Learning styles

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A learning style is not in itself an ability but rather a preferred way of using one’s abilities (Sternberg 1994). Individuals have different learning styles, that is, they differ in their ‘natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills’ (Reid 1995: viii). Learning styles are typically bipolar entities (for example reflective versus impulsive, random versus sequential), representing two extremes of a wide continuum; however, where a learner falls on the continuum is value neutral because each extreme has its own potential advantages and disadvantages (Dörnyei 2005). Moreover, although individuals may have some strong style preferences and tendencies, learning styles are not fixed modes of behaviour, and, based on different situations and tasks, styles can be extended and modified (Reid 1987; Oxford 2011). However, the extent to which individuals can extend or shift their styles to suit a particular situation varies (Ehrman 1996).

In general psychology, interest in learning styles goes back to at least the 1920s when Carl Jung proposed the theory of psychological types (Sternberg and Grigorenko 1997). In the field of education, the learning style concept has been recognized since at least the mid-1970s (Griffiths 2012). Subsequently, many different dimensions of learning styles have been investigated both conceptually and empirically, and numerous theories and multiple taxonomies attempting to describe how people think and learn have been proposed, often classifying individuals into distinct groups (for example visual versus auditory, global versus analytic, inductive versus deductive). Furthermore, various learning style instruments (for example written surveys) have been developed for both research and pedagogical purposes (for a critical review of some of the most influential models and instruments, see Coffield, Moseley, Hall, and Ecclestone (2004)).

According to Sternberg and Grigorenko (op.cit.: 702), there are three main motivations for the interest in the study of styles: ‘providing a link between cognition and personality; understanding, predicting, and improving educational achievement; and improving vocational selection, guidance, and possibly, placement’.

While there is ample evidence that individuals differ in how they prefer to take in, process, and acquire new information, the educational implications of such preferences have been a source of great
controversy among researchers and educators over the years (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, and Bjork 2009). Proponents of learning styles assessment in instruction believe that learning styles can be measured and used as a valuable teaching tool inside the classroom (for example Sternberg, Grigorenko, and Zhang 2008). According to these scholars, by diagnosing students’ learning styles and matching them to teaching methods (for example for a ‘visual learner’, presenting information through pictorial illustrations), learning can be greatly enhanced. Other scholars have rejected the value of learning styles in educational practice and claim that tailoring instruction to students’ individual learning styles does not lead to better learning outcomes (for example Stahl 1999; Willingham 2005).

This same controversial situation exists in the area of second language acquisition (SLA). A number of research studies in SLA have addressed the relationship between learning styles and second language (L2) achievement; however, these studies have generally found only a weak relationship (Ellis 2008). Thus, based on what research in SLA has revealed so far, the question of whether or not learning styles are strongly associated with L2 acquisition and should therefore be considered in L2 teaching cannot be answered with certainty. As Ellis (ibid.: 671) states, ‘at the moment there are few general conclusions that can be drawn from the research on learning style’. According to Riding (2000: 365), this vague situation is due to a number of serious problems, in particular ‘there being too many labels purporting to being different styles, the use of ineffective assessment methods, and the lack of a clear distinction between style and other constructs such as intelligence and personality’.

Further research with more appropriate methodologies is needed to validate the use of learning styles assessment in instruction (Pashler et al. op.cit.). Until this occurs, however, as Chapelle (1992: 381) states, we simply cannot disregard the concept of learning style, ‘which express[es] some of our intuitions about students and which facilitate[s] appreciation for the divergent approaches to thinking and learning’.

References


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