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STUDENTS' LEARNING STYLES SUPPORTING EFL PRACTICE

Estilos de aprendizaje de los estudiantes apoyados en la práctica del EFL

Estilos de aprendizagem dos alunos apoiados na prática EFL

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ABSTRACT

This article summarizes the different kinds of learning styles as well as the way to identify and classify students' learning styles in an EFL classroom. It offers a range of strategies to make our teaching more sensitive and rewarding. There are also some research studies in the field of learning styles which suggest that teaching strategies should match students' learning preferences in order to provide a variety of learning experiences to students. The article ends by suggesting some activities that engage students to learn based on their learning styles, which include a combination of individual and group work.

Keywords: Learning styles, teaching strategies, learning abilities.

RESUMEN

Este artículo resume los diferentes tipos de estilos de aprendizaje así como la manera de identificar y clasificar los estilos de aprendizaje de los estudiantes en un aula de clase de aprendizaje de inglés como idioma extranjero. Esto ofrece un

rango de estrategias para hacer nuestro aprendizaje más sensible y gratificante. Hay también algunos estudios de investigación en el campo de estilos de aprendizaje que sugieren que las estrategias de enseñanza deberían coincidir con las preferencias de aprendizaje de los estudiantes con el fin de proveer una variedad de experiencias de aprendizaje a los estudiantes. El artículo termina sugiriendo algunas actividades que involucra a los estudiantes en aprender basado en sus estilos de aprendizaje, lo cual incluye una combinación de trabajo grupal e individual.

Palabras Claves: estilos de aprendizaje, estrategias de enseñanza, habilidades de aprendizaje.

RESUMO

Este artigo resume os diferentes tipos de estilos de aprendizagem assim como a maneira de identificar e classificar os estilos de aprendizagem dos alunos em uma sala de aula de aprendizagem de inglês como língua estrangeira. Isso fornece uma série de estratégias para fazer o nossa aprendizagem mais sensível e gratificante. Há também algumas pesquisas na área de estilos de aprendizagem que sugerem que as estratégias de ensino deveriam coincidir com as preferências de aprendizagem dos alunos a fim de fornecer uma variedade de experiências de aprendizagem para os estudantes. O artigo finaliza sugerindo algumas atividades que envolvem aos alunos em aprender com base em seus estilos de aprendizagem, que inclui uma combinação de trabalho em grupo e individual.

Palavras-chave: estilos de aprendizagem, estratégias de ensino, habilidades de aprendizagem.

INTRODUCTION

In EFL instruction, it is critical to know and identify our learners' learning styles (LS, hereafter) in order to adjust activities to obtain a successful language performance. In most regular EFL lessons, activities are not commonly designed to match students' learning styles. This aspect is completely relevant to be taken into account when designing activities. For instance, a good athlete is commonly attracted to those activities in the classroom involving movement and interaction, a person attracted to see movies or watch TV will be eager to find activities related to this in his/her language lessons. Thus, language needs to be closely related to the connection between learning styles and the way in which activities are developed. If students cannot find a match between their learning styles and the 'how' of the activities, they will probably face confusion and lack of comprehension. Inevitably, their language performance will tend to be poor. Essentially, the field of EFL instruction should thoroughly consider this aspect of learning styles, which directly affect our language students' performance and success of acquiring a foreign language.

Learning about our students' LS is essential to help us identify them in our students. Teachers must learn and put into practice some strategies for identifying the LS in the classroom, so that they can adjust the activities to meet students' LS. In addition, once teachers have a clear idea of what the LS in their classrooms are, they should look closer to each of them and exploit them with tasks; this will enhance students' performance, since students might be intrinsically motivated. Consequently, students will have their production

in class easier and they will feel much more confident. This article will primarily talk about the importance of matching learning styles to the activities in the classroom, kinds of learning styles, and reports of some successful classroom research experiences in which activities have been adjusted accordingly to student's learning styles.

LEARNING STYLES THEORY: DEFINITION AND TYPES ❯❯

The first step into applying learning styles to adjust activities in the classroom is to know what they are. Clark (2004) states "a learning style is a student's consistent way of responding to and using stimuli in the context of learning" (p.2). Keefe (1979) defines learning styles as the "composite of characteristic cognitive, affective, and physiological factors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how a learner perceives, interacts with, and responds to the learning environment (p. 76)." Stewart and Felicetti (1992) define learning styles as those "educational conditions under which a student is most likely to learn." Thus, learning styles don't deal directly with the fact of "what" students learn, but "how" students prefer to learn.

The subject of LS should not be taken as a general rule for designing activities adjusted to satisfy every learning style that makes presence in our classrooms. Coffield (as cited in Clark, 2004, p. 2) "it is far more important to match the presentation with the nature of the subject, such as providing correct learning methods, strategies, and context; than matching individual preferences" (Coffield, 2004). Instructional activities that permeate those important aspects of the learning styles will be enough

to develop and enhance students' performance. Furthermore, Marzano (1998) discussed that it is completely true that students can learn in any way possible regardless of their preferences. However, if the context and materials work together in order to stimulate students' senses, an awareness of their learning processes could be developed, generating a growing tendency in students to be aware of their own strengths to impact their performance. LS are outlined by the way senses in a student interact to understand and accomplish a task.

According to Merrill, students are not aware of their learning processes and for that reason, they cannot really develop good strategies on their own to match their LS. In other words, they would not come with innovative ideas for activities to enhance their language performance; these should be fostered. For instance, in a study, Marzano (1998) found that graphic and tactile representations of the subject matter had noticeable effects on learning outcomes, regardless of any attempt to match them with learners' modalities. As a matter of fact, students might not have the vaguest clue about what a learning style is; they only go along with the flow of their preferences when it comes to develop activities or tasks. Then, LS should be better understood and undertaken as simple students' preferences towards how to do the activities in their language learning experience.

To keep on building ideas about LS it is necessary to examine the characteristics of each one of them separately. The first is related to auditory learners. Students of this type talk to themselves a lot, trying to develop self confidence. They also have a tendency to read mentally and aloud. Besides, hearing to a source of spoken information

(tapes or video), or to a person communicating something complex, is something pleasant to this kind of students. They may present some difficulties with extended reading and writing tasks, though. (Clark, 2004)

Secondly, visual learners can be divided into two sub categories, linguistic and spatial. For linguistic students the experience with texts included in reading and writing tasks can be productive, since they always remember what has been written down, no matter if they have just got one contact with the contents. Another characteristic of these learners is that their understanding of a lecture will be clearer if they take notes or if the lecture includes explicit visual aids. In contrast, spatial students may have serious difficulties with extend written language. They feel better working with charts, demonstrations and videos. These students can develop high levels of photographic memory, so they hardly get lost in new surroundings (Clark, 2004).

The third LS is the group of kinesthetic learners who perform their best while moving around and touching. These also have two kinds, kinesthetic (movement) and tactile (touch). Students with the characteristics of the first group tend to lose concentration easily when an external stimulus is weak or non-existent. Their eagerness to move is so intense that during listening sessions they may take notes just for the need to move something. They typically like to color and highlight ideas. They also organize their information in charts and diagrams in order to move their hands (Clark, 2004).

To complement this part of types of LS, it is essential to remember the fact that students commonly do not posses single and separated characteristics of LS. On the contrary, they are more a mix of everything, but normally one or two characteristics dominate students' senses when learning (Clark, 2004). These could come from the same LS or from a different one.

Brown (2000) presented another vision and classification of LS regarding language learning specifically. According to him, LS have to do with something called 'cognitive style' (link between personality and cognition). When this is submerged into an educational context where psychological and affective factors intermingle, it is referred to as 'learning style' (Brown, 2000). In other words, LS might be determined by the association of "cognitive, affective, and psychological traits that are stable of how learners respond to the learning environment (Keefe, 1979). These traits are essential to be considered when designing activities in the classroom in order to make students feel at ease and pliable towards learning.

Taking the former vision of LS into account, it is relevant to reinforce a deeper knowledge about students' LS by addressing the following classification. In the first place, there are two basic types of learners. The ones that posses a field independent style (FI), which means that this type of learners have the ability to identify parts from a whole, to analyze and identify separate variables. In contrast, the ones that are field dependent (FD), perceive the whole picture of everything. Both styles have positive and negative effects on the learning process. However, the former has a lot of research experiences and tests to prove its efficacy. The latter, on the contrary, lacks research results and there are no tests to prove it. Therefore, it

can be said that FI is closely related to classroom learning because it involves analysis and other focused activities (Brown, 2004). The importance of these two aspects does not rely on what is more dominant in classrooms. On the contrary, it has to do more with the necessary creativity to mingle them in meaningful practices.

Opposite to the former vision between FI and FD, Hoffman (1997) argues that some persons might be both highly FI and FD according to the context in which the learners are exposed to language. An extroverted person for instance, might feel shy at certain times or in certain situations; which means that a learner should not be classified as FI or FD. Instead, it is more probable that learners have certain inclinations that can flourish when given certain contexts to develop an appropriate style.

The second learning style to be addressed according to Brown's classification is 'Left and Right-brain functioning'. One important thing to regard is that the two hemispheres work together as a team in order to solve different types of problems, regardless of the fact they hold different functions. According to Danesi (1988), many several language teaching methods have failed because they have focused strongly on left brain processes. It is necessary to explore the characteristics of each hemisphere towards learning a language. For instance, left-brain-dominant second language learners are good at producing separate words and phrases, getting the structure of a language, following sequences of operations, dealing with abstraction, reorganization, and labeling. Whereas, right-brain-dominant learners, on the other hand, seem to handle in a better way

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images, generalizations, metaphors, emotional reactions and artistic expressions (Stevick, 1982). All these aspects about brain dominance may be of help to structure and enrich our activities in the classroom. At the same time, they could make practices more effective.

Ambiguity tolerance is the next LS to be addressed. This aspect deals directly with the emotional part of the learner to tolerate ideas, constructs or insights from different cultures and contexts. Some people are open minded and willing to accept new visions and beliefs from others, which facilitates the acquisition of a foreign language. Some others, are narrow minded and could for instance, reject the cultural implications and system of the new language (Brown, 2000). Learners who are tolerant to ambiguity are open to consider innovative and creative possibilities towards learning. They cope positively with the differences in meaning between the new language and their native language. Learners intolerant to ambiguity, on the other hand, are more conservative in their learning processes and tend to be less creative and react more skeptically when facing a new method or innovative methodology. However, these learners can be highly aware of accuracy in language (Brown, 2000). Inevitably, teachers must design and provide activities that can permeate ambiguity in order not to hinder learning.

Reflective and impulsive LS are also part of Brown's classification. Learners' characters are the frame in which these two styles are enclosed. David Ewing (1977) addressed to styles stemming from personality, intuitive and systematic styles. The first implies a set of gambles made by the learner in order to finally achieve a solution to a problem. The second deals with considerations and deep reflection made by the learner in order to venture a solution on the issues.

RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF LEARNING STYLES

Some important research has been carried out in order to highlight the importance of knowing and understanding students' LS. In the field of FI/D, Elliot (1995), found a moderate correlation between FI and pronunciation accuracy. Regarding left-and right-brain functioning, Stevick (1982) found that left-brain-dominant learners deal in much better way with the linguistic part of the learning process. Right-brain-dominant learners, on the contrary, can do better in communication. Chapelle and Roberts (1986) studied tolerance of ambiguity in ESL learners in the state of Illinois. They discovered that learners with high tolerance of ambiguity were a little more successful in certain language tasks. This result, slightly suggests that this type of students might have a little advantage in second language learning. In addition, the areas of reflectivity / impulsivity and visual and auditory styles can also shed some lights from research. For instance, Jamieson (1992) reported that "fast-accurate" learners, or good guessers, were better language learners as measured by TOEFL, but warned against assuming that impulsivity always implies accuracy. Some of the tested learners were fast yet inaccurate. Research in this field of LS demonstrate how critical it is for teachers and language instruction in general, to carry out thorough inquiries in this area, since they might shed lights to make important amendments.

IN CLASSROOMS: SOME STRATEGIES AND LEARNING STYLES IN PRACTICE

A significant advantage of knowing and understanding learning styles in classrooms is the possibility of applying strategies, to help students enhance their practice. For instance, the first step to consider would be checking what strategies are suggested by textbooks. Advice and visions from experts are not to be overlooked. Textbooks contain exercises according to style awareness and strategy development (Brown, 1998). Administer a LS checklist. Sometimes students are not even aware of their own LS and much less about how they influence their learning process. This could be a good idea for the beginning of a course, so they begin to be aware of this aspect. As an attachment of this paper, there is an example of the checklist (Brown, 2000).

As a second strategy, teachers should consider placing on classrooms' walls various hints related to culture of the target language, everyday life activities etc. about having a successful English learning process and communication. This will help students focus and gain confidence. Also, they may feel identified with some of the features displayed on the walls and be eager to improve. This strategy could be fruitful for raising awareness of the importance in learning styles (Brown, 2000).

In order to really influence on students' LS with feasible learning strategies, it is necessary to turn them into techniques aimed at good language learning behavior. For example, to lower inhibitions and encourage risk taking; play guessing games and communication games, along with

the praising for every significant effort they make. Moreover, use fluency exercises where errors are not marked. It is also important to build students' self-confidence and develop intrinsic motivation. This can be easily achieved if teachers tell students that they believe in them and in what they can do. Remind them constantly about the rewards of learning English, so they can focus on a purpose according to their interests (Brown, 2000).

With the knowledge about LS, it is easier to promote several strategies in classrooms. To promote cooperative learning, direct students to share their knowledge in the way they feel better with their peers. Play competitions with students, so they can show their strengths and identify their weaknesses. Encourage them to use right-brain processing using movies and tapes. Have them read passages rapidly and free writes. Regarding ambiguity tolerance, it is essential to encourage students to question whatever they do not find clear. To resort to translation into their native language when necessary is also another way to cope with LS (Brown, 2000).

Some other strategies to embrace learning styles into classrooms are the use of students' intuition and the setting of goals. For the first, teachers must avoid giving explanation to errors all the time; they must correct only selected meaningful errors that interfere with learning. For the latter, students must be encouraged to go beyond the classroom, so that they can reinforce their affinity to the language. Lists of accomplishments are necessary in order to gain self-commitment from students (Brown, 2000).

In summary, all the former strategies attempt to give ideas on how focusing on LS can be done in regular EFL lessons in order to improve

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students' learning practice. Strategies must permeate students' styles and bring the best out of them, enriching EFL practices.

CONCLUSIONS

The field of LS holds a wide range of characteristics embracing psychological, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of learners. All these must be taken into account to identify and classify learners' LS. Commonly, learners do not belong to specific LS, but have a little from each style.

Every LS establishes a set of ways to acquire and process information. It means that much of what students learn depend on how they learn it and how the input is presented and addressed. Although learners have their own preferences towards learning, all of them have the capacity to learn in different ways and at their own pace. It is necessary to infuse all LS present in the classroom when doing language practices.

Acknowledging LS by the use of some classroom strategies might enhance students grasp and performance in the language. These strategies must range from how to get to know students' LS, make students aware of them, and the design of a set of activities to better exploit students' communicative potential. Also, these strategies have to help students identify their weaknesses and strengths to cope with communication issues during their practice.

All in all, the importance of knowing and understanding students' LS to improve their EFL practice, resides in how much teachers dedicate to reflecting over students' emotions, thoughts, cognition processes, and impressions towards the language, in order to find or generate resources capable of supporting their learning practice. In other words, EFL practice must be based and structured on what comes out of that interchange of ideas and classroom experiences (regarding learning styles) between teachers and members of the practice.

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