words, she could not use them in speaking and writing. She knows only basic and simple vocabulary.

After the interview, it was concluded that the subject is not familiar with many styles and strategies to learn English very well. Additionally, she even does not know what type of learner she is. As mentioned above, she is now intermediate level student, but she cannot increase her level to upper-intermediate. We think that it is because of the styles and strategies she use while learning languages. That is why, our main task is to help her identify her learning style and improve her level.

Methods

Initially, the importance of research and a consent form were introduced to my participant. After being aware of the requirements, the subject signed it. A series of questionnaires and interviews were chosen to conduct with the learner. The questionnaires were mostly targeted to identify perceptual and cognitive learning styles of the subject and interviews were mostly about her preference of style and problems she comes across while learning languages. According to them, following problems were identified:

- The way she uses to learn new words was useless;
- She did not know that what type of learner she is;
- She had problems with expressing her ideas in English;
- She does not know different styles of learning to improve her level

After identifying these problems of my participant, we decided to implement activities according to these problems. Moreover, activities were divided into two parts:

1. In-class activities
2. Out-of-class activities

In class, an engagement VAK activity was conducted to help the subject become conscious of how she prefers to learn. The activity allowed M to revise topic vocabulary based on "Characters and Appearance". This involved memorizing and writing down as many words as she could remember in three different ways. Firstly, she had to listen to the words, secondly, she watched some pictures for a few seconds and thirdly, she touched the items of topic vocabulary. In the end, all she had to do was to see in which way she remembered many words. This activity was chosen to help the learner understand the different ways in which we can learn new vocabulary.

From a questionnaire and the activity which it is mentioned above it became tangible that M is a kinesthetic learner thus, we decided to conduct further activities which match her learning style preference. Charades word game was used to improve her vocabulary. In fact, this game is enjoyable when it is played with group. Since the subject was taught individually, we also engaged in this activity and we took turns to act out without speaking in order to describe words or phrases. By this way, it would be easier to memorize words easily as they clearly store in her memory. She said that whenever she faces these words, gestures which we used to describe these words come to her mind immediately. However, she found this activity boring when it was used every time when we asked new words. Another activity was a puppet show. Different puppets were brought to the class and we prepared some cards which were written specific vocabulary. The task of the participant was to choose ten cards and puppets and after that to demonstrate a story based on these tools. 15 minutes were given for preparation. Every week, we conducted this speaking activity with her. M found these activities captivating and engaging since she said while making up the story, she felt real experience of using language.

As for out-of-class activities, we suggested her writing down each new word on cards and the definition of these words must be written on the other side of the cards. And she must revise the words on cards every morning. Moreover, as our task was to introduce her different ways of learning styles, it is also said her to write words on stickers and to stick them on the objects which she sees every day. However, the participant said that these types of activities did not work well for her since she tended to forget these words as time passed by. Then it was recommended her to learn words by making up sentences. The sentences must be written on copy book. She found this way rather useful. In

order to overcome the problem of expressing her ideas in target language, we taught her to create a mind map. We decided to implement this activity in the classroom as well as suggested her to use it out-of-class. She mentioned that she is going to use mind maps not only learning English but in learning other subjects efficiently.

The participant got a clear instruction to do the activities in order to learn new words efficiently and to express her ideas confidently. Moreover, she found out that she is a kinesthetic learner thus she wanted to implement learning strategies according to her preference. However, we suggested her using various learning styles and strategies. Besides, she also admitted that before this research she did not know many language learning styles. For these reasons, the subject found this study very beneficial and she became aware of many learning styles and strategies to acquire second language.

Data Collection

The instruments for collecting the data that suited the purpose of the case study were the following:

- VAK questionnaire and learning styles questionnaires: they were useful to collect initial data about the subject's preferred ways of learning. They helped to implement activities that corresponded the participant's learning style as well.
- Series of interviews: Every week, we interviewed the subject and recorded the interviews after asking the permission of the participant.

Furthermore, we decided to keep a journal to write down the performance of the learner during the development of the activities. The subject was asked to take notes of the activities which she found beneficial and her feelings about each lesson. Along the process, some samples of the participant's work were collected so as to see how she was doing in the activities proposed.

Findings/Results

According to questionnaires, the participant prefers kinesthetic learning style which proves the assumptions of Reid (1987) which non-native learners tend to prefer learning through movement. For this reason, we tried to incorporate more kinesthetic activities to improve her vocabulary. Charades word game was conducted and the participant did well and memorized many words because the activity matched her way of learning. However, the subject was bored when this activity was used many times. Then it was concluded that there is a need to change or at least to diversify English

classes and the exercises used. Thus, it was also decided to teach other ways to learn new words such as using a tape recorder and listening new words every day. This kind of activity did not work well as she least prefers to learn by hearing. Another kinesthetic in-class activity which worked wonders on her was puppet show through role playing. She was highly motivated after doing this activity and she asked us to do role playing through story telling since she gained more and more confidence while speaking every time we conducted this activity in class.

Although the questionnaire results showing that M had less preference for visual learning, mind mapping was used because in my observations, we could see the participant was highly motivated by doing it. Moreover, the participant also asked to do this activity as a home task, and we incorporated mind mapping activity with auditory learning style. For example, we used to share some videos and her task was to create a mind map after watching this video. The results revealed that the subject could develop these learning styles simultaneously. Overall, mind mapping helped her to improve writing, speaking, reading and even learning new words (Is'haqov, 2019).

After a period of a month, when the participant interviewed by the same questions as conducted at the beginning, the responses were totally different (Shamsitdinova, 2021). For example, initially, she said she likes learning by touching, but after a month she admitted that she prefers learning by visualization as well as through movement. Additionally, when the subject was guided properly, she felt confidence in expressing her ideas without hesitation. However, her home culture affected her way of learning languages, since she is a field dependent learner, she wanted the support of her family members too. As the participant's parents are monolingual and does not know English, she was discouraged in learning the target language. Another major finding of the study was that as the participant claimed after being aware of different styles, learning English was not as monotonous as before. Thus, she could improve her level of English by doing the activities which suit her preferences.

Conclusion/Further Implications

The purpose of this study was to determine whether being aware of one's own learning style affects learner's proficiency in second language acquisition. After having studied the subject who has strong desire to acquire fluency but could not achieve it even though studying the language for many years, we came to conclusion that

methods which teachers used in the language classrooms mismatched her learning preference.

According to the findings, it is obvious that teachers should respect the learners' preferences and encourage their development to create opportunities for students to experiment with different learning strategies and styles. As Peacock (2001) suggests that it would be great if teachers strive for a balanced teaching method which includes aspects from every learning style without favoring any particularly. Moreover, it was discovered that awareness of students' preferred learning styles helps to explain why some aspects of language seem more difficult than others. For example, a kinesthetic learner feels uncomfortable when he or she does a language activity which involves only visualization or auditory. On the other hand, a field dependent learner was engrossed with communicative meaning of the sentences, not their value in practicing grammar.

At the beginning of this study, we thought that everyone has only one preferred style, but after the research it was concluded that students can have more than one favorable learning style. All in all, catering for all learning styles in the language lessons gives all students a chance to achieve proficiency in acquiring SLA. Thus, it is undeniable that there is not one particular way to acquire L2, but instead there are many ways to learn languages. Despite the fact that the advantages of being aware of learning styles is crucial for both teachers and students, it must be taken into consideration that learning styles are only one factor in the process of learning languages and cannot be the only basis for designing teaching and learning. Other factors such as culture, aptitude, age, activeness and willingness of learners must be taken into consideration as well. That is why, it is recommend to do extensive research on the relationship of these factors with learning styles and its impact on acquiring second language proficiency.

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