

LEARNING STYLES AND STUDENT TYPOLOGIES – ESSENTIAL ASPECTS IN *ELT*

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The present paper is related to a constant preoccupation in the domain of teacher training resulting in the English teachers’ professional development. Since the duration of intensive language courses has decreased lately, there is a need of maximizing by all means the chances of success of the language learning process. Students tend to become more and more diverse in point of background, education, language exposure and experience, and that is why it has become extremely important to evaluate from the beginning their qualities and possible vulnerabilities. In order to do so, teachers must go back to the “roots” of language acquisition theories. We consider the present paper as means of sensitizing teachers to individual differences in students’ approaches to learning English.

Keywords: English language teaching; learning styles; student typologies

Teaching is a challenging job. Teaching adults in a system where many things are at stake, depending on the success of students’ fulfilling the course objectives makes the job even more challenging. Moreover, fulfilling objectives when the time allotted to courses has been reduced considerably (from 12 weeks to 8 weeks for intermediate courses and from 19 weeks to 12 weeks for advanced courses, for instance) is maybe the most challenging aspect of all. That is why teachers need to make the most of what they have got in terms of time, resources, and people.

We must emphasize from the beginning the fact that the teacher-student relationship is essential and has direct implications upon the English learning process as a whole. The coordinates and the quality of this relationship depend solely upon the people involved in this equation, the inter-professional relationship they are able to establish, maintain, and consolidate in time.

It is common knowledge that people are extremely different with respect to the following aspects and characteristic features: genetic heritage,

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distinctive personality, place of origin, occupation, family and entourage, age, level of education, specialization and expertise in different domains, perception of and approaches towards peers, things, and the world generally speaking, motivation, mindset, attitudes and opinions, mood, etc. Thus, we may consider that depending on the variables listed above, students could be encompassed in different typologies of interest in *ELT*.

Consequently, as people are a key term in this equation, one crucial aspect for the teacher is identifying learning styles within the language learning process. Felder claims that “when the learning styles of the most students in a class and the teaching style of the professor are seriously mismatched, the students can become uncomfortable, bored and inattentive, get discouraged about the courses, curriculum and themselves.”¹ Thus, identifying the different types of learners can help a teacher formulate a teaching approach that addresses the needs of all students.

Generally speaking, a *learning style* is an individual predisposition to learn something in a particular way². The term describes broad, general characteristics of the ways in which individuals approach learning and it is quite possible that the preferred learning style may be manifest in all aspects of learning, not just in relation to learning foreign languages. More deeply, Felder and Henriques explain the meaning of *learning style* as “the ways in which an individual characteristically acquires, retains and retrieves information”³. They define several dimensions of learning style which are thought to be particularly relevant to second language education. In their paper, they show ways in which certain learning styles are favored by the teaching styles of most language teachers, and suggest steps to address the educational needs of all students in foreign language classes. According to Felder and Henriques, students learn in many ways – by *seeing and hearing, reflecting and acting*, and lastly *memorizing and conceptualizing*.

Stewart K. L. and Felicetti, L. A. define learning styles as those “educational conditions under which a student is most likely to learn.”⁴ Thus, learning styles are not really concerned with “what” learners learn, but rather “how” they prefer to learn.

¹ Richard M. Felder, Eunice R. Henriques, *Learning and Teaching Styles in Foreign and Second Language Education*, Foreign Language Annals 28, No1, 1995, www4.ncsu.edu, accessed on November 22nd, 2012, pp. 21-31.

² Martin Parrot, *Tasks for Language Teachers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

³ Richard M. Felder, Eunice R. Henriques, *Learning and Teaching Styles in Foreign and Second Language Education*, Foreign Language Annals 28, No1, 1995, www4.ncsu.edu, accessed on November 22nd, 2012, pp. 21-31.

⁴ K. L. Stewart and L. A. Felicetti, *Learning Styles of Marketing Majors*, Educational Research Quarterly, 15(2), 1992, www.nwlink.com. accessed on the November 26th, 2012, pp. 15-23.

Learning styles may help us discover the different forms of mental representations; however, they may not necessarily be used as definite characterizations of what people are or are not like. It is true, for instance, that some people are visual learners and others are auditory learners, but people generally speaking are all capable of learning under almost any style, no matter what our preference is.

Beside personal preference, learning styles may also depend on heredity, upbringing, and current environmental demands. Thus, according to Kolb, “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it.”⁵ Kolb emphasizes the idea that the complex mental process by which perceived information is converted into knowledge can be grouped into two categories: active experimentation and reflective observation. In Kolb’s theory there are four distinct learning styles, based on a four-stage learning cycle.

Kolb follows four main type of learning:

- *concrete experience* based on a question “What is it?”
- *reflective observation* with a typical question “What does it mean?”
- *abstract conceptualization* and the typical question “What follows on?”
- *active experimentation* with typical questions “What... if...?”, “How does it function?”

According to Kolb an effective learning happens when all four ways of learning are used, although an individual often prefers one of them.

The four types of learners in this classification scheme are:

- Type 1 - concrete, reflective. A characteristic question of this learning type is “Why?” Type 1 learners respond well to explanations of how course material relates to their experience, their interests, and their future careers. To be effective with Type 1 students, the teacher should function as a motivator.

- Type 2 - abstract, reflective. A characteristic question of this learning type is “What?” Type 2 learners respond to information presented in an organized, logical manner and find it very useful to have time for reflection. To be effective, the teacher should function as a manager.

- Type 3 - abstract, active. A characteristic question of this learning type is “How?” Type 3 learners respond to having opportunities to work actively on well-defined tasks and to learn by trial-and-error in an environment that allows them to fail safely. To be effective, the teacher should function as a coach, providing guided practice and feedback.

⁵ D.A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: experience as a source of learning and development*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, p.41, www.infed.org, accessed on November 23rd, 2012.

- Type 4 - concrete, active. A characteristic question of this learning type is "What if?" Type 4 learners like applying course material and the rules and theories acquired in new situations in order to solve real problems in real life-like circumstances. To be effective, the teacher should stay out of the way, maximizing opportunities for the students to experiment and to discover for themselves how the things they learned function.

Active learners tend to retain and understand information best by doing something active with it – discussing or applying it or explaining it to others. Reflective learners prefer to think about it quietly first. Active learners tend to like pair and group work more than reflective learners, who prefer working alone. Sitting through lectures without getting to do anything physical but take notes is hard for both learning types, but particularly hard for active learners. Teachers should keep these aspects in mind and cater particularly for these types of preferences.

The feedback regarding the efficiency of the English language teaching correlated to distinctive learning styles should not be materialized solely in the feedback forms filled in at the end of the course. It must be regarded as an interactive process whose inputs appear all throughout the course and the teacher must prove tactful and understanding so as to perceive and process correctly the different messages and statements made by students.

Taking into consideration certain possible statements made by learners of English, one can speculate about the personalities of the learners who made these statements.

a) I want my teacher to correct all my mistakes

The student who made this comment may be extremely self-conscious or, on the contrary, simply preoccupied with the degree of correctness of his/her speech. It may also show that he/she is afraid of making mistakes and because of this reason he/she may be reluctant to express himself/herself. At the same time, he/she may want any corrections or feedback to come from the teacher rather than from other students.

b) I want to be in a lower level group so as to be able to understand everything, especially in Listening

This is also a very self-conscious student who is afraid of making mistakes. Unlike the average students who may aspire to be included in a higher level group so as to be motivated to keep the pace with the other students, this kind of student may find it demotivating not to be able to understand everything. Listening is obviously his/her main problematic area.

c) I don't want to study grammar in class. I can do it at home

Here there may be two explanations for the statement. Either the student has a high degree of autonomy and motivation and is able to work

alone when it comes to drilling exercises, once the rule is taught and learned in class. Unfortunately, this is quite rarely the case. Most times, students do not like grammar, especially if they are intermediate or above. They consider their grammar is good enough, and, isn't it so, "I've been abroad and everybody understood me even if I didn't speak correctly". So, the teacher should be careful with respect to such instances.

d) I appreciate my teacher because she lets me ask questions about things I want to know

This would be the statement of a student who is quite dependent on his/her teacher for learning. In such cases, or for such students, the strategy to adopt would be to feed them with information, answer any questions they may have, but at the same time encourage them to learn at home too, so as to develop at least in the long run a little independence.

e) I like working in pairs, especially with a student who is better than me

This is the kind of student who finds it motivating to work with someone who is superior from the point of view of his/her English level. Thus, he/she may learn not only from the teacher, but also from his/her peers. Cooperative learning is a current trend in ELT and has more than once proven its high efficiency. On the other hand, the statement may hide a sort of idleness and even laziness, as it is quite easy not to assume responsibilities and let somebody else take initiative, provide ideas and means of doing things.

f) I had a frustrating weekend because I did not manage to do all my homework, I considered it too difficult

The statement may have been made by somebody who is quite demotivated. Either he/she has been placed in the wrong group, probably a group with a higher language level than his/hers, or the difficulty of the homework is used as a pretext for not doing it. In either case, the student should be stimulated to do what he/she can even if not everything.

g) I had a real life meeting and I didn't say anything because I was afraid not to make mistakes

This is a lower level student. He/she may be afraid of speaking as any act of producing English, no matter if orally or in writing, implies a certain degree of independence. Moreover, it implies a certain risk of putting oneself in an embarrassing situation that the respective student is just not willing to take. It may be the same student who made the a) statement.

h) I know very well the grammar rules, but I tend to forget them when I'm speaking

How many of us, teachers, have heard this statement? And from how many students? It is quite challenging sometimes to explain students that all it takes is practice. Practice makes perfect, says the English proverb. The

problem is that then you might get an answer such as statement c). On the other hand, doing only or mostly drilling exercises will not have the expected outcome as it is quite unlikely that a student who produced the above mentioned statement may gain enough confidence in his/her abilities so as to speak freely and correctly. The key word is here, as in other cases, balance. In other words, such a situation may be amended if drilling is accompanied by a lot of oral activities, as close to real-life situations as possible.

Statements a), b) and g) might have been made by the same learner, as they all seem to suggest a learner who is quite concerned with accuracy and seems reluctant to challenge himself/herself in communication, both inside and outside the classroom. Statements c) and d) may represent a learner who appears to be willing to take initiatives in learning and assume the task of taking learning outside the classroom. Statement e) might have been made by the same learner if the statement reflects a willingness to be challenged. Yet, as shown before, it might also reflect certain reluctance to assuming responsibilities.

It is likely that teachers will perceive d) as positive and a) and g) as negative approaches to what is going on in the language class. However, the opposite could be argued too depending on the circumstances. Actually, all the others, b), c), e), f), and h) can be perceived as either positive or negative, as it has been shown above. The aim of studying such statements is primarily to encourage teachers to explore ways in which the value of these attitudes and opinions may depend on the characteristics of the learners and the circumstances in which the learning process takes place.

The main goal of studying such statements is that of encouraging students to explore the ways in which the value of these attitudes and opinions may depend on the students' individual characteristics and the circumstances in which *ELT* occurs. Function of these characteristics and circumstances, the teacher may decide upon his/her strategies with respect to teaching techniques, classroom management, use of materials, etc, for example:

- independent work, worksheets, reading, using computers, self writing or solving problems versus pair work or group work, games, role-play, conversations, discussions, debates, simulations;
- quick activities, speaking, games, running dictation, competitions, project work versus slow and calm activities, reading and writing, individual computer work, individual project work, drill, repetition, finding out information from books, doing tests that teach, using dictionaries,
- going from general to the specific, applying generalizations, starting with rules and theories first, explaining first and then practicing versus using audio tape and videos for presenting grammar and vocabulary issues, providing real communicative situations phrases, letting students induce

grammar rules, words or function phrases from real situations, from watching videos, reading magazines etc.

In conclusion, it is absolutely essential for the teacher to interact with the students, to know their preoccupations and possible educational frustrations, to be connected to their needs and expectations and thus to be able to identify their typologies and adapt to them. We may say that the ability and the manner in which these data are processed, combined, and interpreted strongly influence the quality of the educational process. These elements go beyond a teacher's professional area representing a true art and perpetual challenge meant to guarantee the adequate level of interaction in the relationship between teacher and student.

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