

The Importance of Learning Styles in ESL/EFL

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This article reminds the teachers of the need to be aware of individual learning styles and learner diversity. While the Multiple Intelligences Theory of Howard Gardner is the most popular and readily used by teachers (Currie, 2003), there are other ideas about learning styles, which also can be useful for EFL/ESL teachers.

Introduction

EFL/ESL teachers, just like all other educators, have to bear in mind that:

- People differ consistently from each other in their preferences (e.g., emotional, environmental) for certain ways of processing information (the 'individual differences' assumption).
- These individual differences are measurable (the 'measurement' assumption).
- Matching or mismatching students' learning styles with instructional techniques affects learning significantly (the 'matching hypothesis') (Bedford, 2004).

But are classroom teachers always prepared to try matching their teaching styles with learning styles of their students? Do they always remember to cater to different learning styles?

The growing popularity of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1985) among language teachers shows that many of them are aware of learner diversity. But not all teachers find the Multiple Intelligences(MI) theory attractive enough or easy to implement. There might be two reasons for this.

- First, EFL/ESL teachers work with different categories of students: some teach school students, while others teach college or university students. The variety and nature of learning styles of school students would, presumably, differ from those of students in engineering colleges or universities of education.
- Second, not only do learners differ from each other, but also teachers differ in their teaching styles. Thus, a variety of perspectives is required for teachers to consider. This variety is provided by research.

Various Perspectives on Learning Styles

There is no agreement on the number or variety of learning styles. A number of learning style models can be found in the research on this subject. These fall into general categories such as information processing, personality patterns, and social interaction (Conner, 2004).

Information Processing

This distinguishes between the way learners sense, think, solve problems, and remember information. Kolb's Learning Styles inventory and Gregorc's Mind Styles Model are those most frequently mentioned in this category.

Learning Styles inventory (Kolb, 1984) includes:

- **Diverging (feeling and watching)** - People with diverging styles are able to look at things from different perspectives. They are sensitive. They prefer to watch rather than do, tend to gather information and use imagination to solve problems. They are best at viewing concrete situations from several different viewpoints. Kolb called this style

'Diverging' because these people perform better in situations that require ideas-generation, for example, brainstorming. They have broad cultural interests and like to gather information. They are interested in people, tend to be imaginative and emotional, and tend to be strong in the arts. They prefer to work in groups, to listen with an open mind and to receive personal feedback.

- **Assimilating (watching and thinking)** - The Assimilating learning preference is for a concise, logical approach. Ideas and concepts are more important than people. These people require good clear explanation rather than practical opportunity. They excel at understanding wide-ranging information and organizing it in a clear logical format. They are less focused on people and more interested in ideas. People with this style are more attracted to theories than practice. In formal learning situations, people with this style prefer readings, lectures, exploring analytical models, and having time to think.
- **Converging (doing and thinking)** - People with a Converging learning style use their learning to find solutions to practical issues. They prefer technical tasks, and are less concerned with people. They can solve problems and make decisions. A Converging learning style enables specialist and technology abilities. People with a Converging style like to experiment with new ideas, to simulate, and to work with practical applications.
- **Accommodating (doing and feeling)** - The Accommodating learning style is 'hands-on', and relies on intuition rather than logic. These people use other people's analyses, and prefer to take a practical, experiential approach. They are attracted to new challenges and experiences, and to carrying out plans. They commonly act on 'gut' instinct rather than logical analysis. Also, they tend to rely on others for information. This learning style is prevalent and useful in roles requiring action and initiative. People with this learning style prefer to work in teams to complete tasks. They set targets and actively work in the field trying different ways to achieve an objective (Kolb, 1984).

A. F. Gregorc's Mind Styles Model identifies four major learning types (Gregorc, 1985):

- **Concrete Sequential (CS)** These learners like order, logical sequence, following directions, predictability, and getting facts. They learn best when they have a structured environment. They can rely on others and can apply ideas in pragmatic ways. They find hard: working in groups, pointless discussions, an unorganized environment, incomplete or unclear directions, unpredictable people, abstract ideas, demands to "use your imagination", questions with no right or wrong answers.
- **Abstract Random (AR)** These learners like listening to others, bringing harmony to group situations, establishing healthy relationships with others, focusing on the issues at hand. They learn best when they are: in a personalized environment, given broad or general guidelines, able to maintain friendly relationships, and able to participate in group activities. They find hard: having to explain or justify feelings, competition, working with dictatorial/authoritarian personalities, working in a restrictive environment, working with people who don't seem friendly, concentrating on one thing at a time, giving exact details, accepting even positive criticism.
- **Abstract Sequential (AS)** These learners like: their point to be heard, analyzing situations before making a decision or acting, and applying logic. They learn best when: they have access to experts or references, they are placed in stimulating environments, and they are able to work alone. They find hard: being forced to work with those of differing views, having too little time to deal with a subject thoroughly, repeating the same tasks over and over, lots of specific rules and regulations, "sentimental" thinking, expressing their emotions, being diplomatic when convincing others, and not monopolizing a conversation.
- **Concrete Random (CR)** These learners like: experimenting to find answers, taking risks, using their intuition, and solving problems independently. They learn best when: they are able to use trial-and-error approaches, they are able to compete with others, and are given the opportunity to work through problems by themselves. They find hard: restrictions and limitations, formal reports, routines, re-doing anything once it's done, keeping detailed records, showing how they got an answer, choosing only one answer, having no options.

Personality Patterns

These focus on attention, emotion, and values. Understanding these differences allows predicting the way learners react and feel about different situations. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Keirsey Temperament Sorter are two of the most well-known personality pattern evaluations.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator measures preferences on four scales derived from Jung's Theory of Psychological Types

(Myers & McCaulley, 1985). People are classified according to their preference for:

- **Introversion** (I) (interest flowing mainly to the inner world of concepts and ideas);
- **Extroversion** (E) (interest flowing mainly to the outer world of actions, objects, and persons);
- **Sensing** (S) (tending to perceive immediate, real, practical facts of experience and life);
- **Intuition** (N) (tending to perceive possibilities, relationships, and meanings of experiences);
- **Thinking** (T) (tending to make judgments or decisions objectively and impersonally);
- **Feeling** (F) (tending to make judgments subjectively and personally);
- **Judging** (J) (tending to act in a planned and decisive way);
- **Perceiving** (P) (tending to act in a spontaneous and flexible way).

On this basis, some claim that an individual learning type can be made out of sixteen possible combinations of these preferences (Felder, Felder, and Dietz, 2002). For example, an ENTP would have a preference for extroversion, intuition, thinking, and perception. A preference for one or the other category of a dimension may be mild or strong. Students with different type preferences tend to respond differently to different teaching styles. Extroverts like activity and group work; introverts prefer working alone. Sensors like concrete learning experiences and clearly defined expectations and dislike instruction heavy in abstractions such as theories and mathematical models; intuitors like instruction based on understanding concepts rather than on memorization of facts, rote substitution, and repetitive calculations. Thinkers like logically organized presentations of course material and feedback related to their work. Feelers like those teachers who establish a personal rapport with them and show appreciation of their efforts. Judgers like well-structured instruction with clearly defined assignments, goals, and milestones. Perceivers like to have choice and flexibility in their assignments and dislike rigid timelines (Felder et al., 2002).

David Keirsey identifies the following temperament types (Keirsey, 1998):

- **Artisans:** born for action, particularly for artful action -- making free, spontaneous maneuvers that get quick, effective results. They have a natural talent for all the arts, not only the fine arts but also the dramatic, athletic, military, political, and financial arts.
- **Guardians:** undertake tasks and actions cautiously, and always with careful preparation. Guardians are sensible, down-to-earth people. They believe in following the rules and regulations.
- **Idealists:** have an instinct for interpersonal integration, sometimes become leaders, and often speak interpretively and metaphorically of the abstract world of their imagination.
- **Rationals:** tend to be organizing and planning, or inventing and configuring operations. They are competent and pragmatic.

Among other models that could be considered as belonging in the personality-based category are those built by B. McCarthy and H. Gardner. McCarthy (1990) identified four learning styles:

- **Innovative learners:** they look for personal meaning while learning, draw on their values while learning, enjoy social interaction, cooperate and want to make the world a better place.
- **Analytic learners:** they want to develop intellectually while learning, draw on facts while learning, they are patient and reflective, they want to know "important things" and to add to the world's knowledge.
- **Common sense learners:** they want to find solutions, they value things if they are useful, they are kinesthetic, they are practical and straightforward, they want to make things happen.
- **Dynamic learners:** they look for hidden possibilities, judge things by gut reactions, synthesize information from different sources, and are enthusiastic and adventurous.

H. Gardner's (1985) concept of multiple intelligences', as mentioned earlier, is commonly viewed as, in fact, a model of learning styles. According to this point of view, the following types of learning styles can be identified (Gardner, 1985):

- **Visual Learners.** These learners need to see the teacher's body language and facial expression to fully understand the content of a lesson. They tend to prefer sitting at the front of the classroom to avoid visual obstructions. They may think in pictures and learn best from visual displays. They often prefer to take detailed notes to absorb the information.

- **Auditory learners.** They learn best through verbal lectures, discussions, talking things through and listening to what others have to say. Auditory learners interpret the underlying meanings of speech through listening to tone of voice, pitch, speed and other nuances. Written information may have little meaning. These learners often benefit from reading text aloud and using a tape recorder.
- **Tactile/Kinesthetic learners.** They learn best through a hands-on approach, actively exploring the physical world around them. They may find it hard to sit still for long periods and may become distracted.

Social Interaction

This looks at likely attitudes, habits, and strategies learners will take toward their work and how they engage with their peers when they learn. The Reichmann-Grasha model, for instance, focuses on student attitudes toward learning, classroom activities, teachers, and peers. This model identifies the following types and their characteristics (Reichmann & Grasha, 1974):

- **Avoidant students** tend to be at the lower end of the grade distribution. They tend to have high absenteeism, they organize their work poorly, and take little responsibility for their learning.
- **Participative students** are characterized as willing to accept responsibility for self-learning and relate well to their peers.
- **Competitive students** are described as suspicious of their peers leading to competition for rewards and recognition.
- **Collaborative students** enjoy working in harmony with their peers.
- **Dependent students** typically become frustrated when facing new challenges not directly addressed in the classroom.
- **Independent students**, as the name implies, prefer to work alone and require little direction from the teacher.

Conclusion

The models listed above can prove applicable in some situations and not applicable in others. A critical and careful approach is obviously required when deciding which theory one should follow. First, it is important to take into account the specific characteristics of the educational institution: age group of students (determines how flexible their learning styles can be), the nature of education provided by the school (general or specialized). Second, teachers also have their own approaches to the classroom and their own teaching styles. Thus, it is important to consider not just one, but a variety of approaches to learning styles and select the most appropriate from both objective and personal perspectives.

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