LEARNER DIFFERENCES IN LEARNING STYLES AND LANGUAGE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Naeemeh Kharaghani
Department of English, Quchan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Quchan, Iran
naeemehkharaghani@gmail.com

Abstract
Learner differences in the field of curriculum development could be studied from different perspectives. The reason lies on the fact that each individual is unique considering cognitive, affective and socio-cultural factors. One of the principal debates in the field of individual differences is ‘learning style’ often used to include cognitive style. People learn differently due to their differences in learning styles. Learning styles could be classified as perceptual modality: visual, auditory and tactile learners, information processing, and personality patterns. To meet these different learning styles, instructional designers should avoid applying only one type of activities; rather, employ various learning activities so that each student with a different learning style could have an opportunity to benefit as much as possible from the learning units. One way to reach the aim is providing cooperative language learning activities.

Keywords: learner differences, learning styles, curriculum development

Learner differences and language curriculum development

The aim of education is to enable each student to attain development according to his/her own attributes. To achieve this, students should be provided with suitable assistance and guidance in accordance with their abilities and learning needs, so that they can develop their potential to the full. Crawford (2002) believes that “although language is a social practice learning a language is largely an individual process as learners seek to integrate newly perceived information into their existing language system” (p.87).

Each student is a unique individual, different in cognitive and affective development, social maturity, ability, motivation, learning styles, needs, interests and potential. Apart from this, there are other factors underlying student differences. These include innate differences in intelligence, differences in social and economic background, variations in past learning experiences, and perhaps variations in the level of correspondence between the learner and the curriculum (Tomlinson, 2003). In view of these factors, dealing with individual differences is intended neither to narrow the gap between individuals nor to even out their abilities and performance. It should aim for understanding why students are able or unable to learn well and finding appropriate ways to help them learn better. Therefore, as Crawford (2002) believes “it is to a large extend the learners, not the teachers, who controls what is learnt since it is they who selectively organize the sensory input into meaningful chunks (p.87).
Factors involving Learners' differences

Learning styles &cognitive style

A comprehensive review of research in cognitive psychology has indicated that people display significant individual differences in the cognitive processing styles that they adopt in problem solving and other similar decision-making activities. As for individual differences; different researchers have different definitions and conduct research from different perspectives accordingly. The construct of cognitive styles was originally proposed by Allport (1937 as cited by Dorney, 2005), referring to an individual's habitual or typical way of perceiving, remembering, thinking, and problem solving. Since then, especially in the last few decades, there has been additional considerable research in this area. Cognitive style has been broadly investigated by psychologists.

There are many different definitions of cognitive style. In this regard, Davis & Graff (2006) mention that "Tennant (1988) defined cognitive styles as "an individual's characteristic and consistent approach to organizing and processing information" while Riding, Glass, and Douglas (1993) termed cognitive styles as "a fairly fixed characteristics of an individual that are static and relatively in-built features of the individual" (p. 990). Based on the above definitions, in the authors’ points of view, cognitive/learning styles refer to the individual's consistent and characteristic predispositions of perceiving, remembering, organizing, processing, thinking, and problem solving.

Cognitive styles describe how the individual acquires knowledge (cognition) and processes information (conceptualization). Cognitive styles are related to mental behaviors which individuals apply habitually when they are solving problems. In general, they affect the way in which information is obtained, sorted, and utilized. Cognitive style is usually described as a stable and persistent personality dimension which influences attitudes, values, and social interaction. It is a characteristic of cognitive processing which is particular to a certain individual or class of individuals.

Different researchers emphasize different aspects of cognitive styles. Therefore, there are various terms encountered in the literature related to this area. These terms include: cognitive complexity vs. cognitive simplicity (Kelly, 1955), divergent vs. convergent (Hudson, 1966), field dependence vs. field independence (Witkin, 1962), global vs. analytical (Kirby, 1988), impulsive vs. reflective (Kagan, 1965), and the like (Le francois, 1991).

In most situations, cognitive styles and learning styles are used interchangeably. Generally, cognitive styles are more related to theoretical or academic research, while learning styles are more related to practical applications. A major difference between these two terms is the number of style elements involved. Specifically, cognitive styles are more related to a bipolar dimension while learning styles are not necessarily either/or extremes. Cognitive/learning styles measures conventionally lie somewhere between aptitude measures and personality measures. In addition, cognitive/learning
styles in the literature have been viewed in three major respects: structure, process, or both structure and process (Hede, 2003).

In addition, Schunk & Zimmerman (1994) argued that cognitive styles were characterized by three important properties. The first important property is the generality and stability across tasks and over time. Therefore, they are resistant to training and change. The second important property is the relative independence of cognitive styles from traditional measures of general ability. The third important property is cognitive styles' relationships with some specific abilities, characteristics, and learning tasks. Cognitive styles have either positive or negative relationships with motivation and academic achievement depending on the nature of the learning task.

**Learning style**

Perhaps, the most important cognitive characteristic is the learner’s preferred learning style. Research has shown that people learn differently. They process and represent knowledge in different ways. Their performance is related to how they learn, consequently, they learn more effectively when taught with their preferred methods. According to Schmeck (1988), there are two basic types of learning styles. One is global-holist/field dependent/right brained, the other is focused-detailed/field independent/left brained. Schmeck asserted that, although both styles are equally good for problem solving, each style is likely to be associated with greater efficiency in specific tasks. The most effective problem solvers should exercise strategies connected with both aforementioned styles.

Components of learning styles are the cognitive, affective, and physiological elements, all of which may be strongly influenced by a person’s cultural background. In general, there are many different ways to classify learning styles. This fall into general categories: perceptual modality, information processing, and personality patterns (Ehrman et al., 2003).

**Perceptual modalities** define biologically based reactions to our physical environment and represent the way we most efficiently adopt data. Learning our perception style helps us to seek out information in the format it can be processed in most directly. In accordance with this, we can distinguish between different types of learners:

**A) Visual learners** (learning through seeing): These learners need to see the teacher's body language and facial expression to fully understand the content of a lesson. They tend to prefer sitting at the front of the classroom to avoid visual obstructions (e.g., people’s heads). They may think in pictures and learn best from visual displays, including diagrams, illustrated textbooks, overhead transparencies, videos, flipcharts, and handouts. During a lecture or classroom discussion, visual learners often prefer to take detailed notes to absorb the information.

**B) Auditory learners** (learning through listening): They learn best through verbal lectures, discussions, talking things through, and listening to what others have to say. Auditory learners interpret the underlying meanings of speech by listening to tone of voice, pitch, speed, and other nuances. Written information may have
little meaning until it is heard. These learners often benefit from reading text aloud and using a tape recorder.

c) **Tactile or kinesthetic learners** *(learning by moving, doing, and touching...)*: They learn best through a hands-on approach, actively exploring the physical world around them. They may find it hard to sit still for long periods and may become distracted by their need for activity and exploration (Ehrman et al., 2003).

**Information processing** distinguishes between the way individuals sense, think, solve problems, and remember information. Each of us has a preferred, consistent, distinct way of perceiving, organizing, and retaining information. For example, forms of learning through workshops, practical activities, or through informal methods may suit some people more than others. Sometimes, people feel they are not good at learning when it may just be that they don't know their own learning styles.

**Personality patterns** focus on attention, emotion, and values. Studying these differences allows us to predict the way we will react and feel about different situations.

Teacher must pay attention to different learning styles. Since student-teacher interaction is always an important factor in traditional learning environments (face-to-face classes) for success of the learner because of the fact that the teacher may easily determine the preferred learning style of each student by observing his/her reaction to different activities. Also Instructional designers should also avoid applying only one type of activities; rather, employ various learning activities so that each student with a different learning style could have an opportunity to benefit as much as possible from the learning units (Tomlinson, 2010, p.252).

As a whole, as Nation, & Macalister (2010) put it " A course should take account of individual differences and learning styles into two ways: (1) by providing opportunities for learners to work to their strengths, and (2) by providing opportunity and training for learners to try other ways of learning. An effective language course not only produces effective learning but also produces effective learners (p.39).

**Learner-centred curriculum**

Considering these many factors in 'learner-centred' curriculum design, it is possible and feasible to turn L2 classrooms into whole-person events, where body and soul, intellect and feeling, head, hand and heart converge in action. Also, there is a need to exploit the psycho-social reality of the L2 classroom and its immediate significance for both teacher and learner (Green et al., 2002).

Moreover, they asserted that a capacity for critique needs to be developed in learners. They should become co-managers of their learning and participate in their own teaching. The teacher should create the learning space so that learners can take initiatives to pursue their own learning for their own benefit, and to discover their own learning styles (Wenden, 2002).
Conclusion

As educators and designers, we need to do more research to explore new characteristics that enable us to create student-centered, collaborative and authentic learning environments in which students engage in critical thinking and problem solving. Research clearly suggests that intended audience to whom the instruction is designed is the most important component in curriculum development. Learners with different characteristics learn in different ways and show different reactions to the instruction. Therefore, designers should consider the individual differences to better suit the learning environment in order to reach and serve each learner’s needs. In order to match various learning and thinking styles, tailoring instruction may be an effective way. Unlike the classroom environment, it is much easier to design and implement the instruction according to the learners’ preferences.

Learners with certain attributes would like to know what is expected of them and the exact steps that they have to follow to fulfill the course objectives. Designing well-planned and structured lessons with clear and concise instructions, lists of required readings, explanations and informative course syllabus may diminish the level of learners’ anxiety and enable them to accomplish the task more easily. Another important issue is the loss of motivation and interest of learners towards the learning activities. Instructors should not forget that each learner attends the course with different background and interests. Therefore, instruction should include a variety of engaging activities and the relevant contents with their educational backgrounds so that they could become motivated and encouraged to find the learning enjoyable and build confidence. Assignments should be neither so easy nor so difficult. If the course requires the learners to write a final paper or design a project, the selection of the topics, area of study and methods should be left for learners’ aspiration (Tomlinson, 2003).

Cooperative learning, has historically been a popular method to share knowledge and has proven beneficial to all of its participants; in fact, it was not until the 20th century, when class size increased, that the lecture format became the norm (Tomlinson, 2010, p. 256). Teachers are revisiting the flexible and easily adaptable method of students working together and assisting each other in groups and are finding that even large classes of students flourish in this environment of interdependence.

Although cooperative learning strategies must be clearly structured and specify tangible goals, they should be designed to promote critical thinking skills and student creativity as well as offer varying levels of involvement in order to accommodate students with diverse levels of language ability. This strategy also encourages teacher’s creativity and experimentation to suppress the inclination of adhering to worn-out, conventional methods of teacher-centered learning, such as the lecture format.

Cooperative learning is a broad and multifaceted concept which can be applied to a variety of different formats and "generally refers to many varied ways to structure a class in small, heterogeneous student groups (usually of two
to six members, with four an ideal size) to accomplish individual or group goals for learning that require cooperation and positive interdependence” (George, 2010).

Moreover, the emerging area that the educators need to further pay attention is cultural and social differences that may influence learning. This becomes even more critical in our global world and culturally diverse learning environments as universities start offering online courses to anybody in any parts of the world. Being aware of cultural differences in technology can help instructional designers and trainers to build more culturally and socially sensitive educational materials.

It is worth mentioning that student-centered learning is about helping students to discover their own learning styles, to understand their motivation and to acquire effective study skills that will be valuable throughout their lives. Learning is thus more a form of personal development than a linear progression that the teacher achieves by rewards and sanctions. Errors are seen as a constructive part of the learning process and need not be a source of embarrassment (Wenden, 2002). To put this approach into practice, teachers need to help students set achievable goals; encourage students to assess themselves and their peers; help them to work co-operatively in groups and ensure that they know how to exploit all the available resources for learning. Being a successful teacher means more than implementing a variety of teaching strategies. It means understanding the diversity of your students and using that understanding to design more effective instruction. What facilitates learning for one student does not necessarily facilitate learning for another. Students have diverse learning styles and intellectual capabilities. Every learner will bring a different set of knowledge and experiences to the learning process, and will "construct" in different ways, their own sense of the situation with which they are faced. Harwood suggests that language learners can adapt materials for their own or other classes, even when materials are imposed by some official curriculum and institutional requirement. This would enhance interest and shift their roles from administrators to knowers (p.7).

REFERENCES


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