Abstract

Learner attitudes towards learning and the perceptions and beliefs behind them may have a profound influence on learning behavior and on learning outcomes (Cotterall, 1995; Reid, 1982) and teachers’ awareness of such needs and preferences will result in more realistic and useful teaching strategies which in turn will have a facilitative effect on the learning process (Horwitz, 1988). Thus, it seems the learners should be given opportunities to express their own language learning preferences especially in reference to definition of objectives in general and awareness of strategies in learning (Bada & Okan, 2000).

Taking into account the great role identifying learner preferences plays in learning in general and learning a language in particular, 174 EFL students at English Language Department of Islamic Azad university of Hamedan were asked to take part in a survey, expressing their language learning preferences by answering a 13-item questionnaire adapted from Brindley (1984) and containing questions on Learning, Error Correction, and Assessment and/or Evaluation. As a further measure 24 EFL teachers working with the same students were also asked to express their views on the extent to which they were aware of their students’ needs and preferences. The analysis of the data collected pointed to a need for closer cooperation between the teachers and students in arranging and implementing learning activities.

Keywords: Learning styles/ learning preferences; Language learning strategies, EFL student

1. Introduction

For many years the general teaching practice has involved selection and presentation of materials through methods and techniques considered useful to the learners thinking that all of them need the same thing and learn in roughly the same way(s); thus, neglecting the point that students bring with them their own needs and attitudes in/ towards learning to the learning situation: some consider learning a language a matter of learning grammar rules and memorizing words and some regard it a matter of being able to communicate with the others who know that language. Some prefer to be actively involved in learning activities, while others like to listen to a teacher explaining the points and take notes. These attitudes towards learning and the perceptions and beliefs which determine them may have a profound influence on learning behavior and on learning outcomes (Cotterall, 1995). Therefore, it seems language teachers, in making decisions about the type of activities to conduct in a language classroom should take into account such learner needs and attitudes.

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Nowadays there is a growing emphasis on the need to consider learner differences in language classrooms. (Oxford 1990; Reid, 1987; O’Malley and Chamot 1990, Graham 1997,...), since it is believed that taking such diversities into account has a facilitative effect on learning. (Horwitz, 1988) Identifying learner needs and preferences and devising and implementing suitable activities will make teaching more successful. This will help students develop more active and autonomous attitudes which allow them to take charge of their own learning. But gaps between teacher and learner beliefs may result in negative language learning outcomes. (Horwitz, 1988)

Thus, the present work is trying to study and determine the English students’ language learning preferences at Hamedan Islamic Azad university and to investigate the ideas of the English teachers teaching these students regarding their students’ needs and preferences, thus giving insights and making suggestions for better, more effective class activities when there is mismatch between what students need/ prefer and what teachers think or do.

2. What is meant by learning styles?
The term learning style is used to encompass four aspects of the person: cognitive style, i.e. preferred or habitual patterns of mental functioning; patterns of attitudes and interests that affect what an individual will pay most attention to in a learning situation; a tendency to seek situations compatible with one’s own learning patterns; and the tendency to use certain learning strategies and avoid others (Lawrence, 1984). Learning style is inherent and pervasive (Willing, 1988) and is a blend of cognitive, affective and behavioral elements (Oxford & Ehrman 1988).

Reid (1998) defines learning styles or learning preferences as the different ways of how a learner acquires, retains and retrieves information. He believes learning styles are internally based characteristics often not perceived or consciously used by learners, for the intake and comprehension of new information.

In general, the theory of learning styles states that people have different approaches to learning and studying (Dunn & Dunn, 1987; Felder & Brent, 2005; Felder & Henriques, 1995; Hall, 2005; Heiman, 2006; Manochehri & Jon, 2006; Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006; Price, 2005; Sheridan & Steele-Dadzie, 2005; Silverman, 2006; Ware, & O’Donoughue, 2005). Given a specific instruction method or environment, some people will learn more effectively than others due to their individual learning style.

3. Review of the Related Literature
The research findings on learning styles offer substantial promise to teachers, counselors, and the students themselves in terms of finding better ways for students to learn. But while matching learning style with instructional mode apparently facilitates positive interpersonal relations, and while it would seem to point the way for increased learning, the empirical data that support this idea are rather scarce. Such a significant gap in the research must be filled if knowledge about learning styles is to become a significant force in improving college and university teaching (Claxton & Ralston 1978).

A review of literature revealed several main themes to which researchers have alluded. Researchers have attempted to:
1. determine if preferred teaching styles of instructors and preferred learning styles of students existed,
2. determine if a match between learning styles and teaching styles existed,
3. determine if a match between learning styles and teaching styles produced higher academic achievement as indicated by grades and exam scores,
4. determine if students’ evaluations of instructors were higher if there was match between students’ learning styles and instructors’ teaching styles.

Learning styles have been widely researched in the area of educational psychology (Claxton and Murrell, 1987; Schmeck, 1988) and specifically in the content of language learning (Coffield et al., 2004; Oxford, 1990; Reid, 1987; Stapa, 2000; Reynold & Vince, 2007; Welsh et al., 2007; Hornyak et al., 2007; Herbert & Stenfors, 2007;
Sievers, 2007; Hyde, 2007; Kayes A.B., 2007; Kayes D. C., 2007; Garcia et al., 2007; Demirbas & Demirkan, 2007; Armstrong & Mahmud, 2008; Li et al., 2008).

4. The Study

4.1 Subjects

The subjects included 174 EFL students (135 female; 29 male) and 22 instructors (21 male; 1 female) teaching English at English Language Department of Islamic Azad University of Hamedan. The students ranged between 18-30 years of age, and teachers were between 27 and 43.

4.2 Data Collection

To collect data for the present work, a 13-item questionnaire, adapted from Brindley (1984) was used. The questionnaire had two versions; Version 1 designed for students, and Version 2 for teachers. Apart from addressing and reference conventions, the versions do not differ significantly. Only items 3 and 4 were not included in the teachers' version because they were relevant to students only. Each item in the questionnaire explores a particular L2 topic. However, they can be categorized into three major classes: Learning, Error Correction, and Assessment and/or Evaluation. The Learning class is divided into two subcategories: Course Content, and Non-course Content. While Course Content includes strategies for learning through the basic four skills, learning and expanding vocabulary, making use of audio-visual aids, and general L2 improvement, the Non-content subcategory looks to individual preferences in actualizing the Course Content subcategory. Here it is asked whether students benefit from working in groups, pairs, or individually, and if/how they allocate and utilize time for homework, inside and/or outside classroom.

4.3 Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using the SPSS statistical package. A chi-square frequency analysis was carried out in order to define significance of dispersion of the yes/no choices (p < 0.05).

4.4 Findings

The following are the findings obtained from the analysis of the data. These findings provide some valuable insights into the English students’ preferences at the research context and the nature of the course content and classroom activities to be utilized by their teachers:

- students’ inclination to work in small groups and/or in pairs is well perceived by their teachers but teachers should put less emphasis on the students’ working individually.
- Students seem to enjoy doing home works and would like to do more outside – classroom activities as they seem to provide them with more opportunities to gain proficiency in English. Yet, in a foreign setting like the one we are in, students find the chance for outside classroom communication very rarely and it seems they are missing a lot.
- Students mostly prefer to learn through listening while their teachers think they would like to copy from the board. In actuality, this is what happens in most classes: a heavy emphasis on using the board thus forcing students copy the things they would have liked to be said to be taken down- a warning for the teachers.
- As to the learning of the new words, two ways desired by the students most seem to be “using words in sentences” and “thinking of relationships between known and new.” Thus teachers are advised, especially in reading comprehension courses, to put more emphasis on these and plan some activities to foster them rather than make them say or write words several times.
- It seems students are not bothered with their teachers’ correcting their errors in private or in front of the class, though they sometimes like to correct their own works.
- In their classes, almost all students seem to enjoy watching instructive television/video/films most of the time. This strong tendency is surprising and it seems likely that most of the students prefer visual media in
their different forms. Again teachers of the English Department are advised to use more audio-visual materials than the extensive use of the blackboard or tape recorders.

- The learning activities “talking with and listening to other students” and “learning about culture” seem more appealing to students.
- Finally, students get more confident and motivated when they feel they are able to use their language in real life situations, every day better than the day before. So trying to force them forward just by grades seems not be the best way.

5. Conclusion
Addressing learning styles is a dual responsibility. Teachers need to determine student's learning style preferences and present instruction, supply materials and provide assessment options that address students' learning style needs. Students must be taught about their learning style strengths so they can be empowered to study in ways that will help them concentrate, process and retain new and difficult information. Students and teachers alike need to be respectful of learning style differences.

Teachers also need to be able to present new and difficult information in all four modalities. Providing multiple and varied opportunities for students to interact with content will enable them to initially gain knowledge through their strength modality and reinforce it with two others. Options for gaining knowledge could include listening to a tape or lecture, reading, seeing a video, manipulating a model, taking notes, role-playing, conducting an experiment, or taking a field trip. To retain what they have learned requires that students engage in creating something with the new information and sharing what they have created with others (Dunn, 1991). Options for using their perceptual strengths for demonstrating what they have learned could include giving a speech, participating in a debate or panel discussion; writing a story, play, poem, review; designing a brochure, poster, chart, map, model; and conducting an interview, or creating a video, mock TV show, role-play, or newspaper.

To better insure that all students achieve academically, teachers need to teach and assess using the ways that their students learn. This requires mobility ability or the capacity to present content in multiple ways and provide multiple assessment options.

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