STUDENTS' DIVERSE LEARNING STYLES IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract

In the process of learning a language particularly a second language, there are many variables that determine the success of a language learner which include language learning styles. In a class made up of various learning styles, it is necessary for language teachers to identify and work on the diversity of learner differences. The study investigated the diverse learning styles employed by ESL students in a secondary school. A set of questionnaire was distributed to ninety students of SMK Seri Berang, Kuala Berang, Terengganu. The students' learning preferences were identified in order to recognise their learning styles. The data was analysed using SPSS and the findings revealed that the students' learning styles can be categorised as global, impulsive, perceiving, extroverted, introverted, ambiguity tolerant, sociological, auditory, visual and active learners. The results of the study indicate the need to improve teachers' lesson planning to cater to the students' diverse learning styles.

Keywords: Learning styles, learning preferences, Spolsky's general model of language learning, lesson plan, ESL

Introduction

A language is probably the most difficult set of skills a person could ever struggle to learn. There is no easy way to master a language, particularly a language which is not our first language. This scenario can be seen especially in countries where English is learned as a second or foreign language. In order to be a successful language learner, one must strive and search for new experiences and challenges, to develop a feel for the language and to find opportunities for constant practice. Apart from these, there are many other contributing factors that determine the success in learning the language.

In the process of learning the language, there are many variables that determine the success of a language learner. Language learning success is associated with a range of factors including age, gender, motivation, intelligence, anxiety level, learning strategies and language learning styles (Sharp, 2004). In a class made up of various learning styles, it is always necessary for the teachers, particularly the language teachers to identify, respect and work on the diversity of the learners' differences.

Students may have different levels of motivation, different attitudes about teaching and learning, and different responses to specific classroom environments and instructional practices. The more instructors understand the differences, the better chance they have of meeting the diverse learning needs of their students. This phenomenon was proven true according to the Spolsky's general model of second language learning (1989). This model was used as a basis of this study so as to show that in a second language learning context, there are indeed existing variables of learner differences that could affect students' learning styles as well as learning performances.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Reid (1995), cognitive learning style comprises of field-independent versus field-dependent, analytic versus global and reflective versus impulsive. Field independent learners learn more effectively step by step, which means they begin with analyzing facts and expanding them to ideas. In contrast, field-dependent learners prefer to learn in specific context and consider things as a whole rather than separate part. Analytic learners prefer to learn individually and they establish goals before working. Global learners enjoy learning through concrete experience and they love interacting with people. Reflective learners learn effectively when they are given certain amount of time to consider options before reacting. On the other hand, impulsive learners are able to respond and react immediately without being prompted and they tend to take risks of their own responses and reactions.

As for sensory learning style, it is further divided into two categories which are perceptual learning style and environmental learning style. Perceptual learning style is an approach to learning through the five senses. It comprises of auditory learner, visual learner, tactile learner, kinesthetic learner and haptic learner. Auditory learners learn more through hearing. Visual learners learn more through seeing. Tactile learners discover things through sense of touch. Kinesthetic learners enjoy learning through movement and body experience. Haptic learners are the combination of tactile and kinesthetic learners where they learn more through sense of touch and body involvement. Environmental learning style, on the other hand, comprises of only one dimension which is physical versus sociological. Physical learners can learn better when there are variables such as temperature, sound, light, food, time and classroom management. These variables have to be taken into considerations during the learning process. In contrast, sociological learners are motivated to learn when there are variables such as group, individual, pair and team work and level of teacher authority. These variables are important in encouraging the students' motivation to learn.

Last but not least, personality learning style is related to a person's sensitivity towards his or her characters or behaviours. It comprises of extroversion versus introversion, sensing versus perception, thinking versus feeling, judging versus perceiving, ambiguity tolerant versus ambiguity intolerant as well as left-brained versus right-brained. Akin to the global learners, extroverted learners are interested in concrete experience, interaction with people outside their learning circle and cultivate relationship with others. Introverted learners are more interested in doing works through independent situation, which means they are comfortable working individually. Sensing learners, as suggested by its name, rely on five senses. They learn best from observable facts and happenings around them using the five senses. In contrast, perception learners learn effectively from meaningful experiences that they or other people have had and they also have good relationships with people. Thinking learners are more of thinkers who learn from impersonal circumstances. They are also able to think of logical consequences. As compared to thinking learners, feeling learners prefer personal circumstances and they appreciate social values.

Judging learners learn through reflection of the experiences that they have gone through. They are also able to analyse and interpret the reflection on their own. Eventually they will conclude these processes. Perceiving learners learn through negotiation with other people. They consider others' feelings and also prefer inductive processes that delay closure. Ambiguity tolerant learners learn best when there are opportunities for experiences, regardless of positive or negative experiences. They dare to take risks and prefer interactions with other people. On the other hand, ambiguity intolerant learners learn effectively when the situations are less flexible. They would also go for less risky circumstances and they need more of structured situations in order to organise their learning. Left-brained learners tend to learn towards visual, which means they need visuals to support their learning. They can also be analytical and reflective and hence make them independent throughout the learning process. Right-brained learners, in contrast, are more interested in auditory, which mean they prefer to learn through audible learning equipment. They are global, impulsive and most of all, they enjoy interactive learning in classrooms (Reid, 1995)

In a more recent study, Felder and Silverman (2005) formulated a learning style model that comprises of four dimensions including sensing and intuitive learners, visual and verbal learners, active and reflective learners as well as sequential and global learners (as cited in Felder & Spurlin, 2005). According to the model, sensing learners prefer concrete experiences around and within them. Most of the time, they tend to be practical, methodical and oriented towards facts. They also prefer to learn through hands-on procedures. Intuitive learners are more comfortable learning with abstraction or gist of the situations and are mostly known as creative and innovative problem solvers in a short period of time. Visual learners, as the name suggests, prefer to learn through pictures, diagrams, flow charts and demonstrations in order to support their learning. Verbal learners prefer to learn through written tasks prepared by teachers and as the name suggests, they prefer spoken explanations to aid their understanding. Active learners enjoy physical activity and process information through involvement in discussions. Reflective learners, on the other hand, process information through introspection which means they reflect on their past experiences before moving forward. Sequential learners are those who think in a linear manner. They are able to function even though they are given with only partial explanation of material. Global learners think in a system-oriented manner, which is to say, they are more organised, but yet they may have trouble applying new material until they completely understand it by relating it to material they have come across (Felder & Brent, 2005).

A study was conducted by Stapa (2003) concerning teachers' awareness of ESP students' learning preferences. Fifty three students of English for Hospitality Purposes at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and three teachers who were teaching them participated in this study. Both the teachers and students were asked to answer questionnaires adopted from Brindley (1984). In this study, it was discovered that students' tendency towards working in pairs or small groups was well perceived by teachers. Besides, a significant number of students expressed their views in favour of more outdoor classroom activities that would help them gain proficiency in English. Teachers' responses seemed to correlate with these views. The findings also reveal that the types of learning that focus merely on receptive skills do not appeal to students. It means that there is a significant tendency among learners towards class content that observes both receptive and productive skills emphasized equally. Another finding that should be highlighted is students too would like to see more instructive television programmes shown to them, rather than extensive use of blackboard or tape recorders (Stapa, 2003).

On the same note, Kavaliauskiene (2003) conducted a study regarding the learners' methodological preferences for learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Forty three students of law from University of Lithuania participated in this study. The research instrument used was a slightly modified questionnaire adapted from Nunan & Lamb (1996). The findings that were drawn from this study was first, slightly more than half of the learners favoured a communicative approach to perfecting their language skills by working in pairs or small groups, taking part in projects and practicing English by talking to their peers. Secondly, in giving assignments, 65% of the learners preferred getting information on their own, listening to recordings in class and taking notes. Thirdly, the learners sought to pass their exams and attain good marks; and were not concerned with improving language skills and competence for future usage (Kavaliauskiene, 2003).

Later, another study was conducted by Riazi and Riasati (2007) investigating the language learning style preferences of Iranian EFL learners and the degree of teachers' awareness. Two hundred and nineteen language learners from different levels of instructions and different ages studying at two language institutes took part in the study. Fourteen teachers working with the same students also took part in this study. A set of questionnaires adopted from Brindley (1984) was again used. It was found that regarding the studying style, students did not like working individually but it was not well perceived by the teachers. Other than that, students' mostly preferred vocabulary learning strategies using words in a sentence, and guessing the meaning of unknown words by not looking up from dictionary. However, teachers wrongly perceived that their students like to learn new words through translation. Another significant finding was learning about culture which caught the interest of both students and teachers, indicating that they are aware of the crucial importance of developing cultural competence when teaching or learning the language. Overall results indicated that teachers were aware of their students' learning preferences in some cases, but unaware in some others (Riazi & Riasati, 2007).

There was also a study conducted by Hoque (2008) who investigated the learners' strategies and preferences in learning EFL in Bangladesh. One hundred and thirty students were randomly selected from ten higher secondary colleges to state their views through a questionnaire on how they preferred learning English.

The questionnaire was adopted from Brindley (1984) and Nunan & Lamb (1996). Among the major findings were that the respondents preferred to be corrected later, in private contexts. They did not like to be corrected immediately in front of everyone. They also appreciated peer correction and self-correction. Furthermore, learning about native English culture represented by the language is extremely unimportant as the English culture is seen as a foreign culture. It was also discovered that most of the students studied English due to its curriculum requirement, and that they studied English just for the sake of examinations. Only a few number of students realised the actual need for English in practical life (Hoque, 2008).

Based on the previous studies, it is necessary that this study be done using a slightly different set of sample. Therefore, this study was carried out in the Malaysian rural area setting on adolescent students where the majority of the students find that English is not a major priority and learning it would only add to their burden while studying for the examinations. Studies that were carried out found that even though the students are going through the same curriculum, the level of English proficiency in rural schools is much lower than the level in the urban schools (Nooreiny et al., 2003; Shaari, 1987; as cited in Marlyna, Hua & Khazriyati, 2007). Other than that, in the Malaysian setting, rural school children normally have lower self-efficacy in the English language as compared to their counterparts in the cities. This could be due to the poor facilities provided for English teaching and the under privileged status of living in terms of economy and ICT advantages. Another factor contributing to this scenario is that very little effort is put in particularly by the school management to motivate their students to be proficient in the language. Besides, parents and peer groups who do not have a positive outlook towards English tend to discourage and demotivate them to learn the language, and hence this affects the respondents' attitudes towards English (Noran et al., 1993; as cited in Rahil, Habibah, Cheong, Muhamad, Noreen & Maria , 2006).

Obviously in the Malaysian school setting, there is a need to focus on how to engage both the students' interest in learning the English Language and the school management's commitment in motivating the learning of English specifically in rural areas. The purpose of this study was to investigate the diverse learning styles of ESL students in a rural secondary school. The knowledge of students' learning styles may help teachers in handling the diversity of learner differences and learning styles among them and thus set a new guideline on how to better help them in achieving good performance in the ESL classroom.

Method

The design used to gain data was quantitative by employing questionnaire and the participants were ninety students of form four from SMK Seri Berang who were conveniently selected from 4 intact groups and participated in answering the questionnaire during the study.

Questionnaire

The students answered a thirteen-item questionnaire which was adapted and modified from Brindley (1984). The questionnaire has three major themes which are learning, error correction, and assessment or evaluation. However, the researcher made a slight modification to the questionnaire to establish reliability. The modification was made to items number 7, 10 and 11 in the questionnaire to correlate the items with the current development in the teaching and learning of English as a second language particularly in the Malaysian context. Since there was no data on established reliability value, and that the questionnaire was slightly modified, it was then piloted with a group of six form four students in a different school. This group of students represented a sub-sample of the intended study population. An analysis of item reliability was computed using scale analysis in SPSS. The results showed that the questionnaire demonstrated internal reliability, achieving an alpha coefficient of 0.797 for the items measuring students' learning preferences. Cohen et al. (2000) maintain that the closer to +1.00 the reliability coefficient is, the more highly reliable the instrument (Cohen et al., 2000, p.91). The data obtained from the questionnaire was tabulated using SPSS version 16. The data was classified according to the themes in the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

The finding in Table 1 shows that majority of the students preferred to work in small groups and in pairs, as compared to in one large group (a classroom) or individually. The students showed a preference to interact with each other and negotiation takes place in every activity conducted in groups or in pairs. This learning preference falls under the cognitive learning style, in which one of its learner types is global learners. Global learners learn more effectively through concrete experience and by interacting with people. Other than that, this learning preference also falls under the personality learning style, where one of its learner types is perceiving learners.

Perceiving learners learn through negotiation, feeling and inductive processes that postpones closure. The findings also indicated that this learning preference falls under the environmental learning style, in which sociological learners learn effectively when variables such as group, individual, pair and team work and level of teacher authority are taken into consideration (Reid, 1995). From Table 2, it was found that majority of the students preferred to spend some time in classroom as well as outside the classroom to practice speaking English. It was indicated that the students also need new experience instead of gaining knowledge and proficiency merely from their classmates and teachers in the classrooms. They were aware that by having contact with people outside classrooms would also help in their communicative learning. Similar with the learning style discussed earlier, this type of learning preference also falls under the cognitive learning style, where global learners learn more effectively through concrete experience and by interacting with people. It can also be said that it falls under the personality learning styles, where extroverted learners are interested in concrete experience, contact with outside and relationship with others (Reid, 1995). It is obvious then, that majority of the students are extroverted in nature.

The finding displayed in Table 3 is rather conventional in our education system that demands strict preparations for examinations. The findings revealed that most students preferred to learn through listening, reading, copying from the board as well as listening and taking notes. These four means of learning are among the highest percentage, as preferred by the students. It should be highlighted that the students had to be in favour of traditional approaches of learning due to the examinations. Most of the time, they listen and get their notes completed so that it would be easy for them to memorise for examinations. Apart from being global and extroverted learners, as discussed earlier, these students are also unavoidably auditory learners. This learner type falls under the perceptual learning style, where auditory learners learn more through hearing (Reid, 1995).

Based on Table 4, in the learning of vocabulary, majority of the students preferred to learn vocabulary by using new words in a sentence, thinking of relationships between known and new, learning through online vocabulary games or CD ROMs and guessing the unknown. These four ways of learning vocabulary are among the highest percentage, as preferred by the students. It clearly showed that even though the words are new and unfamiliar to them, they made efforts to get the meanings mostly from guessing using contextual clues and by making sense from the words that they knew and hence relate with the new ones. This explains that the students are global learners who think in a system-oriented manner and may have trouble applying new material until they fully understand it and see how it relates to material they already know about (Felder & Brent, 2005). Other than that, they also preferred to learn vocabulary through online vocabulary games and CD ROMs. This indicates that the students are also visual learners.

In terms of error correction, the finding in Table 5 indicates that majority of the students preferred to be corrected immediately, in front of everyone. The students were brave enough to bear the consequences such as humiliation, if they take it negatively, when they are corrected at once in front of their classmates. Positively, most of them can tolerate with their mistakes and assumed that the immediate corrections being made is part of their learning experience. This type of learning preference falls under the cognitive learning style where impulsive learners are able to respond immediately and take risks. It also falls under the personality learning style in which ambiguity tolerant learners learn best when there are opportunities for experiences, risks and interactions (Reid, 1995). It was discovered in Table 6 that majority of the students believed in self-correction as compared to peer correction. However the findings also indicated that the students are actually in favour of both. In a way, it shows that the students have the ability to be independent in their learning. Sometimes, they also feel the need to self-correct their work or ask their friends to correct their mistakes during the learning process.

They may not correct their work precisely, as compared to teacher correction, but at least they have their own initiative towards improving their English. This explains the personality learning style where despite of being extroverted, as discussed earlier, sometimes they also tend to be introverted. Introverted learners are more interested in doing works through independent situations (Reid, 1995) Based on Table 7, despite being students in the rural area where there are assumptions that they have less facility in learning as compared to their urban counterparts, the students are also aware of that limitation and are in need of technological advancement and creative approaches in learning English. From the study, majority of the students preferred television, video and films. Other than that, they also preferred pictures, posters, English learning software and CD ROMs to aid their learning.

This kind of learning preferences falls under the perceptual learning style, where visual learners learn more through seeing (Reid, 1995), and where visual learners prefer pictures, diagrams, flow charts and demonstrations (Felder & Brent, 2005). As for the learning activities, the responses in Table 8 indicated that majority of the students preferred language games, internet surfing and group discussions. Again, this indicates that the students are not individual type of learners, but instead they are more of students who preferred to be surrounded by others, possess good interactions with each other, and dynamic. These learning preferences especially language games and group discussions as preferred by the students imply that they are active learners who process information through engagement in physical activity and discussion (Felder & Brent, 2005). Besides, as discussed earlier, they are also in favour of visual style of learning as they also keep abreast with the technological advancement in learning through the internet surfing.

Conclusion

On the whole, it is undeniable that the students in the ESL rural Malaysian context employed diverse learning styles due to the individual differences. Based on their learning preferences, the students employed cognitive learning style in which they are the type of global and impulsive learners. The students also employed personality learning style which leads them to be perceiving learners and ambiguity tolerant learners. They are apparently extroverted learners but there are times when they switch to be introverted learners. The students are also in favour of environmental learning style in which they are the type of sociological learners. Other than that, being both auditory and visual learners, it means the students specifically employed perceptual learning style. Last but not least, according to the Felder and Silverman's learning style model (Felder & Spurlin, 2005) the students are the active type of learners.

To conclude, the discussion on the students' diverse learning styles can have a significant impact on the teaching and learning process in ESL education. Firstly, by having the knowledge of students' diverse learning styles, teachers would be able to identify their own students' learning styles and preferences in classrooms. Secondly, the teachers could reflect on their own awareness of the diverse learning styles that exist in the classrooms. It is important to note that teachers too need to do some analysis of learning styles before they approach their students differently. More importantly, the teachers could therefore prepare a better lesson plan to cater to the diverse learning styles among the students.

This study seems to have a few limitations especially in terms of variables and instrumentation. Therefore, this study could be replicated and be carried out to investigate the comparison of students' learning styles in urban and rural areas. Other than that, a set of questionnaire which is attuned to the latest pedagogical approaches and suitable to be used for students in the Malaysian ESL context could be devised. The size of the sample could also be expanded so as to produce more generalizable results.

Presented below is the analysis of results based on the items in the questionnaire;
Learning

Table 1: Working Styles

Item 2	Students			
Options	Yes	%	No	%
Individually	40	44.4	50	55.6
In pairs	74	82.2	16	17.8
In small groups	80	88.9	10	11.1
In one large group	20	22.2	70	77.8
other	0	0.00	0	0.00

Table 2: Learning Inside / Outside Classroom

Item 5	Students			
Options	Yes	%	No	%
Spend all learning time in classroom	32	35.6	58	64.4
Spend some time in classroom and some time outside classroom	66	73.3	24	26.7
Other	0	0.00	0	0.00

Table 3: Ways of Learning

Item 6	Students			
Options	**Yes**	**%**	**No**	**%**
Listening	84	93.3	6	6.7
Reading	70	77.8	20	22.2
Copying from the board	66	73.3	24	26.7
Listening & taking notes	72	80.0	18	20.0
Reading & making notes	58	64.4	32	35.6
Repeating	48	53.3	42	46.7
other	0	0.00	0	0.00

Table 4: Vocabulary Learning

Item 7	Students			
Options	**Yes**	**%**	**No**	**%**
Using new words in a sentence	75	83.3	15	16.7
Thinking of relationships between known & new	70	77.8	20	22.2
Saying or writing words several times	47	52.2	43	47.8
Avoiding verbatim translation	32	35.6	58	64.4
Guessing the unknown	57	63.3	33	36.7
Reading without looking up for words	43	47.8	47	52.2
Through online vocabulary games/CD ROMs	58	64.4	32	35.6
Other	0	0.00	0	0.00

Error Correction

Table 5: Error Correction

Item 8	Students			
Options	**Yes**	**%**	**No**	**%**
Immediately, in front of everyone	63	70.0	27	30.0
Later, at the end of the activity, in front of everyone	41	45.6	49	54.4
Later, in private	53	58.9	37	41.1
Other	0	0.00	0	0.00

Table 6: Peer and Self-Corrections

Item 9	Students			
Options	**Yes**	**%**	**No**	**%**
Peer Correction	67	74.4	23	25.6
Self-Correction	75	83.3	15	16.7

Learning

Table 7: Media Preference

Item 10	Students			
Options	**Yes**	**%**	**No**	**%**
TV/Video/Films	85	94.4	5	5.6
Radio	60	66.7	30	33.3
Tapes/Cassettes	27	30.0	63	70.0
Written Materials	61	67.8	29	32.2
Blackboard	64	71.1	26	28.9
Pictures/Posters	75	83.3	15	16.7
English learning software/CD ROMs	53	58.9	37	41.1
Other-games	1	1.1	0	0.00
Other-magazines	4	4.4	0	0.00
Other-newspapers	3	3.3	0	0.00

Table 8: Learning Activities

Item 11	Students			
Options	**Yes**	**%**	**No**	**%**
Role-play	47	52.2	43	47.8
Language games	68	75.6	22	24.4
Songs	45	50.0	45	50.0
Group discussions	68	75.7	22	24.4
Memorising conversations/dialogues	46	51.1	44	48.9
Getting information from guest speakers	48	53.3	42	46.7
Getting information from planned visits	54	60.0	36	40.0
Writing a learning diary	20	22.2	70	77.8
Learning about culture	61	67.8	29	32.2
Internet surfing	68	75.6	22	24.4

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