Learning language and learning style: principles, process and practice

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This article suggests that by linking a student's individual approach to learning, a clearer understanding can be gained of how successful foreign language acquisition is achieved. Approaching a learner in his/her own style seems to yield better results: pairing a student with someone of the opposite style appears to nurture the development of further strategies. The construct of style offers an opportunity to learn how to teach and learn more effectively.

INTRODUCTION

There are arguably at least two self-evident 'truths' about effective teaching and learning in the classroom. The first is that an individual pupil's approach to learning is central to educational achievement. The second is that a teacher's awareness and response to this approach is equally crucial for success in the classroom. Although knowing more about how individual pupils learn, as a process and in practice, has always been an important question for foreign language teachers (FL) learning a FL may not generally be associated with a direct focus upon the process of learning.

Nevertheless, it is argued in this article that making such a link between teaching a foreign language and pupils' personal approaches to learning leads to a better understanding of how pupils may effectively learn a FL. This, in turn, can lead to new and successful approaches to teaching and learning in the FL classroom. The aim of this article is to raise an awareness amongst FL teachers of such style differences in learning and to demonstrate how such knowledge can enable successful teaching and learning of a FL.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Is learning a FL fundamentally different to the kind of learning demanded by other curriculum areas? Researchers who examine language learning in processing terms argue that FL learning, generally, has much in common with other types of learning (e.g. McLaughlin, 1984: 20; Bialystok, 1994). They argue that individuals are born with a processing mechanism, enabling them to create linguistic patterns in much the same way as they create perceptual patterns, using the senses to interpret the world. Learning language is viewed as being the same process as that used in achieving other forms of symbolic knowledge.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of this learning process, it is helpful to consider the role of two core aspects of language learning: procedural and declarative knowledge. **Procedural** knowledge lies outside an individual's realm of consciousness – it is much easier to demonstrate this form of knowledge than to lecture or talk about it – for example the knowledge of how to tie shoe laces. **Declarative** knowledge, in contrast, is a form of knowledge associated with established criteria or human construct, a vocabulary of units of meaning, or simply, a replication of stated fact, for example, the French for "apple" is "la pomme." One can demonstrate mastery of this type of knowledge by repeating and using this word, ideally in a variety of contexts.

The difference in the two forms of knowledge is captured in the distinction between declarative knowledge which entails 'knowing what or why', with an emphasis upon understanding, and procedural knowledge or 'knowing how', with an emphasis upon application. Declarative knowledge is more abstract, often symbolic, as opposed to procedural knowledge which is more often observed or sensed. Bialystok (1994:161) has linked these two elements of learning to linguistic processing by suggesting that "analysis and control are two of the processing components of cognition", and developing this idea to argue that "knowledge appears to become more explicit and processing more fluent as analysis and control continue to modify the mental representations." The cognitive process of analysis is thereby related to declarative learning. The cognitive process of control appears to be related to

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procedural learning and is defined by Bialystok as a process of selective attention, which features in FL learning as linguistic activity carried out in 'real time'.

Slobin (see King and Boaks, 1993) suggested that the focus in FL learning needs to be deliberately grounded in the area of processing control. Communicative methodology (e.g. CILT 1995) represents one of the more recent significant developments in FL teaching. It involves specified teaching and learning activities as components in a specific approach to FL learning. These include strategies and techniques listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Communicative strategies of teaching

TEACHING ELEMENTS	LEARNING ELEMENTS
• information gap	• intention to mean
• personalisation	• unpredictability
• target language	• legitimacy
• practice vs real language	• authenticity
• speech vs writing	• approach to error

The proponents of 'communicative methodology' positively and clearly acknowledged the key role of procedural learning in acquiring FL proficiency. More traditionally, emphasis in FL learning seemed to rest in the domain of declarative knowledge, as revealed in contemporary text books (see Figure 1). The question of how pupils learn or access these basic forms of knowledge points to the need for further consideration of FL learning and raises issues to do with differences in learning outcome and performance.

Figure 1 German text (pre 1980): An example

"why is it that results in FLs vary so greatly within the same classroom?"

Was ist das?

Das ist eine Zigarette   Wer raucht die Zigarette?   Der Mann raucht die Zigarette

Das ist ein Kleid   Wer kauft das Kleid?   Die Frau kauft das Kleid

Das ist ein Fenster   Wer öffnet das Fenster?   Der Bäcker öffnet das Fenster

Das ist eine Tür   Wer schließt die Tür?   Der Kaufmann schließt die Tür

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES AND FL LEARNING

The significance of individual differences in the learner is as relevant to FLs as any other area of the school curriculum. This can be demonstrated by briefly asking some basic questions about teaching FLs in the classroom. For example, why is it that results in FLs vary so greatly within the same classroom? Pupils with a similar exposure to the target language can achieve a commendably good accent whilst others continue to mispronounce words time after time; some pupils so obviously enjoy activities reflecting 'communicative methodology' with its opportunity for 'genuine communication', while others seem to prefer a more traditional approach to vocabulary building. In the study of German certain individuals master linguistic patterns with ease, while other pupils seem unable to remain consistent in their application of pattern (see Table 2).

Table 2 Learning linguistic patterns in German

[A]   Um sechs Uhr gehe ich ins Kino.
I'm going to the cinema at six

[B]   * Um elf Uhr ich fahre nach
Hause zurück
I'm going home at eleven o' clock

[C]   Wenn das Wetter schön ist,
gehe ich zu Fuss
When it's nice weather I walk

[D]   *Wenn das Wetter schlecht ist,
ich fahre mit dem Bus
When the weather is bad I take the bus

This applies similarly in the teaching of French (see Table 3).

Table 3 Learning linguistic patterns in French

[A]   Je vais partir à six heures
I'm going to leave at six

[B]   *Je vais cherch mon livre
I'm going to look for my book

Why is it that the classroom reality is such a mixed picture of learning outcomes? An immediate and easy explanation, often heard in staff room conversation, is that the pupils do not have the necessary linguistic ability or are unable to transfer learning. Alternatively, explanations might often include a reference to gender differences in approaches to learning or the effect of a pupil's personality to explain the variation in performance. A more practical perspective might point to motivation, on-task behaviour and a general

attitude to learning. Finally, a view perhaps more likely to be associated with parents might point to a teacher's personality, teaching performance and appropriate support for the pupil.

What these responses have in common is an intuitive focus upon individual differences in the learner. However, intellectual or academic ability, that is the notion of brightness or dullness, normally used by teachers as a general predictor of achievement in many curriculum areas, does not seem to accurately reflect achievement in learning a FL: there exists an unacceptably large number of boys and, to a lesser extent, girls across the ability range who seem unable to achieve the standard of success one might expect in FL learning.

The need for a response to such individual differences is indicated in the decreasing numbers of post A Level students in FLs, shortages of FL teachers and the under-performance of boys in learning FLs. Disaffection in the FL classroom as shown in research looking at problem behaviour is long-standing, and the situation has not improved. For example, research carried out ten years ago revealed that "93% of modern language teachers selected boys as being the most troublesome compared with only 55% of mathematics teachers." The researchers further stated that "interestingly enough, as a broad generalisation the lowest average levels of on-task behaviour were found in modern language classes and the highest in maths classes" (Wheldall and Merrett, 1989: 61).

A similar view is reflected in an HMI Report (HMI, 1989) pinpointing the need for the development of positive attitudes to teaching FLs to a wider range of pupils, emphasising the importance of higher expectations for pupil achievement, a view that improved teaching skills or methods were required, and a greater use of the target language in the classroom.

What seems important for effective teaching and learning in FLs, or for that matter any other subject lesson, is raising levels of positive behaviour associated with learning in the classroom. Promoting levels of appropriate behaviour is perhaps even more challenging in mixed ability settings or when using group activities to encourage active participation amongst pupils in their work. By considering learning styles, teachers can begin to enhance their approach to teaching. The possibility of more focused work, targeting styles in an approach to lesson planning, opens up greater opportunity for differentiation. An awareness of pupils' learning styles can also improve behaviour by building levels of motivation and self-confidence within the group. A focus on style can result in the learner feeling more involved in the process of learning. Teachers can, therefore, use style to structure lesson activity with the aim of raising pupil motivation, interest, and on-task behaviour, but, above all, reinforcing the development of

communicative ability. Developing such a style-based approach will be considered next, followed by some practical examples, which were developed during action research carried out in the secondary classroom.

## STYLE DIFFERENCES IN LEARNING AND BEHAVIOUR

A consideration for the teacher interested in effective learning must inevitably include a concern for individual differences in the classroom. Effective teaching requires asking questions about how a teacher can enable the learning performance of each individual pupil within the class. For example: to what extent does a teacher respond to how each pupil is persistently tackling the learning task? Indeed, how possible is it to respond to each individual in the real time of classroom life?

The way an individual pupil will typically approach a learning task is strongly influenced by their cognitive style (e.g. Riding, 1991; Riding and Sadler-Smith, 1992; Riding and Rayner, 1995; Rayner and Riding, 1997). An individual bias affects the way we process information. Implications of cognitive style for the FL classroom are reported by Riding and Banner (1986, 1988) and Banner and Rayner (1997). Other research supporting this perspective is reported by Riding and Cheema (1991), and more extensively by Riding and Rayner (1998). The implications of cognitive style naturally lead to a consideration of the individual development of strategies, skills and techniques used by the learner in any learning activity. Indeed, we each develop a style incorporating a repertoire of strategies for learning or teaching. This personal style reflects our cognitive style and shapes our approach both in the teaching and learning task (Riding and Rayner, 1995).

COGNITIVE STYLE

An individual's cognitive style comprises two fundamental dimensions which form the basis for thinking and the processing of new information. These two dimensions are identified as a Verbal-Imager continuum of representation of and a Wholist-Analytic information continuum of information-processing and problem-solving (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Fundamental dimensions of cognitive style
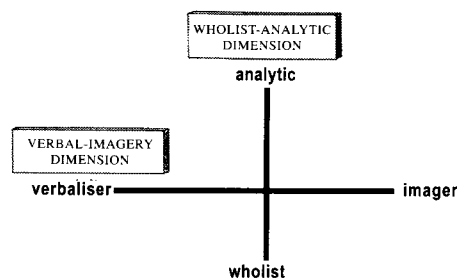
"what seems important for effective teaching and learning in FLs... is raising levels of positive behaviour associated with learning in the classroom"

(i) *The Verbal-Imager Dimension of Learning*

The first fundamental dimension of cognitive style is a verbal-imager structure which reflects the process of mental representation or thinking. The existence of this style dimension in groups of learners was first suggested by Galton (1883) and James (1890). Further evidence of the existence of these learning patterns has been provided by many researchers, including Stewart (1965), Hollenberg (1970), Delaney (1978), Riding and Ashmore (1980) and Riding and Calvey (1981).

Class-based research in FL lessons has also suggested that students who are verbalisers often achieve good pronunciation, which is easily transferable to new topics. They tend to enjoy activities which emphasize discussion. On the other hand, visual learners have been identified as students who are typically proficient in pattern recognition and emphasise meaning in language work. They do, however, seem to experience varying levels of difficulty with pronunciation (Banner and Rayner, 1997).

(ii) *The Wholist-analytic Dimension of Learning*

A second fundamental dimension of cognitive style structures the way in which learners process information, that is, analytically or wholistically. For example, the analytic learner will typically focus upon the parts rather than the whole in a topic. They spontaneously tackle a task by following one separate step after another with little grasp of an overall view. A wholist learner, by contrast, will tend to approach a task in a generalised manner, working clearly to an overview, but with no grasp of detail. Structured observation of FL lessons has revealed a tendency for pupils identified as wholist learners to enjoy class-based or large group discussion. They work well on reproductive tasks but show less inclination to deal with detail or learn from diagrams and pictures (Banner and Rayner, 1997).

(iii) Observed learning behaviours associated with style differences

Tables four, five and six represent observations of learning behaviours in the FL classroom across Key Stages 3 and 4 over a period of three years in a high school. Cognitive Style Analysis (CSA) was used to establish the cognitive style of pupils (Riding 1991). This is a computerized task taking about ten minutes to complete and which gives a measurement of the two basic dimensions of cognitive style.

Research has shown that when individuals have materials presented which match their own style they consistently achieve better results (Riding and Ashmore, 1980; Riding and Dyer, 1983; Riding, Buckle, Thompson and Hagger, 1989). However, it is likely that if a teacher designs a scheme of work without consideration of cognitive

or learning styles, the materials or mode of presentation will reflect their own personal style. The scheme of work, consequently, will probably lack balance, breadth, and most certainly be characterized by limited differentiation.

Table 4 Characteristics of verbal learners

VERBAL LEARNERS	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. Pronunciation	1. Inability to transfer a pattern e.g. **Man kann** in der Nähe die Burg besuch*en.* Man kann in der Stadt einkaufen geh*en.*
2. Accepting of all kinds of people	2. Not very self-reliant when set individual work
3. Lively and enjoy group activity	3. Poor at spelling when recognition of a pattern is vital e.g. *zwie; *veir *drie

Table 5 Characteristics of visual learners

VISUAL LEARNERS	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. Good at transfer of a pattern e.g. **Ich habe** eine Kette gekauft. **Ich habe** deinen Freund gesehen.	1. Introverted with poor pronunciation
2. Learn language best from diagrams and graphs	2. Prefer to work as as individual, rather than in a group
3. Good at problem solving	3. Unwilling to use the teacher or the book as a model, prefer to organise themselves

"When individuals have materials presented which match their own style they consistently achieve better results"

Table 6 Characteristics of wholist and analytical learners

WHOLIST LEARNERS	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. Socially spontaneous Good at coping with a communicative situation which demands a "set phrase" e.g. "Quel dommage!"	1. Seeing differences between nouns, verbs, adjectives etc. – unable to easily classify
2. Energetic with drive	2. Looks only superficially at tasks e.g. resulting in weakness in comprehension of specifics
3. Rarely lost for words	3. Finds it difficult to listen
4. Enjoys a stimulating lesson	4. Finds it hard to persevere
5. Works well on reproductive tasks	5. Finds it hard to understand unless material is clearly structured by the teacher
6. Has a good overview	6. Cannot work from tables and tree diagrams

ANALYTIC LEARNERS	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. Interpreting diagrammatic communicating of language	1. They have difficulty using set phrases in presentation
2. Can impose own organisation	2. Tends to concentrate on one aspect of communication at the expense of the rest
3. Dependable, can get on with a task	3. Needs to cultivate relationships
4. Good at getting a clear view of the important issues	4. Finds it hard to empathise with a foreigner
5. Reliable and dependable	5. Unwilling to involve others, too self-reliant
6. Tends to be superior in comprehension of specific detail	6. Needs help to choose concrete analogies of abstract ideas

The authors have noted individual cases of personal success and academic results being affected by such style-biased planning. This has included individual pupils as well as specific groups, that is, small groups within a class and on one occasion, a whole class. 'A positive change in behaviour and success in learning appeared to be facilitated by an increased level of awareness of style differences. It also seemed to reflect an increased level of differentiation in the process of learning activity. The conclusion drawn, therefore, was that classroom interaction benefited from a deliberately structured mix of activity and grouping, reflecting an active recognition of the differing communicative strengths of individuals in the group.

TEACHING AND LEARNING: 'DOING IT IN STYLE'

The desire and the need to develop new ways of enhancing teaching and learning are shared by every teacher planning the next scheme of work, facing the school day or simply preparing a lesson. This fact alone represents good reason for finding time to consider the development of style-led teaching and learning in the classroom. The way forward for an interested teacher, we argue, involves several steps leading to the creation of style-led differentiation. The purpose of developing such an approach to the learner is to learn to enhance the development of both declarative and procedural knowledge, communication and language skills.

(i) Awareness raising

We suggest that a first step should be an awareness-raising programme which enables teachers and pupils to test the assertion that style differences can make a positive difference in the classroom. The idea that awareness raising represents the first crucial stage in developing a style-led curriculum is well documented in the literature (e.g. Butler, 1985; Claxton and Murrell, 1987; Dunn and Griggs, 1989; Riding and Rayner, 1995).

It is important, however, in the real world of the classroom that teachers see some early return for the time spent considering the place of style in the process of teaching and learning. Teachers, who are pressured by ever-increasing demands, understandably need to see some advantages to including a style-led dimension in their teaching and learning. The same principle applies equally to pupils, who need to see a relevance and benefit for their learning if they are going to change their behaviour. Developing a spectrum of style characteristics is a potentially exciting developmental activity for interested teachers. The benefits of this initial step are illustrated in Tables 4 and 5 and represent short-term gains observed

"The way forward for an interested teacher... involves several steps leading to the creation of style-led differentiation"

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by the authors in the FL classroom.

(ii) Grouping learners

A useful way to continue with a style-led approach in teaching is to re-focus on designing the learning interaction in the lesson. Lack of self-confidence is presumably one factor affecting individual performance in FL learning. Grouping learners together, on the basis of their style, can form a kind of self-help group. Verbal learners facing a task involving extensive use of language patterns could be supported by the teacher whilst visual learners could be expected to get on with the task with less support.

An extension of this teaching strategy might exploit the same grouping: explanations of core elements of the learning task might be presented to match the style of a particular group; visual learners could have key concepts presented with diagrams and charts. Such an approach can enable the teacher to match the intuitive needs of a pupil's style more closely and reinforce as well as accelerate learning as a consequence. By considering style differences amongst pupils, we have the opportunity to work with their levels of control and analysis as part of the process in language learning.

A second form of style-based differentiation or grouping is 'style flexing'. This approach, involving the arrangement of complementary styles, can produce startling improvements in learning behaviour and classroom performance (e.g Kirby, 1979; Claxton and Murrell, 1987). This is particularly relevant to specific forms of group work, for example, where the teacher is seeking a creative but involved dynamic leading to a balanced piece of work as an outcome. Pairing differing styles brings a new perspective to members of the group, and often generates new life and vitality in the learning situation. Furthermore, Banner has found that mixed style and ability grouping is also particularly useful in work involving teams and an element of competition, since the arrangement is more likely to ensure better motivation and everyone's attention.

(iii) Developing style-led activities in the FL classroom

The aim of the following activities is to encourage *thinking style* in teaching and learning, both in the teacher and the pupil, by encouraging a style-led approach to teaching and learning. The teacher involved should allow a short period of evaluation in the lesson, when a hypothesis about the match between learning style, learner and learning is considered.

Prior to embarking on these exercises the teacher will probably have intuitively identified the style of his pupils. Standard assessment using

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a tool like the CSA is, however, highly desirable since pupils can present falsely for a variety of reasons. Peer influence, for example, or even imitating the teacher can lead pupils to adopt an approach to the learning task which they regard as desirable and, as a result, they remain unaware of their own strengths and fail to develop at the rate one could expect. The ultimate goal, ideally, is to enable the development of an independent learner, proficient in the use and knowledge of a FL.

a) Language target: pronunciation
Divide the class into visual and verbal, or wholist and analytic style groups (five or six pupils per group). Give each group a variety of oral tasks over a period of a month: dialogue, prepared monologue, taped plays etc. to read. The teacher or, ideally, an independent speaker of the language, gives feedback on the performance. Group discussion should then focus on how individuals felt about the task. Was it easy? Did they enjoy pronouncing the words?
Expectation: Verbalisers will perform better and find the tasks easier and more enjoyable.

b) Language target: textual summary
Give an unstructured task, for example, find an article in a magazine and make up a new title for it; identify 3 or 4 key issues or ideas in the article; discuss ways of advertising the article and invent a catch-word slogan and/or a logo for the article; invent captions for a character or subject in the article; use a word-bank to support this activity.
Expectation: Wholists perform better and find the task easier and more enjoyable.

c) Language target: pattern recognition
[i] Have a competition between style-based groups to transfer patterns in German using the same materials e.g. How many facilities in an area can they describe using: "Man kann .." pattern? Time the test. Ask pupils to rate their enjoyment of the activity on a scale of 1–10. Analyse and share the results with the whole class.
Expectation: Visualisers will perform better and find the task easier and more enjoyable.

[ii] An interpretation of a diagrammatic presentation of language such as a pie-or bar-chart produced in a survey (e.g. favourite hobbies of young people in a German classroom).
Expectation: Analytics will work faster and produce more accurate results and generally warm to the task of extracting detail and building a report. A recurring feature observed during this exercise has been the way in which pupils with analytic learning styles actually support and reinforce peer understanding as part of their response to the learning task.

d) Developing strategies for communication

A further development of style-led method involves organising pupils into groups which reflect the deliberate use of complementary styles. This kind of active learning involving pupils as learners helps develop the complex interactive process of communication in real time. A genuine communication involves a vast range of referential elements: linguistic, cultural, appropriateness, audience awareness, timing - these are some of the key elements contributing to the quality of a communication or conversation in a language lesson. Cognitive style acts as a shaping influence on all of these aspects of language work, reflecting the individual hall-mark of a pupil's approach to learning.

A person of a complementary style to the learner will typically take a completely different approach to the same task and behave in a different way. Pairing and grouping people with their complementary style can offer opportunities to acknowledge or recognise and even incorporate differing ways of approaching communication in real life. It often appears, on first examination, that the variables in communicative methodology are so numerous that it is impossible for the teacher to even begin planning for success. Style offers a way forward, by providing a new structure for combining individual and group work with interactive and experiential learning. Increasing self-acceptance will permit greater self-awareness and lead, ultimately, to a learning approach characterized by greater versatility, flexibility and adaptation in overall functioning (Schmeck, 1988). Educationalists who have developed a similar approach to *learning style* in the United States have called this technique 'style flexing'. They claim it is one of the most successful ways of developing a range of teaching and learning strategies for both teacher and learner (e.g. Kirby, 1979; Butler, 1985; Claxton and Murrrell, 1987).

TAKING STYLE SERIOUSLY: TEACHING AND LEARNING BENEFITS

The use of style can lead to new insights into the learning process, a greater knowledge of individual differences, and an expanding repertoire of methods for the teacher. An understanding of style can help reinforce the process of becoming communicatively competent. Teaching 'in style', we argue, gives learning more immediate meaning, greater relevance and results in better understanding.

The benefits of including style in an approach to teaching and learning, in summary, are three-fold:
- a direct accommodation of individual differences in the classroom;
- a pedagogical concept which provides a more

structured, assessment-based approach to learning in an FL scheme of work;
- the enhancement of classroom management and group work in FL teaching.

Such outcomes must surely be useful for teachers seeking success in the FL lesson. Similarly, any curriculum development would undoubtedly be enhanced by the inclusion of style-led activity.

CONCLUSION

Learning language and learning style are surely inseparable as part of a more general process of learning a communicative methodology. Brumfit (1995:149) states: "Real advances in the levels of linguistic competence achievable by pupils, however, will only come about from a better understanding of the processes involved in language use and choice."

The teacher's role is one of professional communicator planning a structured programme for developing communication skills in students not only in the FL but also in the mother tongue. As part of this role, style quite naturally plays its part in the process of teaching and learning. Awareness should be appropriately used to organise an inclusive approach to education, which enables diversity and differentiation within the FL lesson. The same approach should be used in curriculum planning and the design of learning activity.

The concept of style differences in learning offers a structure for 'learning how to learn' and 'teaching learners how to learn more effectively'. This, in turn, provides a basis for a richer application of communicative methodology in FL lessons. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, teaching in style can facilitate achievement across the ability range in the FL classroom.

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