

Learning Styles And Teaching Styles: A Case Study In Foreign Language Classroom

Selma Kara, Anadolu University, Turkey

Abstract: This study investigated the hypothesis that a mismatch between teaching style of the teacher and learning styles of the learners results in failure, frustration and demotivation. 100 second year learners studying in ELT Department and 12 teachers who, were teaching these groups in the year the study was conducted, participated in the study. First, in order to find Turkish ELT learners' preferred learning styles, a questionnaire was given to the learners. In order to collect data for the teaching styles, The Personal Learning Styles Inventory was modified and given to the teachers. Then both the teachers and the learners were interviewed to investigate whether they were concerned when there is a mismatch.

The results revealed that second year learners at ELT Department in Anadolu University favored visual and auditory styles. The teachers also preferred visual and auditory styles. The results showed that learning styles and teaching styles match at ELT Department. Learners said that they feel unhappy and frustrated when their teachers do not teach in their favored style. Teachers said that when they become aware of a mismatch, they change the presentation or type of activity. However, at the beginning of the semester, the teachers do not take learning styles into consideration.

1. Introduction

Educational research has identified a number of factors for some of the differences in how students learn (Reid, 1987). One of these factors, learning styles, is of widespread interest in the education area (Dunn and Griggs, 1989). The idea of individualized "learning styles" originated in the 1970s, and has gained popularity in recent years (Sprenger, 2003) and have been focus of a number of L2 studies (Peacock, 2001). There have been a number of definitions of learning style(s):

Learning styles are general approaches used by students in order to learn a new subject or to cope with a new problem (Oxford, Ehrman, & Lavine, 1991).

Learning style is the biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others (Dunn and Griggs, 1988). Styles are patterns that give direction to learning behavior (Cornett, 1983). Variations among learners in using one or more senses to understand, organize and retain experience (Reid, 1987). Learning styles are, simply put, various approaches or ways of learning. They involve educating methods, particular to an individual, that are presumed to allow that individual to learn best. It is commonly believed that most people favor some particular method of interacting with, taking in, and processing stimuli or information (LdPride, 2009).

Reid (1995) proposed two major hypotheses about learning styles:

1. all students have their own learning styles and learning strengths and weaknesses.
 2. a mismatch between teaching and learning styles causes learning failure, frustration and demotivation.
- There have been claims supporting Reid's (1995) hypotheses. Oxford, Hollaway and Horton-Murillo (1992) claim that EFL teachers should consider the students' learning styles and their own teaching styles which often reflect their favored learning styles. Without this knowledge, clashes would affect students' learning potential and their attitudes toward learning. Both the teachers and students should be aware of their styles and try to harmonize them (Oxford. et al., 1992). Sprenger, (2003) states that teachers should assess the learning styles of their students and adapt their classroom methods to best fit each student's learning style.

2. State of the Art

This paper presents assumptions and research concerning ESL/EFL learning styles, teaching styles and match or mismatch between teaching styles and learning styles and also describes the results of a study conducted to investigate whether there is match or mismatch in styles in Turkish university level.

2.1 Literature Review

Assumptions Concerning Learning Styles

Research defines learning styles somewhat differently; however, learning style characteristics are recognized by many writers and researchers. Learning style characteristics are identified into three major categories by Cornett (1983) and Keefe (1987) as cognitive, affective and physiological. Reynolds (1992) presents a conceptual model for categorizing learning style characteristics. His model includes physical environment needs, social environment preference, time of day, motivation and values, cognitive styles and perceptual preference.

Kolb's (1984) Experiential learning model defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p.26). Learning style is the "generalized differences in learning orientation based on the degree to which people emphasize the four modes of the learning process" (p.76). According to Kolb (1984) individual learning styles result from a combination of two adjacent mode preferences in the experiential learning cycle and as a whole four styles are introduced by Kolb. Diverger learning style is characterized as the one in which the learner is concerned with divergent ideas and is considered an imaginative learner. Divergers have a strong imaginative ability, are good at seeing things from different perspectives, are creative and work well with people. Assimilator style learners are less focused on people and more interested in abstract ideas. Assimilators have abilities to create theoretical models, prefer inductive reasoning, and would rather deal with abstract ideas. Converger style is the one in which the learner prefers to deal with technical tasks rather than social issues. Convergers have a strong practical orientation, are generally deductive in their thinking and tend to be unemotional. Accommodator style learners enjoy carrying out plans. Accommodators like doing things, are risk takers, are in here and now, and solve problems intuitively.

Gregorc's (1979, 1997) learning style model defines learning style as "distinctive and observable behaviors that provide clues about the mediation abilities of individuals and how their minds relate to the world and therefore, how they learn" (1979, p.19). Gregorc identifies four learning styles: Concrete-sequential learners prefer direct, hands-on experience, want to order and a logical sequence to the tasks and follow directions well. Abstract-sequential learners like working with ideas and symbols, they are logical and sequential in thinking, and like to focus on the task without distractions. Abstract-random learners focus attention on the people and the surrounding, prefer discussions and conversations that are wide ranging and want time to reflect on experiences. The Concrete-random learners are experimental and risk-takers, like to explore unstructured problems and use trial and error to work out solutions.

The VARK model is proposed by Fleming (2001). Fleming (2001) defines learning style as "an individual's characteristics and preferred ways of gathering, organizing, and thinking about information. VARK is in the category of instructional preference because it deals with perceptual modes" (p.1). VARK stands for Visual (V), Aural (A), Read/Write (R) and Kinesthetic (K). According to Fleming (2001) Visual learners prefer maps, charts, graphs, diagrams, highlighters, different colors, pictures, word pictures, and different spatial arrangements. Aural learners like to explain new ideas to others, discuss topics with other students, and their teachers, use a tape recorder, attend lectures, and discussion groups use jokes. Read/Write learners prefer lists, essays, reports, textbooks, definitions, printed handouts, readings, web-pages and taking notes. Kinesthetic learners like field trips, trial and error, doing things to understand them,

laboratories, recipes and solutions to problems, hands-on approaches, using their senses and collections and samples.

Dunn (1990) defines learning style as “the way in which individuals begin to concentrate on, process, internalize and retain new and difficult information” (p.353). Dunn and Dunn (1989) suggest that there are five learning style stimuli and several elements within each stimulus: Environmental (sound, light, temperature, and room design), Emotional (motivation, persistence, responsibility, and structure), Sociological (learning alone, in a pair, with peers, with a teacher), Physiological (perceptual, intake while learning, chronological energy pattern), and Psychological processing (global or analytic, hemisphericity and impulsive or reflective).

Another learning styles model introduced by Duff (2004) is the Revised Approaches to Studying Inventory model called as RASI. This model defines learning style as “ the composite of characteristic, cognitive, affective, and psychological factors that serves as an indicator of how an individual interacts with and respond to the learning environment” (p.56). Duff describes (2004) students with a preference for a deep approach to studying as individuals who look for meaning in what they are learning and enjoy the learning activity; make connections to previous learning; use logic, reasoning and evidence well. Students with a surface approach to studying use primarily memorization to learn; make fewer connections to the previous learning and have difficulty studying. Students with a preference for a strategic approach to studying want to organize their studying routines, manage their time, and learn what is expected to achieve the highest grade possible.

Reid (1987) identifies six learning styles, referred to as Perceptual Learning Styles:

Visual learners prefer seeing ideas in writing, e.g: reading handouts.

Auditory learners prefer listening, e.g. oral explanations, discussions.

Kinesthetic learners prefer active participation, e.g.: drama, role—play.

Tactile learners prefer hands-on work, e.g: handling materials or taking notes.

Group learners prefer studying with others.

Individual learners prefer studying alone.

Hawk and Shah (2007) state that learning style instruments inform the choice of learning activities and approaches and this enhances the effectiveness and quality of learning for students.

Studies into the Learning Styles

There have been several studies focusing on learning styles. Bickel and Truscello (1996) stated that ESL students bring their preferences and experiences into the ESL classroom and they have their own learning styles, in the same way they bring these to computer labs. Therefore, it is important to enable students to be self-aware of both style and strategies.

Dunn, Honigsfeld and Doolan (2009) focused on how learning styles were considered in different institutions. They answered questions such as the impact of learning styles on teaching practices, on syllabi, and on values, how have learning styles improved instruction and student outcomes.

Dunn (1984) reported that most learners identified their learning strengths correctly and also Dunn and Dunn (1979) found that 30% of school age children were auditory learners and 40% were visual and 30% were kinesthetic.

Concerning second/foreign language learning styles Reid (1987) reported that Chinese university students who were studying in the USA favored kinesthetic and tactile styles. Melton (1990) in his investigation of learning styles of Chinese university students found that they favored kinesthetic, tactile and individual styles. Rossi-Le (1993) found that adult L2 immigrants in the USA favored kinesthetic and tactile styles.

Match or Mismatch between Learning and Teaching Styles

As well as students, teachers play a critical role in the teaching/learning process. Teachers' classroom behaviors impact on many different areas of the process such as preparation, classroom presentation, activities and approaches (Masse and Popovich, 2006). The term “teaching style” refers to a teacher's personal behaviors and media used to transmit data to or receive it from the learner (Kaplan and Kies,

1995, p. 29). Peacock (2001) defined second language teaching styles as “natural, habitual and preferred ways of teaching new information and skills in the classroom”. Reid (1987) stated that mismatches between learning and teaching styles often occurred and this mismatch resulted in bad effects on students’ learning and attitudes to English. Wallace and Oxford (1992) stated that students and teachers experienced style conflicts 82% of the time. Moreover, Willing (1988) noted that matching learning and teaching styles improved learning, attitudes and motivation. Felder (1995) also suggested a method for overcoming the mismatch. He proposed a balanced teaching style and suggested teachers to try to accommodate all learning styles. In order to optimize styles Oxford et al. (1992) suggest teachers to assess the learning style of both the teacher and the students, to alter the teaching style to create teacher—student style matching, to provide activities with different groupings, to include and code different learning styles in lesson plans, to encourage changes in students’ behavior and foster guided style—stretching. Peacock (2001) noted that when there was a match between teacher style and learner style, students were likely to work harder and benefit much more from their EFL classes.

There have been several studies investigating the teaching styles. Evans, Harkins, and Young (2008) investigated the teaching styles of public school teachers and explored the relationship between teaching styles and cognitive styles. They found that public school teachers in Canada differed in their teaching styles and there is a relationship between teaching styles and cognitive styles.

Aragon, Johnson and Shaik (2002) assessed learning styles of the students who were in an online instructional design course and students in an equivalent face-to face course. They found significant differences between the learning style preferences of the online students and face-to-face students.

Several studies have investigated whether there is a gap between teaching styles and learning styles. Xiao (2006) investigated the difference in the teaching and learning styles from a culture-based perspective. Irish English teachers’ styles were found to contrast to Chinese students expectations. A popular teaching style in China is “the transmission style”. The researcher suggested native English-speaker teachers to use appropriate bridging strategies.

Peacock (2001) investigated EFL teachers’ teaching styles and EFL learners’ learning styles at a Hong Kong University. He found a mismatch and suggested that EFL teachers should teach in a balanced style in order to accommodate different learning styles.

References

Aragon, S., Johnson, S. & Shaik, N. (2002). The influence of learning style preferences on student success in online versus face-to-face environments. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 16(4), 227-244.

Bickel, B., & Truscello, D. (1996). New opportunities for learning: Styles and strategies with computers. *TESOL Journal*, Autumn, 15-19.”

Cornett, C.E. (1983). *What you should know about teaching and Learning styles*. Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.

Duff, A. (2004). Approaches to learning: The revised approaches to studying inventory. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 5(1), 56-72.

Dunn, R.S., & K.J. Dunn. (1979). Learning styles/teaching Styles: Should they...can they...be matched? *Educational Leadership*, 36, 238-244.

Dunn,R.(1984). Learning style: State of the scene. *Theory Into Practice*, 23, 10-19.

Dunn, R.S. and S.A. Griggs. (1988). *Learning styles: Quiet revolution in American schools*. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Dunn, R.S. and s.A. Griggs. (1989). *Learning styles: Quiet Revolution in American secondary schools*. *Clearing House*, 65(1), 40-42.

Dunn, R.S., Honigsfeld, A., & Doolan, L. (2009). Impact of learning-style instructional strategies on students' achievement and attitudes: Perceptions of educators in diverse institutions. *The Clearing House*, 82(3), 135-140.

Evans, C., Harkins, M.J., & Young, J.D. (2008). Exploring teaching styles and cognitive styles: evidence from school teachers in Canada. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 10(3), 567-582.

Felder, R.M. (1995). Learning and teaching styles in foreign and second language education. *Foreign Language Annals*, 28(1), 21-31.

Fleming, N.D. (2001). *Teaching and learning styles: VARK strategies*. Christchurch, New Zeland: N.D. Fleming.

Gregorc, A.F. (1997). *Relating with style*. Colombia, CT: Gregorc Associates.

Hawk, T., & Shah, A. (2007). Using learning style instruments to enhance student learning. *Decision Siences Journal of Innovative Education*, 5(1).

Keefe, J. W. (1987). *Learning style theory and practice*. Reston, Va.: National Association of secondary school Principals.

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

LdPride. (n.d.). What are learning styles? Retrieved January 18, 2009.

Masse, M.H., & Popovich, M.N. (2006). He said, she said : A national study of gender differences in the teaching of writing. *The Coaching Corner Online Edition*, 3(1) retrieved January 8, 2009, from <http://jdwritingctr.iweb.bsu.edu/cc.html>.

Melton, C. D. (1990). Bridging the cultural gap: a study of Chinese students' learning style preferences. *RELC Journal*, 21(1), 29-54.

Messick, S. & Associates (Eds.). (1976). *Individuality in Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Oxford, R.L., M. Ehrman, R. Z. Lavine. (1991). Style wars: teacher-student style conflicts in the language classroom. In Magnan, S.S. (Ed.), *Challenges in the 1990s for College Foreign Language Programs*: Boston, MA: Heinle&Heinle.

- Oxford, R. L. , M.E. Hollaway and D. Horton-Murillo. (1992). Language learning styles: research and practical considerations for teaching in the multicultural tertiary ESL/EFL classroom. *System*, 20(4), 439-456.
- Peacock, M. (2001). Match or mismatch? Learning styles and Teaching styles in EFL. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11(1), 1-20.
- Reid, J. M. (1987). The learning style preferences of ESL Students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(1), 87-111.
- Reid, J. M. (1995). *Learning styles in the ESL/EFL classroom*. U.S.A: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Reynolds, J. (1991). Learning and cognitive styles: Confusion Over definitions and terminology. *Virginia Counselors Journal*, 19(1), 22-26.
- Rossi—Le, L. (1995). Learning styles and strategies in adult Immigrant ESL students. In J.M. Reid, *Learning styles in the ESL/EFL classroom*. Boston: Heinle&Heinle, 119-125.
- Sprenger, M. (2003). *Differentiation through learning styles and memory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Wallace, W. And R. Oxford. (1992). Disparity in learning Styles and teaching styles in the ESL classroom: does this Mean war?. *AMTESOL Journal*, 1, 45-68.
- Willing. K. (1988). *Learning styles in adult migrant Education*. Adelaide: National Curriculum Resource Center.
- Witkin, H.A., C.A. Moore, P. Oltman, D.R. Goodenough, F. Friedman, D.R. Owen and E. Raskin. (1977). Role of field dependent and field independent cognitive styles in academic evolution. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 69, 197-211.
- Xiao, L. (2006). Bridging the gap between teaching styles and learning styles: A cross-cultural perspective. *TESL-EJ*, 10(3), 1-15.