How Can Students' Learning Styles Influence English language Learning and Teaching?

الدكتور: أحمد شوقي حواجلي

الأستاذ : رمضان مهيري

قسم الآداب واللغات الأجنبية

كلية الآداب و اللغات

جامعة بسكرة- الجزائر

Abstract

EFL studentsusually feel lost in Linguistics and other courses because they come to the university with their traditional learning habits, such as relying on the teacher's handouts and his explanations. However, since 2004, students have not been seen as recipients of knowledge and information. The LMD model has led to irrevocable changes, especially in the learner's role: the learner has become a real knowledge-seeker. To help these students to cope with English language classes and to achieve better, the present study employed a questionnaire to find answers to the question, "What kind/type of learners are you?" Our hypothesis starts from the assumption that an awareness of the learners' learning styles is very beneficial. This study singled out three categories of learning styles from a group of thirty (30) first year students. The analysis of the results enabled the researchers to elicit the respondents' reactions and feelings about the discovery of their categories as EFL learners. The results show that students really need to discover their learning styles so as to build their learning strategies.

ملخــــص:

يجد طلبة اللغة الانجليزية صعوبات في مادة اللسانيات و مواد أخرى و ذلك يعود إلى اعتمادهم على الاستاد في الشرح و المطبوعات و غيرها. في حين انه منذ تطبيق نظام ال ل.م.د في 2004 لم يعد ينظر للطلبة متلقين بل باحثين عن المعلومة و عناصر فاعلة في العملية التعليمية. ولتمكين هؤلاء الطلبة من التأقلم و التحصيل أكثر في هذا الوسط الجديد، فإن هذه الدراسة خصت مجموعة (30 طالبا) من طلبة السنة الأولى باستبيان للإجابة على السؤال "أي نوع من الطلبة أنت/م". فالفرضية الأساسية لهذه الدراسة هي أن معرفة و وعي الطالب بأسلوبه في التعلم مهم جدا وهو ما يسمح له بناء استراتيجياته التعليمية الخاصة داخل القسم. أدت هذه الدراسة إلى استخراج ثلاثة أنواع من الطلبة في الفوج المعني. إن تحليل النتائج و مناقشتها مكن الباحثين من استخلاص ردود فعل الطلبة و شعورهم بعد تعرفهم على أنفسهم كمتعلمين ومدى استحسانهم لاكتشافهم لعناصر الضعف و القوة في أنفسهم و كيفية استثمارها في العمل الأكاديمي.

I. Introduction

Teachers can teach better and students learn more effectively if the idea that people have different learning styles prevails in the classroom. If the teachers do not use diverse teaching methods and the students are not aware of their own learning preferences, leaning will not boost. A Knowledge of the different learning styles in the classroom stresses the importance of learning and facilitates the distribution of power and control and helps to assess and evaluate achievement (Tennant, 1997, p. 80).

Students respond to the learning environment in many different manners. Some learn by seeing , others favour to hear teachers speak and explain. Many experience learning by escaping the teacher' control and making concrete actions.Beyond these manners is the additional drive for developing appropriate learning strategies. According to Sternberg and Grigorenko (2001), styles apply unconsciously; whereas, strategies are deliberate and are used in doing tasks and solving problems (Cited in Dornyei, 2005, p.122). Owing to the need for being aware of students' learning styles and helping them to develop proper learning strategies, teachers should match the activities they give in the classroom with the students' learning styles so that each one can learn and succeed in the long run. When students' learning styles are identified and targeted by teachers, students become motivated and willing to achieve better. In addition, the classroom becomes a promising environment for both teaching and learning.

II. Backgroundof the study

Understanding how students learn is of paramount importance for today's learning and teaching. Teachersbecome aware of selecting appropriate instructional toolsand students develop proper learning strategies to attain good knowledge, experience and values.These attributes of teachers and students may blend together to create an encouraging atmosphere where the new educational systems, programmes and models are considerably advanced.

II. 1. Definitions of learning

The term "learning" is not easy to define and has been considered from different perspectives –teachers and psychologists, among others, have provided various connotations (Cited in Westwood, 2004, pp. 2-3) which can be summarized as follows:

II.1. 1. Teachers' perspectives

• Knowing something you didn't know before.

• Gaining knowledge and skills.

• Acquiring information that you can use in new situations.

• Acquiring a different perspective on the world.

II.1. 2. Psychologists' perspectives

• Learning is the process whereby an organism changes its behaviour as a resultof experience (Driscoll, 2000).

• Learning is a relatively permanent change in capacity for performance,acquired through experience (Good & Brophy, 1990).

• Learning is a relatively permanent change in mental associations due

toexperience (Ormrod, 2003).

• Learning is the way that human beings acquire new skills, knowledge,attitudes and values. The outcomes of learning are the new capabilitiespossessed by the learner (Gredler, 2001).

II. 2. Learning Styles

The different ways through which we process and perceive information are our learning styles. Our differences in learning are due to many factors such as personality, ability to process information, self-efficacy (beliefs about one's capabilities), and so forth (Shannon, 2008, p. 19).Knowing that students have different learning styles helps educators to better distribute power and control in their classes and to discover the students' strengths and weaknesses, which makes it easy to assess and evaluate their achievement (Tennant, 1997, p. 80). In this same vein, Brookfield (2006) believes that the most important knowledge skillful teachers should have in their classes is a continuous awareness of how students experience learning and perceive instruction. Moreover, skilled teachers, with an awareness of their students' learning styles, are supposed to differentiate instruction, diversify resources and create a thriving learning environment(Haynes,2007, p. 73). To the aforementioned characteristics of effective teachers, Westwood (2008, p. 60) adds the pedagogical skills of questioning students, giving feedback and strategy training.

II. 2. 1. Definitions of learning styles

Below are some definitions of learning styles/preferences (Cited inPritchard, 2009, p. 41):

• A particular way in which an individual learns;

•A mode of learning – an individual's preferred or best manner(s) in which to think, process

information and demonstrate learning;

•An individual's preferred means of acquiring knowledge and skills;

•Habits, strategies, or regular mental behaviours concerning learning, particularly deliberate

educational learning that an individual displays.

•Strategies, or regular mental behaviours, habitually applied by an individual to problem solving.

Here are some more definitions of learning styles (cited in El-Hebaishi, 2012, p. 511).

•Brown (2000) defines learning styles as the choice of one learning situation over another. This means that the author here insists on the idea that learning preference is fundamentally one aspect of learning styles.

•Celcia-Murcia (2011) provides a holistic definition of the concept since she sees the learning styles as the general approach- for example, global or analytic, auditory or visual – that students use in acquiring a new knowledge or in learning in other subjects.

•For Richard (2009), a learning style is an individual's preferred means of acquiring knowledge and skills. Typically, it is a person's

approach to learning activities and problem solving.

•In the same Vein, Sarsin (2006) describes this concept as a specified pattern of behaviour and/or performance according to which the individual approaches a learning experience.

II. 2. 2. Types of learning styles

In the area of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), the main concerns of which are communication and learning (Cited inPritchard, 2009, pp. 44-45), three major learning styles have been identified. These are: visual learners, auditory learners and kinaesthetic learners. Each of these latter is described as follows:

Visual

Visual learners prefer to learn through seeing. They learn best in visual images. This means that they rely on pictures, posters, maps, diagrammes,films …etc.

Auditory

Auditory learners make use of their auditory capacities to catch up information. They like participating and taking part in debates, role-plays, and problem solving.

Kina esthetic

Kin aesthetic learners are learners who prefer contact with the physical world. They learn when actively engaged in doing or touching something. They like to think issues, ideas, and problems

while they exercise. They do not prefer listening to someone talking. Rather, they prefer to walk around or stand up while working.

II. 3. Learning Strategies

In accordance with the investigations carried out on the concept of learning styles, scholars paid interest to the other concept of learning strategies. The motive behind this interest is that the two terms are considered to have a strong relationship. More importantly, the interplay of these two learning processes is seen to be a force that can enhance the learners' academic performance and achievement. Due to this importance of the learning strategies, it is a dire need to shed light on this concept in somehow more details.

The literature on learning strategies presents a great deal of definitions. For instance, O'Malley and Channot (1990) state that learning strategies are thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information. Another definition provided by Oxford (1990) viewed the learning strategies as operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information. Specifically, they are actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, and more transferable to new situations. Brown (2000) concluded that learning strategies are the specific methods of approaching a problem, a task, the modes of operation for achieving a particular end and the planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information (Cited in Al-

Hebaishi, 2012:2013).

From the above cited definitions, Al-Hebaishi (ibid) refers to Grifiths (2008) who asserts six crucial features of learning strategies. These are presented below:

1- Learning strategies are what students do both physically and mentally.

2- Consciousness is a basic element distinguishing strategies from those processes which are not strategic.

3- Learning strategies are optional means and learners have complete freedom to choose any strategy that suits a learning situation or task requirements.

4- Strategic behaviour implies goal-oriented, purposeful activity on the part of the learner.

5- They allow learners to regulate or control their own learning.

6- The main purpose of learning strategies is the facilitationof learning.

Besides, a number of studies have identified different ways of classifying learning strategies. On this point, El-Hebaishi (ibid), in his investigation on the relationship between learning strategies and styles, realized that the Oxford's classification has been regarded the most comprehensive. The latter is comprised of the following:

II. 3. 1. Direct Strategies

II. 3. 1. 1. Cognitive strategies: procedures and activities that facilitate processing information and structuring it, e.g. practicing, note-taking, grouping, summarizing, and analyzing.

A. Memory strategies: techniques that help remembering and recalling information, e.g. grouping, using imagery, reviewing, and employing action.

B. Comprehension strategies: those that enable learners to use new information despite knowledge gaps, e.g. guessing, rephrasing, and using gestures and synonyms.

II. 3. 2. Indirect Strategies

II. 3. 2. 1. Meta-cognitive strategies : they include managing , controlling , and thinking about the learning process , e.g. paying attention , planning for the task , setting goals , self-monitoring , and self-evaluation.

II. 3. 2. 2. Affective strategies: they assist learners to control emotions, attitudes, and motivations, e.g. anxiety, reduction, and self-encouragement.

II. 3. 2. 3. Social strategies: those that facilitate interactions with others, e.g. working with peers, cooperation and communication with people.

III. The Study

III.1. Statement of the problem

It is assumed that students perceive and process information in different ways. Due to this fact, it is very complicated for teachers to

find out a single teaching method that suits all students. Worse, without an actual consideration of their students' needs, the latter will get bored,demotivated, and unwilling to take part in a learning experience. The ultimate result would be poor performance and underachievement.

Given this reality, the present study seeks to raise the awareness of teachers to pay attention to their students' learning styles and preferences while tailoring instruction to match the needs of each individual learner. If realized, this can enable these teachers to make teaching more effective.

III.2. Objectives of the study

The main aim of the current study is to identify the learning styles , strategies , and preferences utilized in the context under exploration, and display how these learning strategies and styles enhance students' academic performance and achievement in learning English as a foreign language.In accordance with the general aim of the study, a set of specific aims are stated below:

•Help students to understand better their learning styles and strategies so that they can perform efficiently in learning English as a foreign language.

•Help teachers to be conscious of the importance of knowing their students learning styles and strategies to be able to design appropriate teaching materials.

• Find out best ways for both teachers and students to teach efficiently and learn effectively.

III.3. Research Questions

The study explores the following research questions:

1- What learning styles do students at the English Branch in the University of Biskra use to learn English as a foreign language?

2- What are the most frequent strategies used by students of the English Branch in the University of Biskra?

3 – What is the relationship between the students' learning styles and strategies and their academic achievement in that foreign language?

III.4. Data collection methods

In the present study, a questionnaire was employed to find answers to the question, "What kind/type of learners are you?"

III.5. Findings and discussion

1. Tick the response which best suits you.

Q1: Do you usually remember from a lecture when:

a) You do not take notes, but listen very carefully

b) You sit near the front of the room and watch the lecturer

c) You take notes

Options	N	%
a	05	16.66
b	02	06.66
c	23	76.66
Total	30	100

These results show that most of the students (76.66%) usually

remember lectures when they take notes. (16.66%) and (06.66%) opted for watching and listening to the teacher to remember a lecture.

Q2: Do you usually solve a problem by:

a) Talking to yourself or a friend

b) Using an organized, systematic approach like lists, etc.

c) Walking, pacing or some other physical activity

Options	N	%
a	23	76.66
b	01	03.33
c	06	20
Total	30	100

(76.66 %)of the students are for talking to one's self as a way to solve problems. (20%) are for using a systematic approach and (03.33) are for making some physical activity.

Q3: Do you find it easier to learn something new by:

a) Listening to someone explain how to do it

b) Watching a demonstration of how to do it

c) Trying it yourself

Options	N	%
a	11	36.66
b	06	20
c	13	43.33
Total	30	100

A good number of students (43.33%) said that they find it easier to learn something new by trying it themselves. Another considerable

number (36.66%) prefer watching a demonstration of how to do it; while, the rest (20%) opted for listening to someone explaining it.

Q4: If you don't know how to spell a word, do you:

a) Sound it out

b) Try to see it work in your mind

c) Write the word in several ways and choose the one that looks right

Options	N	%
a	13	43.33
b	10	33.33
c	07	23.33
Total	30	100

For (43.33%) of the students, spelling a new word requires sounding it out. For (33.33%), it is a matter of imagining it. (23.33%)believe that they should write it down in several ways and choose the right spelling.

Q5: Do you enjoy reading most when you can read:

a) Dialogue between characters

b) Descriptive passages that allow you to create mental pictures

c) Stories with lots of action in the beginning (because you find it difficult to concentrate early on)

Options	N	%
a	10	33.33
b	12	40
c	08	26.66
Total	30	100

The results indicate that(40%) of the studentsenjoy reading descriptive passages; (33.33%) like reading dialogue between characters; and (26.66%) find it pleasurable to read stories with lots of action.

Q6:Do you remember people you have met by their:

a) Names

b) Faces

c) Mannerisms, movements, etc.

Options	N	%
a	05	16.66
b	24	80
c	01	03.33
Total	30	100

According to the results delineated above, the vast majority of the students (80%) indicatethat they remember other people by their names. (16.66%) show that they remember them by their faces, and (03.33%) remember others by their mannerisms and movements.

Q7:Are you distracted mainly by:

a) Noises

b) People

c) Environment (temperature, comfort of furniture, etc.)

Options	N	%
a	12	40
b	07	23.33
c	11	36.66
Total	30	100

(40%)of the studentssay that they are distracted by noises; (36.66%)maintainthatthey are disturbed by the environment, and (23.33%) state that they are bothered by people.

2. Count the total numbers which fall into the following categories

a) ……79… Auditory (by hearing)

b) ……62…… Visual (by seeing)

c) ……69…… Kin aesthetic (by touching, doing or moving)

Learning style	Scores
Auditory (by hearing)	79
Visual (by seeing)	62
Kin aesthetic (by touching, doing or moving)	69

Table 1: Overall learners' questionnaire scores

Students	Option (a)	Option (b)	Option (c)	Learning Style
St1	02	02	03	Kinaesthetic
St2	02	02	03	Kinaesthetic
St3	03	03	01	Auditory-Visual
St4	03	03	01	Auditory-Visual
St5	02	03	02	Visual
St6	03	01	03	Auditory-Kinaesthetic
St7	05	01	01	Auditory
St8	01	02	04	Kinaesthetic
St9	01	05	01	Visual
St10	02	03	02	Visual
St11	03	02	02	Auditory
St12	01	02	04	Kinaesthetic
St13	02	03	02	Visual

St14	03	01	03	Auditory-Kinaesthetic
St15	05	01	01	Auditory
St16	03	03	01	Auditory-Visual
St17	03	01	03	Auditory-Kinaesthetic
St18	04	02	01	Auditory
St19	03	01	03	Auditory-Kinaesthetic
St20	01	02	04	Kinaesthetic
St21	02	03	02	Visual
St22	03	02	02	Auditory
St23	02	03	02	Visual
St24	03	02	02	Auditory
St25	04	01	02	Auditory
St26	01	03	03	Visual- Kinaesthetic
St27	02	01	04	Kinaesthetic
St28	03	01	03	Auditory-Kinaesthetic
St29	04	01	02	Auditory
St30	03	02	02	Auditory
Total	79	62	69	9 Auditory 6 Visual 6 Kinaesthetic 5 Auditory-Kinaesthetic 3 Auditory-Visual 1 Visual-Kinaesthetic

Table 2: Individual learners' questionnaire scores

VI. Conclusion

Based on the results of the present study, students in the study group fell into three categories of learning styles: visual, auditory and kin aesthetic learners.Pritchard (2009, pp. 44-45), from a Neuro-Linguistic Programming perspective, stated that visual learners prefer to get information presented visually and they use hand movements to describethings; auditory learners benefit more from discussionand lectures and hearing stories and they tend to tilt their head and use eye movements; and kin aesthetic learners enjoy physical activity and they cannot easily keep still in classroom activities.

The results indicated that the overall learners' questionnaire scores were 62 for (visual), 79 for (Auditory) and 69 for (Kin aesthetic). The overall scores results reflected the classroom context, for the course was oral expression and the teachers had often varied the lessons and practice before the questionnaire was distributed to the students. The results also indicated that the individual learners' questionnaire scores were (9) auditory, (6) visual, (6) kin aesthetic, (5) auditory-kin aesthetic, (3) auditory-visual and (1) visual-kinaesthetic.The results were consistent with the reviewed literature. Somescholars highlightedthe idea that learning styles may overlap (Celcia-Murcia 2011) and may appear as independent leaning preferences (Brown 2000).

The results revealed that for any of the learning styles mentioned above, some strategies must be developed. Specific actions must be done on the part of students in order to cope with each single learning

situation. Visual learners should use visual aids when teachers bring them into the class; auditory learners should participate in discussions with teachers and classmates; and kin aesthetic learners should do more practice in the class and outside of it.

VI. 1. Limitations

The results of this study are proportional to its limitations.The small number of participants involved in the study is a significant limitation. The fact that these participants were not randomly selected, though it is a case study, is considered to be another limitation. The homogenous background, for there were no foreigner students, from a methodological stand, is what made the researchers avoid generalization to any other college, institution, or university in the country. Therefore, further studies are expected to employ a larger number of participants and thus would bring about a more systematic understanding and implementation of students' styles and their effect on their learning and achievement. Additionally, another important limitation was the duration of the study and the single method used in it. The study lasted only a short time; it was limited to few sessions. If more data collection methods were used and more time was allotted, the results would be more significant.

VI. 2. Recommendations

Below is a recommended set of tips for the different learning styles in this study:

Tips for visual learners

1-Write down anything that you want to remember.

2-Use your own words to rephrase new information.

3-Underline the key words when reading.

4-Use lists, diagrams, drawings…to memorize new vocabulary.

Tips for auditory learners

1-Talk to yourself to remember information.

2-Say aloud new vocabulary in order to remember it.

3-Say aloud new vocabulary in order to read and write it.

4-Discuss with others different topics.

Tips for kinesthetic learners

1-Try to learn through practice (group work, lab work…).

2-Do exercises while studying.

3-Use your computer to raise the sense of doing (touch).

4-Work with groups to review information and consolidate your learning.

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Appendix 1: Learning Styles Questionnaire

II.1.1. Tick the response which best suits you.

1. Do you usually remember more from a lecture when:

a) You do not take notes, but listen very carefully

b) You sit near the front of the room and watch the lecturer

c) You take notes

2. Do you usually solve a problem by:

a) Talking to yourself or a friend

b) Using an organized, systematic approach like lists, etc.

c) Walking, pacing or some other physical activity

3. Do you find it easier to learn something new by:

a) Listening to someone explain how to do it

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4. If you don't know how to spell a word, do you:

a) Sound it out

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5. Do you enjoy reading most when you can read:

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6. Do you remember people you have met by their:

a) Names

b) Faces

c) Mannerisms, movements, etc.

7. Are you distracted mainly by:

a) Noises

b) People

c) Environment (temperature, comfort of furniture, etc.)

II.1.2. Count the total numbers which fall into the following categories

a) …………… Auditory (by hearing)

b) …………… Visual (by seeing)

c) …………… Kinaesthetic (by touching, doing or moving)

Source: adapted from University of Newcastle upon Tyne. (n.d).

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