

Galyna Mikhnenko

National Technical University of Ukraine

„Kyiv Polytechnic Institute”

The use of information about students' learning styles in a foreign language teaching

Over the years many different methods and approaches to the teaching and learning of language to and by speakers of other languages, each with its own theoretical basis, have come and gone in and out of fashion (for instance the grammar-translation method, the audio-lingual method, the communicative approach). Meanwhile, language learning styles and strategies are increasingly attracting the interest of contemporary educators because of their potential to enhance learning. It is common knowledge that it is extremely important to understand individual differences, learning principles, factors that affect motivation of students in language learning situations, and the variety of individual learning styles models that teachers can consider in their efforts.

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 following four dimensions of learning style are among the most strongly associated with language learning: sensory preferences, personality types, desired degree of generality, and biological differences.

Sensory preferences can be broken down into four main areas: visual, auditory, kinesthetic (movement-oriented), and tactile (touch-oriented). The aspect of personality type consists of four strands: extraverted vs. introverted; intuitive-random vs. sensing-sequential; thinking vs. feeling; and closure-oriented/judging vs. open/perceiving.

Desired degree of generality contrasts the learner who focuses on the main idea or big picture with the learner who concentrates on details. The global student and the

analytic student have much to learn from each other. A balance between generality and specificity is very useful for language learning.

Differences in language learning style can also be related to biological factors, such as biorhythms, sustenance, and location. The biological aspects of language learning style are often forgotten, but vigilant teachers can often make accommodations and compromises when needed. [2]

One should mention that learning styles are not dichotomous (black or white, present or absent). Learning styles generally operate on a continuum or on multiple, intersecting continua. For example, a person might be more extraverted than introverted, or more closure-oriented than open, or equally visual and auditory but with lesser kinesthetic and tactile involvement. Few if any people could be classified as having all or nothing in any of these categories [2] So, the styles identified by learning style inventories are not little boxes, neatly separated from one another; rather, they represent dimensions along which learners may differ.

How do learning styles relate to other important, related concepts like personality or learning strategies? One might visualize these complex relationships in this way: Personality > Learning style > Learning strategies > Techniques/Tactics.

Personality - the very general basic individual character structure. Learning styles reflect the individual's consistent and preferred learning approach, an approach which he or she exhibits time and time again, in a wide range of situations and contexts - and not necessarily in school or university contexts. A person's style affects the kinds of learning strategies that he or she will use - in other words, if you tend to prefer certain strategies on a rather permanent basis, this means that you are probably using a particular learning style. Finally, a learning strategy consists of a cluster of tactics or techniques, this being the only visible level, what we see when we look at what a learner actually does in the classroom. [1]

After identifying learning styles represented in our class should we accommodate personal characteristics or should we try to change them? In other words, should we

design activities which suit the individual learner's personal styles, or should we rather ask our learners to adapt their own styles to different materials and activities? Moreover, one should take into account that we as teachers also have our own fairly well-established learning and teaching styles.

This is no easy question to answer, but there is one important consideration to make. All styles represent positive approaches to learning; all styles can be productive and useful according to the situation, and especially according to the specific task you have to face. In other words, the demands of a task may mean that some styles or approaches are more appropriate for certain purposes than for others. This is to say that learner's preferences or natural ways of performing may be irrelevant to a particular task: for example, no matter how visual you are, some ideas are hard to convey graphically, so you need to learn other ways of expressing them.

So if we simply choose to adapt materials, activities and teaching styles to our learners' favourite approach, if we ask them to perform only in ways which come easy to them, we will not be doing them a good service after all. We can certainly reinforce their strong points but we will neglect their weak points - and, as we know, we have a tendency to become weaker and weaker in those areas which we avoid. [1]

Hence, we can use the information we get about our students' learning styles in two basic ways: to capitalise on learners strengths and to deal with learners weaknesses. On the one hand, we could try to offer them a variety of learning opportunities to match the range of styles which is represented in the classroom. This would mean, for example, varying the materials and the activities; using group work and cooperative learning, by, for example, grouping learners so that there are students with different styles in each group, or giving different tasks to each group. In this way we would be accommodating the tasks to the learners. On the other hand, we could help students to shape or adjust their learning approach to suit the requirements of the tasks. This implies helping them to recognize the purpose and the demands of a task, and then helping them to use also

what is not their preferred style. We would then try to make our students more flexible and versatile; in this way we would be accommodating the learners to the tasks.

As for teaching materials, in order not to directly change our own teaching style we sometimes might instead think of incorporating an approach we are not familiar with into the materials we use. In this way the materials might do a job for us - for example, sometimes learning strategies embodied in teaching materials can improve students' performance even if our own teaching strategies are not always in tune with our students' expectations.

Thus, it is important for both teachers and students to realize that learners always encounter many situations that are not adapted to their own preferences. What teachers need to do is to help students develop the skills and strategies needed for learning effectively from teachers who do not match the students' preferred learning style. When students become aware of their preferred ways of learning and realize the requirements of the tasks they have to perform, they can be taught to practise suitable learning strategies to cope with the specific demands of the tasks.

References:

1. Mariani, L. Investigating learning styles //Perspectives, a Journal of TESOL-Italy. – 1996. – Vol. XXI, No. 2/Vol. XXII, No. 1.
2. Oxford, R.L. Language Learning Styles and Strategies: An Overview. - Oxford, GALA, 2003.
3. Sims, R & Sims, S (Eds.). The importance of learning styles. – Greenwood Press, 1995.