

Utilizing Learning Styles in EFL Teaching

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Abstract

The focus of this study is to systematically uncover the variegated learning styles of a selected group of EFL learners, with the intention to develop effective tools for exceptional teaching and attainment of life-long learning. In short, this paper investigates the different learning modalities of EFL students, and their implications in the classroom. One hundred and eight Saudi EFL female students participated in the study. A learning style test as well as classroom observation and interviews were used to collect the data of the study. It was discovered that most students employ mixtures of the three main learning styles (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic). Therefore, it is recommended that EFL teachers vary their teaching materials and strategies, as well as apply cooperative learning strategies to assist their students in attaining greater learning levels. Additionally, it is recommended that the EFL teacher communicate with her students about their individual learning styles. This process will not only encourage students to be more proactive in the learning process, but will also enhance their overall classroom experience.

Keywords: Learning styles, learning modalities, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), cooperative learning, and lifelong learning.

1. Introduction

EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia appears to be cycling in an endless loop. On the one hand, colleges expect schools to provide their English Departments with students who have already acquired a good foundation for studying the language in detail. Schools, on the other hand, expect colleges to provide them with competent English language teachers. None of these expectations have been fulfilled so far. This lack of fulfillment, on both sides, is caused by many reasons, one of which is the difficulty student's face in learning English as a foreign language. Although English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been taught to Saudi students for a very long time, local students are still facing difficulty in learning it, especially in classroom settings. They are still frustrated and unmotivated. At the same time, teachers are still working very hard to devise new teaching materials and new strategies to teach their students better. However, they do so utilizing their own predictions about the way they think their students will learn better. Such predictions are usually based subconsciously on their own teaching styles, without a consideration of the essence behind the individual differences of their students. Often, EFL teachers lack the awareness that different learning styles of learners exist, and that their students' learning styles might be different from their own learning styles.

For many years, the students' individual differences were counted as shortfalls in their academic and mental abilities. The students' marks in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and drawing were taken for granted as the only way to evaluate their success, their level of intelligence, and even their level of responsibility. Naughty students have traditionally been considered "the stupid ones," while silent students have been considered inferior to those who like to discuss ideas with the teacher. Most teachers implement these assumptions without thinking deeply about the essence behind their students' individual differences, and without considering that those students have different ways of learning to their own. The concept of different learning styles emerged in the 1970s. Before that date, learners' individual differences were counted as inadequacies in their academic abilities only. It has been taken for granted that some students are good at writing, but not very fluent in speaking, and that some students are good speakers but make terrible mistakes in writing.

Moreover, naughty students, who like to move around a lot in the classroom and sometimes chew gum during lectures, have been looked upon as students with lower academic abilities. However, it has become very clear from the experience and practice of many educators that learners simply learn in different ways. As a way to solve this problem of teaching English to EFL Saudi students, and to recommend good practices to be implemented, a theory called "learning styles" taken from psychology can be very helpful in this attempt. It states that teachers should acquire knowledge about the process of learning itself and how it happens since this is an important step in empowering students through better teaching, and can assist them in enjoying learning. "How can we teach students if we do not know how they learn?" (Coffield, F., Moseley, D., Hall, E., & Ecclestone, K., 2004, p.1). The present paper aims at investigating the presence of different learning styles among Saudi EFL learners. It also aims at proposing some solutions and implications for the classrooms based on the investigation of the students' learning styles.

2. Learning Styles

Many educators and researchers have identified learning styles as one of the reasons behind language learners' individual differences (Reid, 1995; Peacock, 2001; Sprenger, 2003; Joy, & Kolb, 2007; and Nygaard, Højlt, & Hermansen, 2008). Several of them started investigating the concept of learning styles in the early seventies. David Kolb, Professor of Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University, was the first educator to investigate learning styles. He provided educators and researchers with three versions of a learning style inventory, starting from 1971 and continuing until 2005. Kolb's experiential learning style model was first published in 1984. In this model, he proposed four learning styles: concrete experience (feeling), reflective observation (watching), abstract conceptualization (thinking), and active experimentation (doing). He also presented these styles with a cycle of experiential learning that applies to all learners: diverging, assimilating, converging, and accommodating. Joym Reid (1995) defines a learning style as "an individual's natural, habitual and preferred way of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills" (p. 8). He proposed two main hypotheses about learning styles. The first one is that "all students have their own learning styles and learning strengths and weaknesses." The second one points out that "a mismatch between teaching and learning styles causes learning failure, frustration and de-motivation." Reid's views were supported by other researchers who maintained that it is helpful for EFL teachers to consider the mismatch between their students' learning styles and their own teaching styles, and that the lack of such consideration will cause clashes to the detriment of both students' learning ability and their attitudes toward learning (Oxford, Holloway, & Horton-Murillo, 1992). Although Kolb's model and Reid's definition and hypotheses were the pioneering learning style works, Neil Fleming's recent VAK model has been the most popular one (2001).

According to Fleming (2001), there are three types of learners: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (some learners display a mixed blend of these three styles). While visual learners tend to learn through seeing and enjoy looking at maps, charts, pictures, videos and movies, auditory learners tend to learn through listening. Auditory learners enjoy lectures, discussions, talking things through and listening to what others have to say. The third types of learners are kinesthetic ones who tend to learn through moving, doing and touching and expressing themselves through movement. Kinesthetic learners find it hard to sit still for long periods, and may become distracted by their need for activity and exploration.

3. Review of Related Literature

Although there has been an increasing interest in the investigation of students learning style preferences all over the world, (Pengrian-Jadid, 2007; Solvie & Kloek, 2007; Chen & Zhang, 2008; Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork (2008); Franzoni & Assar, 2009; Kumar, Voralu, Pani, & Sethuraman, 2009; Nuzhat, Salem, Quadri, & Al-Hamdan, 2011; Al-Maghraby & Alshami, 2013), very few studies deal with the learning styles preferred by EFL Saudi students. The researcher will now proceed to review the Saudi studies which have already been done. Abdan and Al-Muarik (1992) investigated 263 EFL Saudi university students' learning styles, querying whether gender and major have any effect on the students' learning styles. A questionnaire was used to collect the study data. It was found that the students have multiple learning styles. It was also found that gender and major make no difference concerning their learning styles. Another study was conducted by Alkhatnai in 2011. He examined 100 Saudi EFL college students' learning style preferences in relation to their academic decisions, satisfaction and success in two different learning modes: face to face and online. It was found that the students preferred tactile, auditory, visual, group, kinesthetic and individual learning styles.

Although no correlation was found between the students' preferred styles and their choice of instructional mode, a correlation does exist between the learning style preferences and the students' satisfaction and success, as well as their positive and negative learning experiences. The study also showed that students' perceptions of their learning styles are affected by their personality types, cultural beliefs, and the instructor's teaching style. Moreover, Saudi EFL students' choice of online classes was found not to be affected by their learning styles. The study emphasized the importance of understanding students' learning styles and meeting students' expectations and needs in the classroom, regardless of class mode. In 2012, Ahmed investigated the impact of the use of different learning styles on developing EFL Saudi students' writing skills. The subjects were divided into two groups: a control group and an experimental group. It was found that while the students who were taught regardless of their different learning styles faced difficulties in learning writing, those students whose teachers were aware of their different learning styles performed better. The present study is an attempt to contribute to the literature conducted on Saudi EFL students' learning styles and their relationship to EFL teaching.

4. Hypotheses of the Study

Based on the concept of learning styles as well as on the related literature, the researcher attempts to test the following hypotheses:

1. EFL Saudi female students at King Khalid University have multiple learning styles.
2. Each student has one dominant learning style among the three learning styles investigated: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

5. Methodology of the study

5.1 Participants:

The present study uses data obtained from 108 Saudi EFL female students at King Khalid University (KKU), during the first academic semester of 2013 -2014. The students who were given the questionnaire and those interviewed were studying at varying levels within the English department, which offers bachelor degrees within three different course plans: Arts, Language and Translation, and Education. The ages of the participants ranged from eighteen to twenty-three years old.

5.2 Materials:

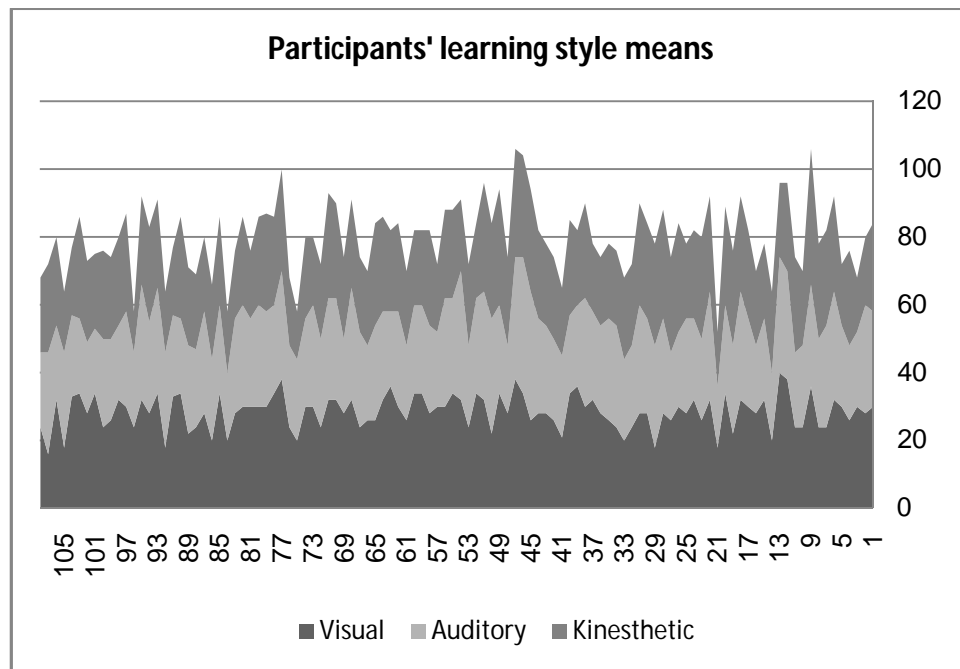
The researcher used a questionnaire taken from the Barsch Learning Style Inventory to collect the study data which charts the students' learning style preferences. This questionnaire consists of 24 multiple-choice questions, which employs a Likert scale ranging from 1 (often) to 5 (rarely). It was given to the students to complete in order to measure their preferred learning styles. The questionnaire is designed to obtain the students' preferred learning styles (see Appendix A). Microsoft Excel was used to compute the means of the students' answers to the questionnaire questions, and to draw the graphs that display the computed means. In addition to the questionnaire, classroom observation as well as interviews with EFL Saudi learners were used to collect the data of the study.

5.3 Procedures:

The researcher distributed the questionnaire, read it very slowly to each class, and explained it in the students' native language in order to make sure that they did not have difficulty in understanding the questions. The researcher also asked the students not to be hesitant in asking for translation and clarification. Since the students were drawn from different levels, each group was given the questionnaire separately, but they were all given the same amount of time to complete it (30 minutes), and the same opportunity for clarification and translation, when needed. After collecting the answers from the students, the mean number of each student's orientation towards visual, auditory or kinesthetic learning styles was computed, and drawn into graphs using Microsoft Excel. The researcher also recorded her classroom observation of students' different behaviors related to their learning styles. Moreover, the students were interviewed with regard to their knowledge about their learning styles.

6. Results:

The results of the study confirm its first hypothesis, and reject its second one. It was found that EFL Saudi female students at King Khalid University have multiple learning styles. It was also found that each one of those students is not totally visual. Auditory or kinesthetic. Each student tends to exhibit a different mixture of the three learning styles investigated: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. These results are shown in the following diagram:



As shown in diagram, the investigated students have multiple learning styles. Each one of the investigated students displays a portion of one of the three investigated different styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. In conclusion, the research shows that no student is totally visual, auditory, or kinesthetic, and that each one of them appears to utilize her unique mixture of the three different styles. Depending on classroom observation, the researcher found that students have different behaviors in the classroom. Some of them are silent during lectures. Others are talkative. Other students do not like to sit for a long time in the classroom. The researcher attributes the different behaviors to different learning styles, concentrating on the three main ones investigated here: visual, auditory and kinesthetic. As for the interviews, it was discovered that most of the interviewed learners were not aware of their learning styles. After being made aware of them, many learners do not think that their teachers use teaching styles suitable for their learning styles. They were happy to discover a tool that could help them in learning English at college and beyond. Learners stated that discovering their learning styles will help them learn better and by themselves, as well.

7. Discussion, Conclusion, and Implications

Based on the results of the study, the researcher concludes that Saudi EFL students have multiple learning styles. This conclusion is consistent with the conclusions of the previous research on Saudi EFL students' learning styles (Abdan & Al-Muarik, 1992; Alkhatnai, 2011; and Ahmed, 2012). With our knowledge of the fact that our students display different mixtures of learning style preferences, the researcher recommends that EFL teachers adopt varied teaching materials and strategies to meet their students' diverse learning modalities. They should also apply cooperative learning strategies, and encourage their students to be active members in learning groups. Doing so will help the learners achieve better learning, and also perhaps to become cooperative members in school and beyond. More importantly, EFL teachers should enlighten their students about their own learning style preferences so that they can enjoy learning. When students like learning, they will be more receptive to it. With a greater learner-centered approach, teachers will guarantee, to some extent, that their students gain the benefits of lifelong learning, which is considered nowadays to be the ultimate goal of education.

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Appendix A: Barsch Learning Style Inventory

Please check the appropriate line after each statement.

| No. | | 5 | 3 | 1 |
|-----|--|-------|-----------|--------|
| 1 | I can remember best about a subject by listening to a lecture that includes information, explanations and discussions. | Often | Sometimes | Seldom |
| 2 | I prefer to see information written on a chalkboard and supplemented by visual aids and assigned readings. | | | |
| 3 | I like to write things down or to take notes for visual review. | | | |
| 4 | I prefer to use posters, models, or actual practice and other activities in class. | | | |
| 5 | I require explanations of diagrams, graphs, or visual directions. | | | |
| 6 | I enjoy working with my hands or making things. | | | |
| 7 | I am skillful with, and enjoy developing and making, graphs and charts. | | | |
| 8 | I can tell if sounds match when presented with pairs of sounds. | | | |
| 9 | I can remember best by writing things down. | | | |
| 10 | I can easily understand and follow directions on a map. | | | |
| 11 | I do best in academic subjects by listening to lectures and tapes. | | | |
| 12 | I play with coins or keys in my pocket. | | | |
| 13 | I learn to spell better by repeating words out loud than by writing the words on paper. | | | |
| 14 | I can understand a news article better by reading about it in a newspaper than by listening to a report about it on the radio. | | | |
| 15 | I chew gum, smoke or snack while studying. | | | |
| 16 | I think the best way to remember something is to picture it in your head. | | | |
| 17 | I learn the spelling of words by "finger spelling" them. | | | |
| 18 | I would rather listen to a good lecture or speech than read about the same material in a textbook. | | | |
| 19 | I am good at working and solving jigsaw puzzles and mazes. | | | |
| 20 | I grip objects in my hands during learning periods. | | | |
| 21 | I prefer listening to the news on the radio rather than reading the paper. | | | |
| 22 | I prefer obtaining information about an interesting subject by reading about it. | | | |
| 23 | I feel very comfortable touching others, hugging, handshaking, etc. | | | |
| 24 | I follow oral directions better than written ones. | | | |

Scoring Procedures

Directions: Place the point value on the line next to the corresponding item below. Add the points in each column to obtain the preference score under each heading. OFTEN = 5 points SOMETIMES = 3 points SELDOM = 1 point

| VISUAL | | AUDITORY | | KIENESTHIC | |
|--------|-----|----------|-----|------------|-----|
| NO. | PTS | NO. | PTS | NO. | PTS |
| 2 | | 1 | | 4 | |
| 3 | | 5 | | 6 | |
| 7 | | 8 | | 9 | |
| 10 | | 11 | | 12 | |
| 14 | | 13 | | 15 | |
| 16 | | 18 | | 17 | |
| 19 | | 21 | | 20 | |
| 22 | | 24 | | 23 | |
| VPS = | | APS = | | KPS = | |

VPS = Visual Preference APS = Audio Preference KPS = Kinesthetic Preference

Appendix B:

Interview questions

1. What is your learning style?
2. Do you think that your EFL teachers are addressing your learning styles when they teach you?
3. How can you benefit as an EFL learner from discovering your learning style?