

ESL/EFL Learning Style Preference among Bangladeshi Students

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Abstract

The effective learning and teaching of English language depends on the application of classroom teaching strategies that takes into account the students' learning style preferences. The incompatibility between teaching approach and students' learning preference is one of the responsible factors behind the poor output in the rate of successful learning of English. The current paper investigates into the students' learning style preferences at the higher secondary level of educational institutions in Bangladesh and also finds out how much importance teachers attach to the good fit between their perception and teaching strategies and students particular preference of the learning styles.

Key words: Learning styles, ESL, EFL, Bangladesh

Introduction

Learning style of individuals has a bearing on their natural and habitual way of learning Hyland (1993). Hence, learning style has a lot to do with the cultural atmosphere in which a learner grows up. The exposure to a certain type of cultural setting plays a role in shaping a learner's way of thinking, understanding, and analyzing and synthesizing various data that are taken in. The social interaction with diverse people with diverse mindsets influences the formulation of a learner's personality that in turn influences the learning style of a person. Researchers have recognized the role of socialization in the shaping of style preferences of learners from diverse cultural backgrounds as very important.

Young (1987) recognized the role of cultural variance in accounting for the variance in the learning and teaching styles of different societies. Reid (1987, 1995) acknowledged the

unique and variable ability of individual learner and the learning style. He emphasized on the good fit between teaching and learning styles for successful learning; otherwise, he argued, learners will end up frustrated, de-motivated and they will fail in learning effectively.

It is generally agreed that teachers' teaching approaches need to be in tune with learners' psychological, cognitive and affective characteristics that have huge implication to the choice of variable learning methods of learners. For effective teaching, teachers should consider these variable factors and accordingly adapt their teaching method so as to maximize the output in learning. With the help of knowledge and ideas about students' preferred learning styles, teachers can adapt their teaching style to match with that of the students. These knowledge and ideas also serve as guidelines to the designs of the syllabus or curriculum.

Different Models of Learning Styles

The ever increasing number of learners has increasing variability in their learning styles that keep changing in keeping with the changes in the cultural components in which learners interact and grow up with a diverse range people. Hence, new theories about language learning styles evolve with both divergence and convergence on the existing theories. Following are some of the notable theories accounting for variable learning choices.

Felder and Silverman (1988) wrote about five variables with each of those having two components opposite to each other. The variables include 1) Perception 2) Input 3) Processing 4) Understanding and 5) Organization. The two other variables attached with each of the above variable are 1) Sensitive/Intuitive 2) Visual/Verbal 3)Active/Reflective 4) Sequential/global and 5) Inductive/deductive respectively.

According to the proponents of the theories, sensitive learners prefer to work with detailed facts and data and tend to avoid complicated approach in learning whereas intuitive learners do not feel uncomfortable with complicatedness. They do not want to work with details. As for the visual learners, they obviously prefer the visual aids in learning. They find pictorial graphics, slides very helpful to retain things. As for the verbal learners, they are found to learn

better through listening and viewing verbal lectures or presentation and through speaking. The theorists propounded that the active learners can enthusiastically learn in any situation and have a better team spirit than the reflective learners who prefer to learn through thinking. Regarding the sequential variable, they opined that sequential learners prefer to learn with linear reasoning whereas global learners prefer to learn with a holistic perspective. Finally inductive learners are found to learn through using reason from specific to the general and the deductive learners learn in the reverse way.

Witkin, et al. (1978) wrote about two types of learning styles which are field-dependence and field-independence styles. They have indentified three sets of differences between these two styles. The differences are global/analytical, external/internal, and passive/active. They have stated that field-dependent students are inclined to thinking something holistically whereas field-independent learners learn by focusing on the individual components of something-in other words they learn through analysis that is --breaking a concept into parts. As for external/internal, field-dependent learners emphasize on the external reality or the environment for gathering, and systematizing information while field-independent learners are inclined to be independent learners. Moreover, about passive/active differences, the writers have stated that field-dependent learners passively use the cognitive strategies whereas field-independent learners use cognitive strategies actively.

Keefs (1979) has categorized learning styles into three types that are cognitive, affective and physiological traits. Reid (1995) has come up with three main variables about learning styles each category having some sub-categories. The three main categories are 1) cognitive, 2) sensory and 3) personality learning style. Cognitive learning styles, according to her sub-categorization, have three sets of differences that are field-dependent/field-independent, analytic/global and reflective/impulsive. The sensory dimension is subdivided into auditory/visual and physical/sociological while the personality learning styles has been subdivided into extroversion/introversion, sensing/perception and thinking/feeling categories.

Willing (1988) has categorized learning styles into four types which are authority oriented, communicative, analytical, and concrete learners. The researcher stated that authority-

oriented learners prefer to learn according to teachers' directions and guidelines. This type of learners is not interested in learning independently. About communicative learners, the researcher stated that this type of learners tend to learn through social interaction and communication. Analytical learners, according to the researcher are that type of learners who learn through breaking a concept or topic into its component parts and learn part by part and as for concrete learners, they tend to learn language by using direct methods.

The above discussion of the learning styles shows a wide array of learning styles that have much in common both in the use of the terms and the concepts. The reason for this similarity is that the researchers often tended to retain some of the concepts and terms of the previous researchers as their ideas and explanations were found plausible. As such, they modified or built on the existing concepts and categorizations in their effort to reach more definitive goals. Based on the multiplicity of learning styles theories, a few common and major learning styles can be isolated against which students' learning styles preferences can be evaluated.

The following major learning styles can be considered relevant in the current research that has been conducted on the total of one hundred students from five private universities in Bangladesh. Those are 1) Reflective/Impulsive, 2) Auditory/visual, 3) Field-dependent/Field-independent, 4) Group preferring/individual preferring. 5) Authority-oriented/Communicative and 6) Inductive/deductive.

Objective

The research in this area is a highly significant one as the effective learning of the second /foreign language in Bangladesh hinges on the proper understanding of the students' preferred learning styles and other contextual circumstances. The successful learning of language presupposes an effective methodology that has to be devised and adopted taking into consideration the individual characteristics, idiosyncrasies and personality traits of students that determine the specific learning style preference of an individual students. To be more precise,

teaching approach has to be in line with the learning style preferences of students. Otherwise, the entire effort for teaching and learning will be thwarted.

Unfortunately in Bangladesh, teaching method is not quite geared to the individual styles preference of the students as adequate research has not been conducted to find out the preferences. Hence, finding out the information about the style preference and understanding them are critical to effectively devise the suitable teaching methods for maximizing the learning and teaching output at the tertiary levels of education in Bangladesh.

Methodology

In this study 100 students from five private universities located in Dhaka and its suburb took part and they were randomly selected. A questionnaire was made consisting of twelve questions and a follow up interview questionnaire was made in order to interview the ten teachers from those universities. Both survey questions and semi-structured interview questions were made since using questionnaire is an effective way of collecting a good deal of data in a short time from a large sample. Moreover, the semi-structured interview questions “allow the interviewers sufficient freedom to digress: that is, the interviewers are permitted to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared and standardized questions.” With the findings from the questionnaire and interviews, the data that were collected were then typed on the computer and the frequency of the data was counted. Then, data analysis was done based on my thorough study of the information collected from the questionnaires and interviews.

The experience of my long teaching career proved very useful in analyzing and interpreting the data thereby giving ‘the meaning, structure and order to the data.’ Further, the related literature review served as the guidelines for the data analysis. Besides, I utilized my intuitive and interpretative abilities to analyze the data systematically.

Findings

To start off, the respondents were asked “Do you emphasize on thinking carefully while learning?” or “Do you emphasize on guess work while learning something?” The questions are

related to the Reflective vs. Impulsive learning and were asked to know which type of learners outweighs the other. It was found that 60% respondents answered that they emphasized on thinking carefully while learning. In response to the second question, 30% respondents answered positively, that is, they emphasize on guessing while learning. The responses suggest that the reflective learners outnumber the impulsive number by 50%.

Next, students were asked two questions in order to find out the preferences for auditory learning or the visual learning. It was found out that in response to the question, “Do you learn better by listening to teachers’ lectures, audio tapes and someone’s conversation?” 55 % respondents answered that they learn better through listening rather than through using sights. 25% respondents answered that they learn better through using visual media like writing on boards, reading books, watching TV, video clips etc when they were asked , “ Do you learn better when you see something written on board, read books or see videos on something?” 10% of students responded that they learn better when they follow a combination of all these media. Hence, the findings show that among the respondents, the ones preferring the auditory styles is higher than the visual learners.

At this stage, the respondents were asked two questions to find out if they are mostly field-dependent learners or field independent learners. The two questions were 1) “Do you prefer to learn part by part focusing on individual component?” and 2) “Do you prefer to learn the whole concept or topic while learning lesson?” In response to the first question, 53% respondents stated that they prefer to learn a lesson by the breaking the concept or lesson into its individual parts while, in response to the second question, 42% respondents stated that they prefer to learn a lesson as a whole rather than breaking it into parts. The result suggests that the number of field-independent learners is higher than the field-dependent learners.

The respondents were also asked about whether they prefer to learn in group or as individual. The result shows that in response to the question, “Do you like to learn in group in the class room?” 56% answered in the affirmative while 43% answered that they prefer individual learning rather than group learning. Thus, it was found that learners at the private universities in Bangladesh prefer group learning to individual learning.

As for Inductive vs. Deductive styles, two questions were posed to the respondents whose responses were at a little variance with each other. They were asked firstly “Do you first learn grammatical structures for understanding the meaning of a text?” and secondly, “Do you first read the text and then learn the grammar structures according to the needs in the context?” In answer to the first question, 53% stated that they prefer to first learn rules for reading and understanding of the text, while 45% responded in the positive about the second question. It was thus found that the number of learners preferring to move from general to specific is a little higher than the number that prefers learning by moving from specific to general. In other words, the result shows that the deductive learners slightly outnumber the inductive learners.

In response to another question, “Do you depend on your teacher for correction and explanation while learning?”, 66% respondents responded in the affirmative. That is to say that these learners are the authority-oriented learners. In response to another question, “Do you depend on sharing and interacting for learning more than learning through teachers’ guidance?” only 32% answered in the affirmative. That means, these learners are the communicative learners

Teachers’ Observation

The opinions of the teachers about the preferences revealed some of the misconceptions that prevailed about teaching and learning in Bangladesh that teachers do not take into the consideration the learners’ learning styles choices. As ten teachers were interviewed from the same private universities where the questionnaire was administered to the students, most of them were found in agreement with the justifiability of students’ learning preference given the uniqueness of the context. As for the preference of the deductive learning style, they held that in Bangladesh though CLT has to a large extent replaced grammar translation method, still learning grammar rules before reading, understanding and writing can not be dispensed with. They said that deductive method is a plausible choice for the students as they do not have adequate exposure to communication in English. In Bangladesh, as there is no widespread use of English in all the domains social, business or academic and as there is no day to day use of English, inductive method will take an indefinite period of time to gain a fairly efficient level of language

learning. They further said that dependence on inductive learning also makes it uncertain whether a learner will be able to cover the satisfactory range of learning.

The teachers also commented on the choice of field-independent approach by greater number of learners. They pointed out that because of limited exposure to use of English, learners have to depend on learning individual part of a sentence, or something and base the full understanding of the thing on the understanding of the component part.

Recommendations

In Bangladesh, grammar translation method has been a common method for quite a long time. Even today, it is found to be used side by side with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method. The preference for the deductive method has a bearing on the proven usefulness of the Grammar Translation method. It is also linked up with the students' preference for the authority-oriented learning. Besides, the preference for the auditory learning style also is associated with the long existing pedagogical practice adopted in Bangladesh. A close look at the most preference of the learners in Bangladesh further shows this link. It is important that in keeping with the preferences, students should be provided with more facilities required for the fulfillment of learning target. Moreover, they also have to be brought under the perimeter of more innovative approaches that can be helpful if students are motivated and guided properly. In view of these observations, following recommendations can be made for more effective learning of English in Bangladesh.

- 1) Learners should be introduced to more audio-visual means of learning such as learning through movies, video clips, dialogues, role playing etc.
- 2) Learners should be more encouraged to learn through interaction, sharing, using language in context.
- 3) As learners already prefer the deductive method, so the teachers should be more dedicated to the learners giving them more time and focus.
- 4) While encouraging the learners for learning in their preferred styles, a combination of styles can be applied by teachers. For instance, teaching them grammar rules deductively,

an enabling environment can be made by the teachers requiring students to put the learned rules into immediate practice for a long time.

- 5) More locally contextualized text-books have to be produced whereby students can easily relate their personality with the subject matter of the lessons through which they learn.
- 6) Teachers should be more patiently monitor the reflective learning without discouraging them to delve deep in an area.
- 7) Teachers have to be highly trained, flexible, enthusiastic, adaptive, friendly and dynamic so that students feel comfortable in leaning. It should be remembered that the enthusiasm in teachers are transmitted to students also and for effective learning learners should be enthusiastic..
- 8) Teachers should be creative, innovative and varied in his or her methods so that learners are not easily bored.
- 9) New methods and techniques or combination of a number of methods can be applied only after making sure that students have adequate facilities and guidance in learning in their preferred ways.
- 10) Teachers should analyze the needs of students and accordingly set the goals. They should put together resources to achieve the goal.

Conclusion

The study finds that learners of the EFL/ESL in Bangladesh have their own learning style preferences. These preferences in them are mostly rooted in their cultural orientation and social orientation. It was found that though higher percentage of learners' learning styles are traditionally oriented, a good percentage of them also prefer to learn in the alternative ways too. Hence, we find a mix of learning preferences that might change its tendency with the evolving culture and other phenomena around them. It was also found that most teachers are not at a wide variance with their learners about rationale of the learning preferences.

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