

IS IT POSSIBLE FOR TEACHERS TO TEACH LESS AND FOR LEARNERS TO LEARN MORE? EXPLORING LEARNING STYLES AND STRATEGIES IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract:

The objective of this article is to illustrate how secondary students' learning style awareness can lead to improving and expanding foreign language learning strategies, increasing self-confidence as well as motivation to learn English. The research was conducted on a number of 116 ninth and tenth graders at Colegiul Național “Emil Racoviță” of Iași, 58 of whom were part of a working group and 58 were the control group. The methodology consisted in applying questionnaires pre-manipulation and post-manipulation as well as pre- and post-manipulation focus group discussions. The data collation highlighted the great importance of the teachers' taking into account the learners' learning style preferences, learning efficiency and the learners' personal development.

Keywords: *learning styles and strategies, differences in learners, efficient teaching.*

1. Introduction

The present research is part of a longer project that was aimed at proving that a coherent, well-structured approach to English classes and lessons, taking into account the students' learning styles and adapting the teaching techniques and the activities to those styles will help both good and poor students improve their learning strategies. Before the research, I assumed that such an approach would also help students increase their motivation to learn English as well as their confidence and self-esteem level as learners. The reason why I embarked on this research journey, which took place between March and June 2013, lies in the strong belief that “lessons are for learning”, as Mike Hughes states in his book, *Strategies for Closing the Learning Gap*, “for learning is not the same thing as being occupied, sitting quietly or producing copious notes” (2003: 23).

2. Literature review

The learning context is extremely important when it comes to teaching depending on the learners' preferred learning styles and to helping students build learning strategies. There are a number of factors which influence learning and educators must be aware of these. They may range from external ones, such as age, the classroom the students find themselves in, the learners' physical state, the atmosphere created, to inner ones, such as intelligence¹, aptitude, personality, "confidence, motivation, learning pace, observed ability in language skills, cultural knowledge/awareness and linguistic knowledge" (Nunan, 1989: 102). As a teacher, one may easily come to the conclusion that learners are different from an array of points of view, some or most of which influence the foreign language learning process.

According to O'Brien and Guiney, "in recent years an interest has developed in learning styles and strategies [which is reflected] in the increased availability of educational literature in this area" (2001: 63). They provide the readers with very clear definitions² of the two concepts and the relationship between them: "learning styles illustrate how a learner processes information and makes judgments about their own learning capabilities [and] learning strategies relate to how the learner reacts to teacher decisions about how the learning environment is structured (...) learning style could be said to be more fixed than learning strategy which can be seen as fluid" (*ibidem*).

Learning styles and strategies have already been long researched and their importance or relevance to adopting or using them in the classroom has had both supporters and critics. For example, on the one hand, Cohen and Weaver argue the view that insight into and integration of learning styles preferences within the teaching framework, interrelated with learning strategies as well as motivational ones, "enhance the learners' interest in the task and expectancy of success (...) and will have a positive influence on their performance with other tasks as well" (Cohen, 2012: 175). On the other hand, Harmer brings forward Coffield and his colleagues' skeptical view: firstly, "there are so many different models available that it is almost impossible to choose between them" and "this is a big worry, especially since there is no kind of consensus among researchers about what they are looking at and what they have identified". Secondly, "some of the most popular methods are driven by commercial interests which have identified themselves with particular models". However, it still is extremely important to "understand the individual differences within a group" and I think

¹ Intelligence seen from the perspective of Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences.

² I consider them *clear* from the point of view of the scope of interest of this article: foreign language learning strategies being developed in the classroom and expanding them outside the classroom.

teachers, “should endeavour to teach individuals as well as groups” (Harmer, 2007: 89).

Despite the criticism or the downsides of learning styles and strategies, I strongly support Benson’s view and “idea that language teachers should know their students well and be responsive to their needs and preferences in language learning [which should now be] part and parcel of every teacher’s basic training” (apud Burns and Richards, 2012: 30)¹.

The literature offers a multi-faceted perspective. What I mean is that there are researchers who tackle learning styles and learning strategies separately, trying to define and classify them contingently, there are theorists who approach the two concepts in a unitary way, stating that it is not possible to disrupt the two elements that are one, and there are researchers who develop their findings interwoven with other aspects, such as motivation, teaching methods to be used in the classroom or even inclusion.

Learning styles, defined as favourite ways in which learners prefer studying, whether consciously or unconsciously, are obviously highly important when it comes to increasing effectiveness of second language learning. As Cohen and Weaver state, the discussion on such a topic with the students could lead to a number of advantages: “awareness of our learning styles preferences allows us to understand and organize our learning, (...) being in control of our learning styles makes us more flexible learners, since the more ways we can learn comfortably, the better, knowing how we learn best can make us more efficient, since the less amount of time needed to learn, the better, awareness of our style preferences can make us more effective learners, since the more easily we can learn, the better” (2005: 11).

In an article published in *Applied Linguistics Book*² in 2009, Andrew Cohen gives some examples of learning styles: 1) sensory/perceptual preferences: being more visual, more auditory or more tactile/kinaesthetic (hands-on); 2) cognitive style preference: being more global or more particular/detail oriented, being a more of a synthesizer and/or being analytic, being more deductive or more inductive; 3) personality-oriented style preference: being more extroverted or more introverted; being more abstract and

¹ “The rise of learner-centeredness in the 1970’s grew out of the recognition that language learners are diverse”. “Until the 1970’s language learners were largely invisible in teaching guides and their invisibility largely reflected an assumption that language learning was a more or less automatic consequence of good language teaching” (Benson, apud Burns and Richards, 2012: 31).

² The title of the article is *Focus on the Language Learner: Styles, Strategies and Motivation*.

intuitive or more concrete and thinking step-by-step sequence; preferring to keep all options open or being more closure-oriented (Cohen, 2009: 163).

There are a lot of characterizations and descriptions of the various types of learning styles. What we have written above is the essence. A more elaborate and minute illustration of what each preference is actually like, what it entails as a learning process, in terms of ways of approaching a task, means that support the process, as well as the support that teachers could provide with such each type of preference, appears in a very systematic and clear way in Andrew Cohen and Susan Weaver's *Styles and Strategies-Based Instruction: A Teachers' Guide* (2005: 14-15).

Researchers have classified learning strategies in different ways since the 1970's, when the learner and the learning process started slowly to be in the centre of attention of second language teaching methodology. "One such typology was formulated by O'Malley and Chamot in 1987: 1) *metacognitive* strategies: "previewing a concept or principle in anticipation of a learning activity; deciding in advance to attend to specific aspects of input; rehearsing linguistic components which will be required for an upcoming language task; self-monitoring of progress and knowledge states; 2) *cognitive* strategies: repeating after a language model; translating from L1; remembering a new word in the foreign language by relating it to one that sounds the same in L1, or by creating vivid images; guessing meanings of new material through inferencing; 3) *social/affective* strategies: seeking opportunities to interact with native speakers; working cooperatively with peers to obtain feedback or pool information; asking questions to obtain clarification; requesting repetition, explanation, or examples" (Saville-Troike, 2006: 91).

Around the same time, Oxford (1990, 1992) was developing her Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which uses factor analyses to group strategies into six categories. Rebecca Oxford identified "six major groups of [foreign language] learning strategies: 1) *cognitive* strategies enable the learner to manipulate the language material in direct ways, e.g., through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, and synthesizing; 2) *metacognitive* strategies (e.g., identifying one's own preferences and needs, planning, monitoring mistakes, and evaluating task success) are used to manage the learning process overall; 3) *memory-related* strategies (e.g., acronyms, sound similarities, images, key words) help learners link one L2 item or concept with another but do not necessarily involve deep understanding; 4) *compensatory* strategies (e.g.,

guessing from the context; circumlocution; and gestures and pause words) help make up for missing knowledge; 5) *affective* strategies, such as identifying one's mood and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself, and using deep breathing or positive self talk, help learners manage their emotions and motivation level; 6) *social* strategies (e.g., asking questions, asking for clarification, asking for help, talking with a native-speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms) enable the learner to learn via interaction with others and understand the target culture" (Ehrman, Leaver, Oxford, 2003: 316-317)¹.

All of these lists of types of learning strategies, characteristics and descriptions may be discouraging for some professionals in the 'teaching sector'. Nevertheless, teachers should bear in mind that they are part of the larger cycle that comprises not only teaching, but also learning. As Rebecca Oxford states, "this system is based on the theory that the learner is a 'whole person' who uses intellectual, social, emotional, and physical resources and is therefore not merely a cognitive/metacognitive information-processing machine" (Oxford, apud Richards and Renandya, 2002: 128).

3. Data and research methodology

Why would learners of foreign languages be the same? Why would the teaching strategies and techniques be the same day after day, or why would they be the same for all the students? Why would teachers sometimes pretend that teaching equals learning, when it does not? "When a teacher teaches, it is not necessarily the case that a learner learns what the teacher intended. The supposition that teaching equals learning suggests an equal and balanced relationship between teacher and learner. The balance is based upon one teaching while the other one learns (...) the relationship is not always equal" (O'Brien and Guiney, 2001: 36).

The research I conducted on a group of higher secondary students aimed at investigating and measuring, as accurately as possible, the impact that a coherent and well-structured approach to English classes has on learners, taking into account their perceptive learning style preferences and adapting the teaching techniques and activities to the students' learning styles or stretching them at times. The hypotheses of the research were the following: 1) both good and poor students would improve their learning strategies; 2) lower-level-competence

¹ In addition to the ones mentioned, Andrew Cohen provides further categories of learning strategies: retrieval strategies, rehearsal strategies, communication and cover strategies (2012: 164).

students would increase their motivation to learn English; 3) all students would increase their self-esteem and participation frequency during the English classes.

The research had several stages:

1. Finding out what kind of perceptive learning style preference the students in both the working group and the control group had. I asked them to answer a questionnaire¹ that was translated from Romanian into English and that consisted of 39 questions. I chose this questionnaire as it was the most comprehensive and the most relevant one to decide if the students were predominantly visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learners.

2. Sending approval forms to the parents or the legal tutors of the students in the working group, which the former signed and thus consented to their children taking part in the research.

3. Asking the students in the working group to answer a first research questionnaire (QA) that was aimed at finding out if they had a strategy for learning for school subjects in general, if they had a strategy for learning English, how motivated they were to learn English and how confident they were to take part in the English classes or any other extra-curricular activities that involved using the English language. The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open answers.

4. Setting up a focus group² made up of 9 students in the working group, ninth and tenth graders, who were selected depending on their English competence level as well as their learning style preferences. Thus, there were 3 pre-intermediate students, 3 intermediate students and 3 upper-intermediate or advanced students. Out of the 3 students in each English competence level group, one was a predominantly visual learner, one was a predominantly auditory learner and the third one was a predominantly kinaesthetic learner. For example, out of the 3 pre-intermediate students, one was a visual learner, one was auditory and one was a kinaesthetic learner.

5. Planning and delivering the lessons to the working group, the ninth and tenth graders, adapting the units in the coursebooks and setting up tasks that were in accordance with the students' learning style preferences. The approach was twofold: there were lessons when the students worked in groups or in pairs,

¹ The learning style preference questionnaire was downloaded from www.didactic.ro.

² As Liamputtong says in a short presentation of the history and methodology of using focus groups in applied research, on www.sagepub.com, "at the simplest level, a focus group is an informal discussion among a group of selected individuals about a particular topic" (2010: 3). This was Focus Group 1.

and they had to carry out tasks that were specific to visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learners and there were lessons when the students had to carry out tasks that were outside their learning style scope, in order to help them develop other ways in which they could approach a certain task and experience different things¹. Lessons were carefully planned in advance and all the types of perceptive learning preferences were included, to a higher or smaller extent. After each lesson had been planned, I made sure that activities for the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners were included, using some tools presented by Mike Hughes in his book *Strategies for Closing the Learning Gap* (2003: 132).

6. Asking the students both in the working group and in the control group to answer a second research questionnaire (QB) that was aimed at finding several aspects. The students answered the questionnaire in the last week of the school year. The main objectives of the questionnaire were: to check the students' motivation to learn English; to see how students assessed the efficiency with which they had studied English during the school year; to check if the students in the working group had developed learning strategies for English or if the ones who said they had one at the beginning of the research still kept it; to see what the skills the students had improved were; to see what activities were the most useful ones in the students' opinions; to see what the students thought of the teaching methods used during the English classes.

7. Setting up a focus group² for the students in the working group. I tried to keep the same structure and 7 of the initial 9 students were present. The same type of distribution was mostly kept: pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate students, as well as visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners. The discussion was aimed at checking if the answers of the students in the working group corresponded by and large with the answers of the students who took part in the focus group. The questions dealt primarily with the types of skills they thought they had improved during the school year, what they would have changed had they had the opportunity, what they would do if they were the

¹ According to Reid, "it is possible to 'match' teaching styles with learning styles. It does not, however, have to be carried out in all areas of the curriculum as the child needs to gain experience in all aspects of learning and practice at using different styles, it is desirable to ensure that children/students are aware of their own learning styles so that when they are undertaking independent learning they will be able to use the self-knowledge they have in relation to their learning" (Reid, 2005: 63).

² This was Focus Group 2.

English teachers of their class and what their plans connected to improving their English skills were for the holiday¹.

8. Setting up another focus group² for the students in the control group. The students were selected in the same way as for Focus Group 2; there were students whose English competence level was diverse, ranging from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate and they were visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners. I asked them exactly the same questions as for Focus Group 2 as I meant to compare their answers to those of the students in the previous focus group, and to the answers the students in the control group gave for Questionnaire B.

9. Interpreting the data. This step had several layers: the qualitative method of collating the data, the quantitative method and a mix of the two types of methods, for the questions that had a *yes/no* answer or a *scale-framed* kind of answer, ranging from *very efficient* to *not efficient at all*, for example.

The working group of the research consisted of two classes: a ninth grade, studying 2 hours of English per week and a tenth grade, studying 4 hours of English per week. The total number of the students was 58: 31 students in the ninth grade and 27 students in the tenth grade. All the students were aged between 15 and 17. There were 7 boys in the ninth grade and 2 boys in the tenth grade. The rest of the students were all girls. The level of linguistic competence of English was heterogeneous. Even if the students of the tenth grade, a humanities class, were selected at the beginning of their ninth grade, their levels had remained quite diverse, ranging from advanced to pre-intermediate. The levels of linguistic competence of the ninth-graders were very diverse, ranging from upper-intermediate to pre-intermediate. If I were to analyse the students' level of competence thoroughly, I could say that there were 14 pre-intermediate-competence-level students, 10 intermediate and 7 upper-intermediate. The situation for the tenth grade was the following one: 1 pre-intermediate student, 9 intermediate students, 11 upper-intermediate and 6 advanced. The above mentioned aspects can be summarized in the table:

¹ That was the last question of the discussion and it was meant to check in an indirect way if they had developed learning strategies.

² This was Focus Group 3.

Class	Number of students	Gender	Age	Level of English competence
9 th grade	31	24 girls 7 boys	15-16	14 pre-intermediate
				10 intermediate
				7 upper-intermediate
10 th grade	27	25 girls 2 boys	16-17	1 pre-intermediate
				9 intermediate
				11 upper-intermediate
				6 advanced

Table 1: The number of students in the working group involved in the research, their gender, age and level of English competence.

The control group consisted of students of ninth and tenth grades from different classes of Colegiul Național *Emil Racoviță*, some of them studying 2 hours of English per week and others 4 classes of English per week. I constituted this group from a wide range of students so as to have a relevant sample. They answered two types of questionnaires: one establishing their perceptive learning style preferences and Questionnaire B which they answered at the end of the school year. Some of them also took part in the control group focus group at the end of the school year, which was Focus Group 3.

There were 58 students in the control group, all of them aged between 15 and 17. Out of the total number of 58 students, 26 students were ninth-graders and 32 students were tenth-graders. There were 16 girls in the ninth grade and 10 boys and in the tenth grade there were 18 girls and 14 boys. Following a discussion with the teachers of these classes, I found out that, out of the total number of 28 students in the ninth grade, 4 were pre-intermediate, 10 were intermediate and 14 upper-intermediate. Out of the total number of 30 tenth-graders, 14 were pre-intermediate, 6 were intermediate and 10 upper-intermediate. The above mentioned aspects can be summarized in the table:

Class	Number of students	Gender	Age	Level of English competence
9 th grade	28	18 girls 10 boys	15-16	4 pre-intermediate
				10 intermediate
				14 upper-intermediate
10 th grade	30	16 girls 14 boys	16-17	14 pre-intermediate
				6 intermediate
				10 upper-intermediate

Table 2: The number of students in the control group, their gender, age and level of English competence.

4. Research findings

The interpretation of the data and information provided by the first research questionnaire (QA) in the working group revealed some interesting aspects: a larger number of ninth graders had a strategy to learn English than tenth graders, but they were less motivated and less confident to take part in the English classes or any other extra-curricular activities that involved using English. Despite these differences, the visual and the mixed type learners in both groups proved to be more motivated to learn English and more confident to take part in the English classes, the other types of learners being less motivated and less confident.

Taking into consideration the discussions that took place during the first focus group of the working group, several conclusions could be drawn: students who had a visual, auditory or kinaesthetic predominant learning style preference proved the fact that they favoured activities or approaches that matched their learning style; students who had higher level of competence in English also used a wider range of strategies to improve their knowledge and skills; regardless of their level of competence and perceptive learning style preference, students were aware of the importance of interactive activities and tasks in a foreign language class.

The results of the second research questionnaire (QB) that the students in the working group answered at the end of the school year revealed some changes in the learners' motivation to learn English and the capacity to self-assess their performance and progress in English. For example, the students' level of motivation to learn English increased by 3.3% at the end of the school year, in comparison with their motivation level at the beginning of the research

and their self-confidence as well as the capacity to self-assess their progress in English increased by 5.9%. In addition, the questionnaire also revealed the skills the students had most developed and what activities helped them improve those language skills and areas. Speaking was the most developed skill in all students and the discussions or structured conversations had helped them. The last aspect worth mentioning is connected to how well the students' needs had been met and how teaching techniques and strategies had helped them. More than half of the students considered teaching to be *very efficient* and the learners who had benefited the most were the auditory and the mixed type learners. The majority of the other types of learners thought that the teaching had been *quite efficient*. On balance, all types of perceptive learning style preferences were taken into account and the vast majority of students benefited from them.

Correlating Questionnaire A and Questionnaire B for the working group, there was an increase in the number of students who had developed learning strategies. Even if the increase was not spectacular, only 5% of the students in the working group having done so, it is important to mention that the students became more aware of the importance of having a coherent strategy when learning English. This was visible in the focus group discussions and in the words, or the metalanguage, the students used when motivating their answers to the questions at the end of the school year.

The answers that the students in the working group gave in QB were consistent with the ones they gave in the second focus group. This clearly indicated that they were actually aware of the language skills and areas they had improved during the school year. Another relevant aspect was that they were able to provide explanations about the activities that had been useful for them as learners of English or they had not fully enjoyed, even if they knew those activities supposed benefits for other learners and that they were useful. All in all I can say that, during the school year, at the end of the research, students in the working group who participated in second focus group developed awareness of learning styles and strategies and their answers were quite homogeneous in terms of types of activities, benefits involved and things they would make use of further on.

If the answers regarding learning strategies of the working group and the ones given by the students in the control group were compared, a quite big difference would be visible. At the end of the school year, there were 38 students, out of the total 58, in the working group who wrote that they had had a strategy to learn English, whereas there were only 13 students in the control

group, out of the total number of 58, who answered affirmatively to the same question at the end of the school year. This means that the students in the working group were more aware of the importance of learning strategies.

	The working group	The control group
The total no. of students	58	58
No. of students who had a strategy to learn English	38	13
No. of students who did not have a strategy to learn English	20	45

Table 3: The total number of students in the working group and in the control group who had or did not have a strategy to learn English.

Motivation

Comparing the findings in Questionnaire A and Questionnaire B, for the working group, an increase in the students' level of motivation to learn English is visible. If the average motivation level was 8.91 at the beginning of the research, the average motivation level was 9.24 at the end of the school year. If the difference in numbers were to be changed into percentage, this would be 3.3%. The most motivated learners in the working group were the visual and the mixed type ones.

The motivation level of the students in the control group was a little below the one of the students in the working group at the end of the school year. The average was 9.08, the difference between the two groups of students being only 1.6%. The most motivated learners in the control group were the visual learners and the auditory ones.

Self-esteem

The average level of confidence to take part in the English classes or in any other types of activities that involve using English was 7.96, which means that, at the beginning of the research, there were still students in the working group who were not confident enough to participate in the activities. At the end of the school year, when they were asked to measure how efficiently they thought they had learnt English, they became more confident in assessing themselves. The average was 8.55. Correlating the two questions, I can say that the students' level of confidence and even self-esteem increased by 5.9%.

The students in the control group proved to think that they had learnt English less efficiently than the ones in the working group. Their average level

was 7.60. The most efficient learners, in the students' opinions, were the visual and the mixed type learners, followed by the auditory and the kinaesthetic types.

Teaching efficiency

One of the most interesting aspects to analyse, and definitely, one of the most relevant ones, was the way in which the students assessed teaching in terms of efficiency. More than half of the students in the working group thought the teaching had been *very efficient*, the rest of them considering it to have been quite efficient. This means that the teaching techniques and strategies were diverse enough to cater for all the learning style preferences in the two classes.

On the other hand, only almost a third of the students in the control group considered the teaching to have been very efficient and nearly a quarter thought that the teaching had been quite efficient. The rest of the students were not sure about how efficient teaching had been or they even thought that it had not been very efficient. This situation clearly indicates that the teaching did not take into account the fact that the learners do have different needs and various learning style preferences.

5. Conclusion

Whether visual, auditory, kinaesthetic learners or mixed type ones, higher secondary school students do know the importance of learning English efficiently. Learning a foreign language successfully actually means using it in all types of communication. This is what all students appeared to have been very much aware of and mentioned in their answers in the questionnaires and in the focus groups.

Despite the drawbacks related to time, curriculum and other activities that could consume quite a lot of time¹, it is extremely important for teachers to be aware of the importance of finding out what their students' learning style preferences are and try to adapt to them, as much as possible, in order for the latter to start building their autonomy in terms of learning, to mention at least one implication of such an approach. "The more that teachers know about their students' style preferences, the more effectively they can orient their [foreign language] instruction, as well as the strategy teaching that can be interwoven into language instruction, matched to those style preferences. Some learners might need instruction presented more visually, while others might require more

¹ Preparing students for national exams or contests, where they are tested for certain skills or micro-skills that need extra practice.

auditory, kinesthetic, or tactile types of instruction. Without adequate knowledge about their individual students' style preferences, teachers cannot systematically provide the needed instructional variety" (Vaseghi, et al., 2012: 448).

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Professor Anca Cehan for her valuable insights and guidance. Any errors are my own.

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