

Which Learning Style Do You Prefer to Improve EFL Learning?

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Abstract

The term “learning styles” refers to the concept that individuals differ in regard to what mode of instruction or study is most effective for them. Proponents of learning-style assessment contend that optimal instruction requires diagnosing individuals’ learning style and tailoring instruction accordingly (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, and Bjork, 2009). There are several methods or theories that describe learning styles. Learning style can be divided into several broad categories and these affect how students learn. The VAK learning styles model suggests that most people can be divided into one of three preferred styles of learning. The Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic Inventory (VAK) are tools to quickly identify what a person's learning style tendencies may be. The present study aims to discover the preferred learning styles of 120 EFL learning students (67 females and 53 males) for the year 2014; in order for the instructor to be aware of the learning styles in the classroom and how the instructor would need to adjust or balance the teaching methods to address all students learning styles. The sample of the study was randomly chosen to answer the VAK learning style questionnaire developed by Chislett and Chapman (2005). The data collected by the researcher were analyzed by using different techniques. Means, standard deviations, percentages, and Independent T-Test to show significant differences between variables were used. The results of T-Test revealed that there were significant differences at ($\alpha= 0.05$) between auditory and kinesthetic learning styles in males and females. The aim is to have a balanced teaching style and to adapt activities to meet students’ style and to involve teachers in this type of research to assure the results found in this research study.

Keywords: VAK Styles; Preferred Learning Style; Assessment; Feedback

1. Introduction

The Assessment lies at the heart of the learning experience: how learners are assessed shapes their understanding of the curriculum and determines their ability to progress. Learning styles may be defined in different ways, depending on learners’ different perspectives. Learning styles are the manners in which individuals perceive and process information in learning situations. Learning style preference is one aspect of learning style, and refers to the choice of one learning situation or condition over another (Brown, 2000). Learning styles are the general

approaches; for example, global or analytic, auditory or visual that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject. The manner in which a learner perceives, interacts with, and responds to the learning environment (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Learning style is sometimes defined as the characteristic cognitive, affective, social, and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment (MachKeracher, 2004).

Discovering these learning styles will allow the students to determine their own personal strengths and weaknesses and learn from them. Teachers can incorporate learning styles into their classroom by identifying the learning styles of each of their students, matching teaching styles to learning styles for difficult tasks, strengthening weaker learning styles. When the students know their preferred learning style(s) they understand the type of learning that best suits them. This enables them to choose the types of learning that work best for them. There is no right or wrong learning style. The point is that there are types of learning that are right for their own preferred learning style (Gilakjani, 2012).

VAK (Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic) model is one of most popular models for finding the learners' different learning styles (Alavinia& Ebrahimpour, 2012). Based on this model, all learners show inclination to one of the three major modalities, i.e. Visual, Auditory, or Kinesthetic, to acquire and learn new information and experiences. This model assertion is that one or two of these styles are dominant in a learner, by which a learner takes in the new information and learning.

According to Montemayor (2009), visual learners are the kind of learners who learn best through seeing the teacher's body language, facial expression and even the visual content of the course materials used by the teacher. Visual learners try to avoid any possible visual obstruction as they want to understand the lesson through seeing. Among the lessons that will be included in the visual learning style are the following: 1) diagrammatic exercises course, 2) computer visual skills course, 3) patterns and logic course, 4) drawing and arts course and, 5) visual presentation courses. Teachers must also recognize that the learning materials that should ideally be used in teaching visual learning styles are illustrative textbooks, transparencies, flipcharts, models, videos and film, handouts and various kinds of diagrams and pictures. One form of engaging the students is through having them draw and write their understanding of the lessons.

Furthermore, Montemayor(2009) states that auditory learners basically gain knowledge through listening. These types of students learn best, via the learning methods including discussions, verbal lectures monologues, and any form of teaching that requires teachers and students to talk and listen to what each of them

has to say. The auditory learners also interpret the messages sent to them by the communicator via the pitch, speed, tone of voice and other forms of communication nuances which explains primarily the reason why any written information may most likely have very little meaning to them. For auditory learners, the course content may include the following: 1) listening and comprehension courses, 2) oral delivery courses (e.g., poems, debates etc), 3) oral reporting courses (oral presentation), 4) stage acting courses and others

According to Montemayor (2009), the kinesthetic learners actually belong to the category of learners who grasp, learn and understand things by touching, doing and moving. They are very hands-on and experiential type of learners who learn via exploration of the physical world around them. In line with this the best course content materials for this group of learners are the following: 1) experiment-type of courses (laboratory/scientific experiments etc), 2) activity-based or application based courses, 3) experiential based courses (computer learning, acting, debates, drawing etc), 4) skill enhancement course (singing, dancing, ballet and sports-related activities).

A vast amount of literature has been published on the role of individuals' variable learning styles to catch a foreign language more easily. Interestingly enough a high proportion of the studies on learning styles seem to have been conducted in the domain of higher education (Biggs, 2001; Busato, Prines, Elshout, and Hamaker, 2000; Guild, 1994; Hartman, 1995). Although these studies present different learning styles in different ways, their purposes and approaches are, more or less, similar.

Research on learning and teaching styles has provided teachers and students with a different view of learning and teaching within the classrooms. Drawing upon a survey by Joy Reid (1995) indicated that learning styles are internally based. All learners have individual attributes related to the learning processes. Some people may rely on visual presentations, others prefer spoken language; still others may respond better to hands-on activities. People learn differently and these differences in learning are found in ESL/EFL settings. She also indicated that matching teaching styles with learning styles provides all learners an equal chance in the classroom and builds student self-awareness. In a survey by Witte (2009), categorized learning styles in Joy Reid (1995) work are six types: Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, Tactile, Group, and Individual.

Felder (1995) indicated that the way in which an individual characteristically acquires, retains, and retrieves information are collectively termed the individuals' learning styles. He also added that mismatches often occur between learning styles in students in a language class and the teaching style of the instructor with unfortunate effects on the quality of the students' learning and on their attitudes

towards the class and the subject. Felder (2002) revealed that individuals have different learning styles that are reflected in different academic strengths, weaknesses, skills and interests.

This study aims to highlight the importance, of recognizing individual learning styles with the purpose of influencing future training in the organization in which the study was conducted. The hypothesis is that many training programs lack effectiveness because teaching methods do not match individuals' learning styles. Generally, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Which learning style is the most frequently used by male and female students?
2. Are there any significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) between the means of learning styles used by males and females?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants of the current study were a total of 120 students (53 males and 67 females) studying General English course in Ahvaz Islamic Azad University. They were students of different majors such as Computer, Architecture, and Accounting. In terms of age merely a slight amount of variation was witnessed, as most of the participants fell within the age range of 19 to 22 years.

2.2 Instrument

The VAK questionnaire (Chislett and Chapman, 2005) consists of 30 questions to which respondents were asked to answer A, B or C (Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic learning style) was administered to students. A self-selecting sample ($n=120$ Male and Female) was identified from within the university students learning EAP. In this survey, thirty different settings were posed and respondents selected a solution which was tied to one of the three learning styles. For the thirty items, the learning style most often selected determines the learning style label assigned to that individual. The reliability of the questionnaire estimated via Cronbach's alpha was found to be 0.81.

2.3 Procedure

The study was conducted after four months of teaching from February to May 2014. The data for the questionnaire were collected according to the opinions of EAP male and female students in 3 domains. The data collected by the researcher were analyzed by using different techniques to answer the questions of the study. Means, standard deviations, percentage, and T-Test to show significant differences between variables.

First, the researcher by observing EAP classes and making interviews with students became familiar with the EAP focal difficulties of male and female students majoring computer, accounting, and architecture. Second, 120 students (67 female and 53 male) by a simple random sampling are selected to continue the study. A questionnaire which was comprised of thirty items was given to both group of students.

Acknowledging and realizing the students' preferred learning styles and creating learning profiles was two major components of differentiated instruction. Then, having utilized a learning style inventory (Chislett and Chapman, 2005) and in a cross-gender survey questionnaire, the teacher captured the dominant learning styles of the individual learners. She also analyzed the students' academic strengths and weaknesses, using the outcomes of the test.

3. Results

Tables 1, 2, and 3 summarize the descriptive results of the instrument (VAK learning style questionnaire) used in this study. The researcher used the means, standard deviation, and percentages in three domains of learning styles used by males and females. Then, independent T-Test has been used to analyze the data from the questionnaire, to show whether the difference of three domains between male and female EFL students is significant or not? What are the perceptions of both genders of the best style to learn English?

The findings suggest that female students predominantly prefer auditory (n=30) learning style, with visual (n=23), and kinesthetic (n=14) the least preferred. Male students prefer kinesthetic learning style (n=21) the most. However, the auditory style was the least preferred by them (n=13) (Table 2).

Table 1 *Sample Distribution According To the Student Variable*

Students	No	Percent%
Females	67	55.83
Males	53	44.16

Table 2 *Frequency off VAK Style in Female and Male Students*

VAK Style	FEMALE(F)	MALE(F)
Visual	23	19
Auditory	30	13

Kinesthetic	14	21
Total	67	53

Table 3 *T-Test Results for Differences in the VAK Learning Styles of Female and Male Students Variable*

Domain	Students	N	Mean	SD	DF	T-test	Sig(2tailed)
Visual	Females	67	10.552	4.896	118	-.050	.961
	Males	53	10.509	4.530			
Auditory	Females	67	11.895	5.385	118	-3.291	.001
	Males	53	8.905	4.315			
Kinesthetic	Females	67	7.552	4.415	118	3.586	.001
	Males	53	10.584	4.741			

The results of table 3 show that the computed T-Test values for different learning styles are respectively *(-.050, -3.291, 3.586)*. This means that there are significant differences at ($\alpha= 0.05$) in auditory and kinesthetic learning styles between male and female students. Auditory style is the most preferred style by females, and kinesthetic by males. There is no significant difference in visual style learning by male and female students.

4. Discussion

This means the current training program is not meeting their learning needs and the organization needs to review its strategy. Failure to do so means training will continue to have reduced effectiveness. This could lead to a workforce lacking the appropriate skills to fulfill their role competently

Learning style theories, are new, and are usually considered practical because they are classroom-specific. Ability to learn is one of the most important characteristics of human beings, which differentiates them from other living creatures and renders them social beings. Although learning is defined in several ways, most of the psychologists agree that learning happens as a result of the interaction with the environment and it creates long-term differences in the behaviors (Fidan & Erden, 1991). Each learner has his/her own preferred way of perceiving, organizing, and maintaining the incoming information, and these different manners in which data are processed are generally regarded to be rather distinctive and consistent (Chou & Wang, 2000). Researchers are now of the unanimous view that not all learners learn in the same way (Witkin, 1973; Gregorc, 1979).

According to Pham (2000), learning styles are the learners' fixed methods for responding to and working with the existing stimuli in learning circumstances. Carbo (1980) points out that determining the unique learning styles of students and making necessary arrangements to adjust our instruction to such learner differences might help boost the educational accomplishments of our learners.

Thus, Visual, Auditory and Kinesthetic (VAK) model says there are only three types of learning styles that all learner are said to possess. In the ensuing section a brief account is provided of each of these three learning styles.

The majority of teachers teach the way they learn (Stitt-Gohdes, 2001). These teachers are field independent, that is, they are more content oriented and prefer to use more formal teaching methods, favoring less student involvement and more structured class activities (Pithers, 2001).

One reason teachers are led to teach the way they learn is that they are not skilled in adult learning theory (Gilakjani, 2012). Classroom teachers who are skilled in adult learning principles and have experience with theories about student-centered learning are more likely to adopt student-centered instruction (Stitt-Gohdes, 1999) even if it is not the way they learned or prefer to learn.

As Gilakjani(2012) says each teacher is unique and can use his or her style to be as effective an educator as possible. We must understand teachers' use of learning styles and relate this to the university context. It is very important to understand and explore each individual's learning style. Discovering this learning style will allow the student to determine his or her own personal strengths and weaknesses and learn from them. Teachers can incorporate learning styles into their classroom by identifying the learning styles of each of their students, matching teaching style to learning style for difficult tasks, strengthening weaker learning styles through easier tasks and drill, and teaching students, learning-style selection strategies.

Furthermore, being informed about the fact that our learners make use of different learning styles in the process of learning might help sensitize us, as language educators, toward this learner diversity and preference for a particular mode of learning (Alavinia & Ebrahimpour, 2012). This awareness is of great importance, because as Riazi and Riasati (2007) note, most teachers are not aware of their students' unique learning styles. This awareness is, in turn, expected to motivate the teachers to change their teaching style to meet each single student's learning style and preferences. The findings can also be helpful to students in that they provide them with critical awareness of their learning styles.

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