

Learning styles in teaching a foreign language

Whether we are aware of it or not, whatever we do in the classroom as teachers reflects an underlying view of how language is best learnt. Learners perceive and process information in different ways: by seeing and hearing, reflecting and acting, reasoning logically and intuitively, analyzing and visualizing. Teaching methods also vary. Some instructors lecture, others demonstrate or lead students to self-discovery. Using insights from learning styles theory, we can build on our learners' positive areas and raise awareness of those areas which may be barriers to effective learning through learning training.

Honey and Mumford (Learning Styles FEDA 1995) have produced a number of different Learning Styles Questionnaires which they found helped trainees to identify their learning style preferences and they summarise the four styles as follows:

Activists involve themselves fully and without bias in new experiences. They enjoy the here and now, and are happy to be dominated by immediate experiences. They are open-minded, not sceptical, and this tends to make them enthusiastic about anything new. Their philosophy is: "I'll try anything once". They tend to act first and consider the consequences afterwards. Their days are filled with activity. They tackle problems by brainstorming. As soon as the excitement from one activity has died down they are busy looking for the next. They tend to thrive on the challenge of new experiences but are bored with implementation and longer term consolidation. They are gregarious people constantly involving themselves with others but, in doing so; they seek to centre all activities around themselves.

These learners learn best when they are involved in tasks, group work, games and so on. They are not bothered about accuracy as long as they are understood. These learners are not very good at studying on their own and usually forget to do homework. Teachers like them in the class because they always respond and often get group work doing.

Reflectors like to stand back to ponder experiences and observe them from many different perspectives. They collect data, both first hand and from others, and prefer to think about it thoroughly before coming to a conclusion. The thorough collection and analysis of data about experiences and events is what counts so they tend to postpone

reaching definitive conclusions for as long as possible. Their philosophy is to be cautious. They are thoughtful people who like to consider all possible angles and implications before making a move. They prefer to take a back seat in meetings and discussions. They enjoy observing other people in action. They listen to others and get the drift of the discussion before making their own points. They tend to adopt a low profile and have a slightly distant, tolerant unruffled air about them. When they act it is part of a wide picture which includes the past as well as the present and others' observations as well as their own.

These learners like observing and listening to the teacher and others. They like watching TV and films in English. They often wait for another student to answer a teacher's question and will always write their answers in pencil until they are sure they have the right answer. These learners can sometimes get distracted and miss the point of a task. They are not always comfortable with getting involved in activities but may be creative and imaginative.

Theorists adapt and integrate observations into complex but logically sound theories. They think problems through in a vertical, step-by-step logical way. They assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories. They tend to be perfectionists who won't rest easy until things are tidy and fit into a rational scheme. They like to analyze and synthesize. They are keen on basic assumptions, principles, theories models and systems thinking. Their philosophy prizes rationality and logic. "If it is logical it is good." Questions they frequently ask are: "Does it make sense?" "How does this fit with that?" "What are the basic assumptions?" They tend to be detached, analytical and dedicated to rational objectivity rather than anything subjective or ambiguous. Their approach to problems is consistently logical. This is their 'mental set' and they rigidly reject anything that doesn't fit with it. They prefer to maximise certainty and feel uncomfortable with subjective judgements, lateral thinking and anything flippant.

These learners like studying alone using grammar books and course books. They often ask the teacher to explain the rule for a piece of language. They need to write things down like grammar rules or new words. These learners like structured lessons where they can see the point of what they are doing. They are well organized and do homework on time.

Pragmatists are keen on trying out ideas, theories and techniques to see if they work in practice. They positively search out new ideas and take the first opportunity to experiment with applications. They are the sort of people who return from courses brimming with new ideas that they want to try out in practice. They like to get on with

things and act quickly and confidently on ideas that attract them. They tend to be impatient with ruminating and open-ended discussions. They are essentially practical, down to earth people who like making practical decisions and solving problems. They respond to problems and opportunities 'as a challenge'. Their philosophy is "There is always a better way" and "If it works it is good".

These learners learn best when given a presentation of a particular piece of language then are given the chance to practice it. They like to have clear goals and get worried if they don't understand what they have to do. These learners like to be in control and to know why they are doing something. They don't like grammar because there are so many exceptions to the rules but they are really well organized and pay careful attention to detail.

When mismatches exist between learning styles of most students in a class and the teaching style of the teacher, the students may become bored and inattentive in class; get discouraged about the courses, the curriculum, and themselves. Teachers, confronted by low test grades, unresponsive or hostile classes, poor attendance, know something is not working. They may become overly critical of their students or begin to wonder if they are in the right profession.

Matching teaching styles to learning styles can significantly enhance academic achievement, student attitudes, and student behavior. This is not to say that the best thing one can do for one's students is to use their preferred modes of instruction exclusively. Students will inevitably be called upon to deal with problems and challenges that require the use of their less preferred modes, and so should regularly be given practice in the use of those modes.

Teachers need to encourage students to try out the learning styles they may feel less comfortable with or perhaps don't even bother with. Learner training is about establishing good work pattern so that learners can take greater responsibility for their own learning and become more independent.

Jim Scrivener gives such a definition of learner training (Learning Teaching 1994):

For me learner training means to raise students' awareness about how they are learning and, as a result, help them to find more effective ways of working, so that they can continue working efficiently and usefully even when away from their teacher and the classroom. More simply, it means work on teaching learning as well as teaching English.

However, Smith and Renzulli (1984) caution that stress, frustration, and burnout may occur when students are subjected over extended periods of time to teaching styles incompatible with their learning style preferences. Students learn more when information is presented in a variety of modes than when only a single mode is used. What must be done to achieve effective foreign language learning is to balance instructional methods, somehow structuring the class so that all learning styles are simultaneously or at least sequentially accommodated.

Teachers should aim at a balance of methods. If the balance is achieved, all students will be taught partly in a manner they prefer, which leads to an increased comfort level and willingness to learn, and partly in a less preferred manner, which provides practice and feedback in ways of thinking and solving problems which they may not initially be comfortable with but which they will have to use to be fully effective professionals.

Some text books suggest activities to raise students' awareness of the importance of learning styles. An example of this is in the Teacher's Resource Book for Cutting Edge (Cunningham & Moor 1998). One of these gives a description of three different learners and students are asked to rank them according to how successful each would be in learning English. They then compare their ranking and discuss why they reached their conclusions.

In conclusion, if we do not take into account the learner as an individual we will miss one of the most essential ingredients in the management of effective learning. Understanding the way our students learn best and planning for this in our lessons not only optimizes learning but will ensure our lessons are varied and engaging. There is an increasing recognition of the need for students to take responsibility for their own learning and the teacher plays a crucial role in helping students develop ways to organize and be aware of their own learning.

References

1. Honey, P. & Mumford, A. (1995) Learning Styles FEDA
2. Scrivener, J. (1994) Learning Teaching Heinemann
3. Smith, L.H., Renzulli, J.S. (1984) Learning Style Preferences: A Practical Approach for Classroom Teachers
4. Stice, J.E. (1987) Using Kolb's Learning Cycle to Improve Student Learning