



The Importance of Considering the Different Learning Styles in Students of English as a Foreign Language

La importancia de considerar los diferentes estilos de aprendizaje en estudiantes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

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Abstract

This paper aims to consider the importance of implementing different learning styles with learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In addition, information is provided on the existence of these learning styles as well as the importance of teachers' implementation of them. Various academic articles were reviewed and compared to highlight the transcendence of the use of learning styles to favor the EFL teaching and



Recibido: 18 de octubre de 2022. Aprobado: 5 de diciembre de 2023

<http://doi.org/10.15359/rep.18-2.16>

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learning process. In addition, some examples of activities that can be developed to promote them are suggested.

Keywords: adaptations, English as a Foreign Language, implementation, learning styles, students' needs



Resumen

Este ensayo tiene como objetivo considerar la importancia de implementar diferentes estilos de aprendizaje con los estudiantes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (ILE). Además, se proporciona información sobre la existencia de estos estilos de aprendizaje y la importancia de que los profesores los implementen. Se han buscado y comparado diversos artículos académicos que destacan la trascendencia del uso de los estilos de aprendizaje para favorecer el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje del ILE. También, se presentan algunos ejemplos de actividades que se pueden desarrollar para promoverlos.

Palabras clave: Adaptaciones, estilos de aprendizaje, implementación, inglés como lengua extranjera, necesidades de los alumnos.

Introduction

Learning strategies have been discussed for many years in the field of education. However, these strategies have mostly been implemented only as content or theory. It is believed that learning strategies only help students to acquire knowledge according to their learning needs; furthermore, they also help teachers to create and adapt the curriculum in a way that all students can play an active role in learning English as a foreign language. Most of the time, teachers tend to prioritize how they teach rather than how students learn. [Moussa \(2014\)](#) mentioned that “[I]earning styles researchers are more concerned with the ways in which students prefer to learn than what they actually learn” (p. 20). Often, some teachers understand the term *learning strategies* as something that helps to identify the way students learn; nevertheless, educators do not understand the great tool these strategies can be if implemented correctly in the process of teaching English as a foreign language.

On the other hand, different learning strategies in the classroom help students recognize their needs and strengthen their skills in order to facilitate the process of second language acquisition. Still, they may not be fulfilling their purpose due to a lack of evidence-based information,



Gudnason (2017) explained that guidelines have been approved with respect to learning styles for the educational population, but their use has not been endorsed. Moreover, the implementation of learning strategies eases the process of recognizing which activities, methods, assessments, models, and curricular adaptations should be made to address the diverse needs of the students.

The term *learning styles* has been defined by professionals such as Pashler *et al.* (2008) who pointed out that it “refers to the concept that individuals differ in regard to what mode of instruction or study is most effective for them” (p. 105). Every person has diverse ways to acquire knowledge in various fields. In addition, as everyone has unique needs, it is important to implement the strategies in order to suit the students’ necessities. Chick (2016) claimed that the term “is widely used to describe how learners gather, sift through, interpret, organize, come to conclusions about, and “store” information for further use” (para. 1). Although both definitions are given by different scholars, this shows that the concept is closely related to how students can easily obtain and store information based on their own style. According to Silverman and Felder Learning Styles (1998) (as cited in Supangat & Zainuri, 2020), there are four distinct learning styles: active-reflective, sensing-intuitive, visual-verbal, and sequential-global.

Types of Learning Styles

Active learners are those who acquire the content in a straightforward way by putting it into practice and solving tasks assigned to them by the teacher. Supangat and Zainuri (2020) argued that this type of students “learn more by looking at things and not sitting with textbooks and reading what they need to do” (p. 8556). This means that they acquire an insight more quickly through the explanations they give to their peers. In addition, these learners are characterized by the preference to work in groups because it is easier for them to share their points of view with other classmates; as a result of this practice, the information is clear to them, and at the same time, students save the information for future use. Then, students who have the reflective style are distinguished by the action of taking notes on the content seen in class. Supangat and Zainuri (2020) mentioned that “[r]eflective learners process information by receiving, listening and deep thinking” (p. 8556). These notes are helpful in facilitating the learning of the subject

matter to carry out the different tasks assigned in class. In comparison, reflective learners prefer to acquire the content in an individual and personalized way. Consequently, the information arrives without distractions, and it can be analyzed and understood within the class. Sensitive students are those who simply manage numbers. As [Supangat and Zainuri \(2020\)](#) claimed, “these learners work best with numbers, sensing learners like to recap the material they have studied previously” (p. 8556). This type of student is characterized as a learner who prefers practice rather than theory and is identified as a pupil who seeks results patiently. On the other hand, [Supangat and Zainuri \(2020\)](#) explained that “[i]ntuitive learners like to work with principles and theories. This type of learners do not like repetition” (p. 8556). This indicates that these students prefer to be assigned a variety of assignments rather than tasks that are redundant in their content; they are also those who prefer to argue their work based on theory.

Visual learners are those who acquire information more easily through vision. [Supangat and Zainuri \(2020\)](#) confirmed that “they prefer to learn the lessons [that] are demonstrated by the teacher (photo, diagram, film)” (p. 8556). They acquire the content easily when they have visual material that eases the process of understanding the theory given in class. Verbal students are those who simply receive the information by listening. [Supangat and Zainuri \(2020\)](#) asserted that these students “perceive information by hearing words” (p. 8556). This means that, in this way, it is simple for them to interpret the content; i. e., these students find it easier to understand the subject when someone provides the explanation in an oral way.

Sequential learners are those who develop a task easily by following instructions. [Supangat and Zainuri \(2020\)](#) explained that the students “tend to learn to follow instructions; this makes it easier for them to understand” (p. 8556), which means that this makes it less complicated for them to understand the content that is required in each activity; i. e., they require a step-by-step explanation of the task to be developed. On the other hand, students who have a global learning style are those who have a general understanding of the interpretation of instructions when they must develop a task assigned by the teacher. [Supangat and Zainuri \(2020\)](#) pointed out that “[g]lobal learners can help themselves in the future by looking at the bigger picture” (p. 8556). In sum, these students do not need to follow a sequence where an order to



follow is indicated to conduct a task. Finally, these students do not require a general understanding for the interpretation of the instructions.

By defining learning styles, it is possible to recognize that there are several types of students for each of the mentioned categories. In addition, it was noted that each of them has great differences from each other; therefore, it cannot be assumed that a student who has a specific way of learning can interpret the material used in class in the same way as if it were taught from the learning strategy that suits their needs. [Gosse and Hansel \(2014\)](#) stated that

Many times implementing learning styles in the classroom is seen as unnecessary because teachers take for granted that their way of learning is the same as that of students. Educators take the content of the curriculum for granted, they lose opportunities to coordinate and collaborate. Students may be learning something valuable in each grade or course, but they do not receive the benefits of a coherent, cumulative, cross-curricular experience. (p. 19)

However, there is a diversity in the ease of acquiring the content taught in the classroom. The implementation of these ways of learning not only has a relevant role in the educational environment because the students feel included in the activities, but they may also feel comfortable and involved in the educational process because learners could notice that the teacher considered their diverse needs, which will allow a better performance and development of the class.

Designing teaching strategies that include learning styles in the classroom can benefit both the students and the teacher because, on one hand, the teacher can get insights into how to cater for the learning needs of the students. [Hu et al. \(2021\)](#) affirmed that “[k]nowing a student’s learning style and personalizing instruction to students’ learning style could enhance their satisfaction, improve their academic performance, and even reduce the time necessary to learn” (p. 1). On the other hand, learning strategies in the classroom help each of the students to be able to recognize what their style is, which will facilitate carrying out the different tasks, acquiring and retrieving information.

Background of the Implementation of Learning Strategies in the ELF Classroom

Learning styles have been studied for years but have not been known under the same name. It was the neuroscientist and psychologist Jhon O’Keefe who proposed the name *learning styles*, which is what they are currently called. Swanson (1995) explained that “the term ‘cognitive style’ was used rather than learning style” (p. 1) before. Seeing that not all students acquire knowledge in the same way, O’Keefe chose to call these diverse ways of acquiring and responding to the content taught in class, as well as producing output effectively. Thus, the teaching and learning processes will be more fluid and rewarding for both teachers and students.

The incorporation of the different styles depends on the teachers because they may apply different methods, strategies, and patterns to teach. Many classes are developed in diverse ways, whether practical or theoretical, and it is here where teachers must play with learning styles to attract the attention of students during the lesson, thus making them active participants in the class and their learning process. Through the implementation of these, the teacher can turn the classroom into a place where the students feel comfortable and confident, which facilitates their participation in class. Ferrell (2018) stated that teachers have opted to use more imagination in classes to make the learning process more enjoyable and engaging for students. In this regard, it should be noted that educators have made efforts to incorporate creativity into their classrooms. However, it may not always have been a primary consideration, resulting in a possible absence of creativity in the classroom in previous generations, making students feel less involved in the learning process.

However, there are authors who believe that the implementation of learning styles does not work as a method to improve students’ academic performance. For example, Newton and Salvi (2020) argued that “[i]n the mid-2000s two substantial reviews of the literature concluded that there was currently no evidence to support the idea that the matching of instructional methods to the supposed Learning Styles of individual students improved their learning” (para. 3). On the other hand, Feldman *et al.* (2015) affirmed that “learning styles have been used in educational systems to automatically adapt learning material according to detected learning preferences” (p. 5). This is evidence that



various learning styles have been put into practice to adapt the materials used in class to cater for the learning needs of the students and facilitate the teaching process, and their performance in class.

Students can become frustrated when teachers do not adapt their methods to accommodate the diverse needs of all students, hindering their progress due to a lack of flexibility and evolution in teaching approaches (Mohssine *et al.*, 2021). There is no evidence that supports that teachers implement learning styles in the classroom environment in every class, which can have negative effects on the lesson, such as students' becoming bored and frustrated because the teacher does not consider the diverse needs of their students when teaching the content. Instead, teachers tend to develop their classes with the same activities; consequently, students do not have different ways of interpreting the material taught in the lesson.

It can be argued that learning strategies are not being addressed in most English classes; for some teachers, this theory may even be almost nonexistent, which means that if teachers do not take learning styles into account, classes may always be monotonous, and only some students might develop an effective learning process. The students who benefit the most are those whose learning styles align with the teaching methods employed by their instructors in their classes. In addition, when learning styles are not contemplated when designing and teaching a class, it can cause students to have difficulty acquiring the information that the teacher shares in class. This happens because each student has a preferred way of processing and comprehending new information, and when teaching methods do not align with these individual styles, students may struggle to grasp and retain the material effectively. It can complicate the students' completion of the tasks, and, as a consequence, the students' academic performance may be negatively affected.

When thinking about learning styles, the theories of Kolb, the Natural Language Processing Model, Felder and Silverman (1998) (as cited in Supangat & Zainuri, 2020) may be the most relevant references. Still, Burns (2016), for instance, refuted such learning styles: "research suggests that learning styles do not exist, which has important implications for curriculum design and teachers' practice" (para. 1). The fact that he claimed that learning styles do not exist can be attributed to his appraisal of some psychological research findings.

On the other hand, other authors argued that learning styles do exist and must be applied in the classroom. [Supangat and Zainuri \(2020\)](#) affirmed that “Felder and Silverman’s learning model’s design suggests that teaching style should focus on four dimensions of learning style (sensory/intuitive, inductive/deductive, active/reflective, sequential/globally) and sensory channel (visual/auditory)” (p. 8555). This theory suggests that effective teaching should encompass various dimensions and not be confined to a single approach, allowing students to explore the material from multiple perspectives. If teachers focus on the different models, but they could also teach classes that are more dynamic and inclusive for students with different learning styles.

Before implementing learning styles in an EFL lesson plan, it is important to diagnose the target group including both students and teachers:

In order to gauge how much students have learned; it is not enough to assess their knowledge and skills at the end of the course or program. We also need to find out what they know coming in so that we can identify more specifically the knowledge and skills they have gained during the course or program. ([Eberly Center, 2022, para.1](#))

In addition, this diagnosis can be carried out through the application of activities that involve the different learning styles, as the teacher can make observations throughout the classroom to recognize which tasks are easier for certain students to perform. This diagnosis will work in order to reveal the weaknesses of those who do not have the same learning style and who find it more difficult to complete the tasks. This analysis can be made by the teacher, taking into consideration the different needs of EFL learners, as it will determine the learning style they need to address in order to achieve the expected results.

The curriculum is generally designed to meet the general needs of the target population. However, it does not include the individual necessities of the students that comprise that population. [Tools for Teachers \(2016\)](#) mentioned that “[t]here is no recipe for adapting general education curriculum to meet each student’s needs. Each teacher, each student, each classroom is unique, and adaptations are specific to each situation” (p. 15). In other words, the tailoring of the activities



should not be the same for all students or groups. Although the same teacher may teach the same subject, students in different groups may have different learning styles and process information in diverse ways. On the other hand, students should be aware that each teacher is unique, so their teaching style will probably be adapted to their learning style, which means that even if there are two teachers teaching the same subject at the same grade level, the input and output obtained will be different in each class.

It is relevant for teachers to make this type of adaptation to the activities of the curricula at the beginning of the school year. In this way, they will identify the different learning styles present in the classroom; [Mumaraki *et al.* \(2018\)](#) affirmed that “[t]he aim of a curriculum is to ensure that all children are provided with learning opportunities that recognize and celebrate their uniqueness, develop their full potential” (p. 105). They should be able to teach the content successfully and individually, which will allow students to acquire knowledge more effectively from the beginning of the classes. This can yield successful results and fulfillment of the goals set for each lesson taught.

When learning styles are to be implemented in the classroom, it is important for this process to be conducted gradually. This means that they can be put into practice one by one or two by two per week, thus giving students the opportunity to try out and identify each of their existing cognitive preferences. As a result, the teacher will be able to recognize, on a regular basis, which students most frequently identified with the particular style that were taught throughout the weeks. Additionally, by teaching classes with this model, students will be able to point out their weaknesses and work on them to strengthen them. However, it is important not to categorize students solely based on their learning preferences. Just because a student performs well in a week when active-reflective methods are employed does not necessarily make them better than a peer who may face challenges during a different week with a different learning style. Success in a particular week does not define their overall capabilities as good or bad students.

Activities to Incorporate Learning Styles in EFL Classroom

For teachers, sometimes it is difficult to find activities in which learning styles are addressed in the classroom. In order to ease this task

for educators, some ideas of activities are given in order to promote the implementation of these in the classroom.

Writing skills can be put into practice by means of reflective essays because, in this way, two styles (active and reflective) could be stimulated. Active students will put into practice their writing based on the grammar studied in class, while reflective students will make their analysis of the content seen in class. [Klimova \(2012\)](#) affirmed that writing essays “aids language development at all levels: grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and discourse; it requires learners to manipulate the language in interesting and demanding ways as they attempt to express uniquely personal meanings” (p. 9). This type of activity can be used as a task to be carried out gradually, i. e., the teacher can assign it from the beginning of the course for students to deliver it as a final product of their learning.

Interviews are another activity that can be conducted in the classroom to promote the sensitive-intuitive learning style for students who prefer to work under this style. [Clapman \(2020\)](#) explained that “[w]hen students plan for an interview, they need to assess what they don’t know—a metacognitive skill—and learn a lot about the interview subject because otherwise, the interview will be awkward” (para. 2). It is more enjoyable to collect data and perform tasks that are different from those commonly assigned because they can see updated content or information that makes them be interested in the topic under study and data collected.

The use of media visuals can be of great benefit to the learning process of students. In this case, it could strengthen the students who have a visual and verbal learning style. [Sofian and Anggraeni \(2021\)](#) stated that media visuals make the teaching and learning process more effective and engaging for students. It is important to emphasize that the chosen media visuals must be related to the topic being studied in class so that students can better understand the subject by viewing a movie, image, or video. On the other hand, this material helps understand the content seen in the lesson through auditory stimulation. By using this type of resource, students reinforce the content studied, which helps to make the topic studied clearer.

For students who have a sequential learning style, [Sowell \(2017\)](#) argued that “instruction-giving is an area that deserves attention and practice, as it has a major impact on how well students are able to carry



out the activities” (pp. 10-11). Activities should be promoted in which students follow specific instructions, for example, writing a letter, in which they are suggested to follow a format. For students with a global learning style, activities with less specific instructions should be considered, for example, debates, symposiums, and round tables. [Snider and Director \(2011\)](#) explained that debates allow the student to develop free and independent thinking as it is an activity where critical thinking is used and cannot be controlled so easily. In these activities, learners feel freer to express their ideas because the teacher does not have control over them, nor do they have exact instructions to follow.

Without incorporating activities such as the ones described above, learning styles remain untapped. Furthermore, they provide individualized support to each student, tailoring the learning process and activities to match their unique styles and requirements. These are some activity ideas that teachers can employ to engage various learning styles within the classroom. Nevertheless, it is crucial for educators to stay continually informed about learning styles and the latest strategies for integrating them into the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. By doing so, teachers can avoid the monotony of using the same activities repeatedly, fostering a dynamic learning environment.

Conclusion

The conducted review highlights that learning styles have been used through time, but they have not been identified to respond to students’ needs. Through different arguments, it was found that, for such authors as [Burns \(2016\)](#), these learning styles do not even exist. Other authors such as [Supangat and Zainuri \(2020\)](#) affirmed not only that these learning styles do exist but also that they are of utmost importance because without the application of the various learning styles in the EFL class; this situation could render classes less effective for students, potentially resulting in a decline in student interest. In addition, by addressing learning styles in the classroom, the environment can become more interactive, dependable, and comfortable for students. Thus, students may directly become active participants in the learning and teaching process. Additionally, when students are allowed to employ their learning styles, they can use language in ways that resemble real-life contexts. Therefore, teachers will be training students who are prepared to communicate in everyday situations in the future.

Knowing about learning styles can be helpful to teachers, as it allows them to know their students and their learning needs. It also helps teachers to identify how their students cover the content better, thus facilitating their learning process and teaching of English as a Foreign Language. Teachers and students should immerse themselves in the subject so that they are not guided only by an author's point of view. Different authors present arguments that affirm that through the use of learning styles in the EFL classroom, a dynamic, personalized, and enriching teaching process is created for each of the students because, by using different techniques, the students engage in a variety of dynamics.

It is important to highlight that learning styles have not always been termed as such. The implementation of these learning styles has varied over the years because the teachers who put them into practice have different ways of teaching, and they plan and direct their classes in such a way that they can meet learning needs of the students in charge and the activities used. To sum up, teachers must promote activities in which the different learning styles are addressed because it is through practice that teachers will be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their students. In this way, curriculum activities can be adapted so that each one of them has the purpose of reinforcing the skills of a particular group in an EFL class. Furthermore, it should always be considered that English is not the target population's native language, so it is essential to apply new strategies that ease the students' approach to the foreign language, thus effectively achieving the proposed goals.

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