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From Teachers to Learners

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Abstract: This paper is about a study done with a group of secondary school students regarding their learning styles and strategies. It was performed with the aim to help the teacher learn more about her students and then adapt his own teaching methodology to her learners' diversity. Thus, the change of focus from the teacher to the learner should make the English language learning more effective and improve students' learning achievements.

Key words: the learner, the teacher, a change of focus, learning strategies, learning styles

Apstrakt: Ovaj rad se bavi istraživanjem obavljenim sa grupom srednjoškolaca, a na temu njihovih stilova i strategija učenja. Istraživanje je sprovedeno sa ciljem da se pomogne nastavniku da nauči što više o svojim učenicima i da zatim svoj metod rada prilagodi njihovim različitostima. Tako bi promena težišta sa nastavnika na učenika trebalo da dovede do efikasnijeg učenja i boljih učeničkih postignuća.

Ključne reči: učenik, nastavnik, promena težišta, strategije učenja, stilovi učenja

Introduction

There are probably no teachers in the world who have not asked themselves the following question at least once in their teaching career: 'How come that despite the fact that I try hard to make my lessons exciting and engaging, I still fail to make my students interested in learning?' I have been teaching teenagers for many years now, facing, more or less, the same problem. I have always insisted on variety and creativity in the classroom and there is constantly a lot of pair and group work, games, quizzes, role plays, poetry writing, projects and music. And yet, I am often aware of the fact that my students avoid doing anything, look at me blankly, or engage themselves in an activity as reluctantly and rebelliously as they can. Although I know that teenagers are difficult to move and are not very keen on school in general, this does not prevent me from occasionally thinking of myself as a failure.

Have you noticed the many I's in this long introduction of mine? This is exactly where the problem might lie. Language teaching is often looked at from the point of view of us, teachers, and when teaching, we almost always do things we personally like or are good at or things we consider important or worth accomplishing. However, learners, our students, also have their goals, beliefs, preferences and attitudes, which inevitably affect their motivation to learn, their expectations and, eventually, their learning achievement.

Problem Formulation

The idea that logically sprang to my mind was to change the focus of my attention from myself and what I want to students and what they need, and then use the newly acquired knowledge to expand the range of my teaching methods and techniques so as to respond to their diversity. I focused on learning styles and learning strategies, and tried to learn more about my students by obtaining answers to the following questions:

1. What are my students' learning styles?
2. Which learning strategies are typical of particular learning styles?
3. Do students' learning strategies match their learning styles?

4. What are the differences, if any, between the learning strategies used by successful and unsuccessful learners?

Research Methodology

Since this was a pilot project, I chose a class of twenty-eight students, third-graders of Užicka gimnazija, the grammar school where I teach. They are proficient enough to understand what is expected of them and, at the same time, I believed there would be sufficient time for me to, if necessary, change the focus of my work with them within the following two years of their high school education. Besides, they are a fine class, quite communicative and responding well to new things. There are twenty girls and eight boys, and about an equal number of successful and not so successful learners. They completed two questionnaires in September 2013, at the very beginning of this school year. The first one was on learning style preferences; it consisted of 30 statements they had to agree or disagree with (the Likert-type scale) and was meant to determine their dominant learning style. The second questionnaire was on learning strategies; there were 25 statements describing some of the basic learning strategies, and the students were supposed to tick the ones they use most frequently in the process of learning a foreign language. This would eventually show the most common learning strategies of the whole class as well as of particular learning style groups.

Both questionnaires were taken from 'Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classroom by Jack C. Richards and Charles Lockhart, CUP, 1990, pp.73-77, and very slightly modified. The most important change was the fact that they were both done anonymously. In the first questionnaire, the introductory section describing various learning styles was omitted as the students were already familiar with them. In the second questionnaire, the introduction was also simplified since I thought that instead of imagining living in a foreign-language country it would be much easier for the students just to think of themselves and their practices as foreign-language learners and nothing else. In addition to this, some of the statements were simplified in terms of vocabulary.

Theoretical Background

According to Keefe learning or cognitive styles are 'composite of characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological factors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how a learner perceives, interacts with, and responds to the learning environment'(Keefe 1979, p. 1-17), They are not concerned with what learners learn but how they prefer to learn, and they reflect different ways people respond to learning situations. For example, some people like working independently, while others prefer group work; some people learn best with the help of visual cues and note-writing, while others prefer auditory learning; some like drills, while others learn best through movements, role plays and simulations. There are various categorizations of learning styles, e.g. Knowles (1975) suggests that there are four of them: concrete, analytical, communicative and authority-oriented whereas the Baldwin Programme for Academic Development (<http://www.bowdoin.edu/baldwin-program/student-resources/learning-styles.shtml>) identifies five: verbal/written, auditory/oral, visual/graphic, kinesthetic/tactile/concrete and active/reflective. The questionnaire used in this study is based on the six-part system (Richards and Lockhart, 1996, p. 68-69), which defines the following six categories of learners: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group and individual. Identifying a student's style and then providing instruction consistent with it can contribute to more effective learning. However, learning styles are not the characterizations of what people are or are not like since we are all capable of learning under almost any style, no matter what our preference is.

Learning strategies, on the other hand, are 'steps taken by students to enhance their own learning; they are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferrable to new situations' (Oxford, 1990, p. 1). Some of them have been used since ancient times, e.g. mnemonic or memory devices. According to Oxford (1990), there are six general types of learning strategies:

- Memory strategies for storing and retrieving information (such as creating mental linkages);
- Cognitive strategies for understanding and producing new language (practicing):

- Compensation strategies for communicating despite one's own deficiencies in language knowledge (guessing intelligently);
- Metacognitive strategies for organizing, planning and evaluating one's own knowledge (arranging learning);
- Affective strategies for gaining control over emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values (encouraging oneself);
- Social strategies for interacting with people (asking questions).

Identifying them accurately may result in increasing students' self-awareness about their own approaches to learning as well as improving their proficiency and self-confidence.

Research Findings

The results are as follows:

1. Of the twenty-eight examinees, eleven (39.28%) are individual learners; seven (28.57%) are visual learners; four (14.28%) are tactile learners; four (14.28) are auditory learners, and two (7.14%) are kinesthetic learners.
2. The top five learning strategies according to the first four groups are:
 - Individual learners:
 - Comprehending and practising language primarily in real-life context having personal significance,
 - Focusing on and learning from public messages of all kinds,
 - Listening and watching observed situations, overheard conversations,
 - Using semantic context, linguistic manners, gestural cues, etc.,
 - Practicing the language in deliberately artificial contexts.
 - Visual learners:
 - Comprehending and practising language primarily in real-life context having personal significance;

- Listening and watching observed situations, overheard conversations;
 - Interacting with a native speaker;
 - Taking notes, writing down new items;
 - Focusing on and learning from public messages of all kinds.
- Auditory learners:
 - Comprehending and practising language primarily in real-life context having personal significance;
 - When listening or reading, directing attention to a specific language feature;
 - Interacting with a native speaker;
 - Speaking freely, without worrying too much about errors;
 - Focusing on understanding messages socio-culturally.
 - Tactile learners:
 - Comprehending and practising language primarily in real-life context having personal significance;
 - Interacting with a native speaker;
 - Speaking freely, without worrying too much about errors,
 - Comparing, for example, several sentences in an effort to deduce the underlying rule;
 - Making visualizations to clarify meaning and remember it.
3. Top five learning strategies among successful learners are:
- Listening and watching observed situations, overheard conversations;
 - Interacting with a native speaker;
 - Self-monitoring one's own individual difficulties;
 - Comprehending and practising language primarily in real-life context having personal significance;
 - Just relaxing and keeping sensory pathways open.

Top five learning strategies among not so successful learners are:

- Comprehending and practising language primarily in real-life context having personal significance,
- Listening and watching observed situations, overheard conversations,
- Interacting with a native speaker,
- Seeking from other people explanations of linguistic and grammatical points,
- Focusing on and learning from public messages of all kinds.

The Significance of the Research Findings

The results were more than surprising. An active, responsive class with, what seemed to me, a great capacity for interaction, appeared to consist of mostly individual learners with no affinity whatsoever towards group work, and with only two kinesthetic learners, which meant that I had been constantly creating an inadequate learning environment for them by insisting on pair and group activities, mingling and playing, and that I, in a way, prevented them from achieving better learning results since I used inappropriate teaching methods and techniques.

It was a relief to find out that students obviously use a variety of learning strategies, irrespective of their learning preferences. This enables me to persist in the principle of variety, which I so dearly cherish. Furthermore, the students' learning strategies are not a perfect match with their learning styles. There is at least one learning strategy that seems unexpected or illogical for each of the identified learning styles. For example, visual learners enjoy interacting with native speakers, tactile learners make visualisations to clarify meaning, and individual learners like practising language in artificial contexts such as role-plays or simulations. This clearly demonstrates that even though we have one or two dominant learning preferences, we actually learn under a variety of different styles.

It was really fascinating to see that each group of learners placed comprehending and practising language primarily in *real-life* context having *personal significance* at the top of their learning strategies lists.

Surprisingly enough, there are more similarities between successful and unsuccessful learners than expected. Successful learners are more relaxed and prone to self-monitoring, whereas unsuccessful learners lack self-confidence and tend to have something or someone to rely on when learning.

Conclusion

By shifting the focus from themselves to students, teachers undergo, a process of self-monitoring and self-evaluation. At the same time, they expand a spectre of the roles they already have – they are no longer just instructors, managers, judges or even doctors; now they are also guides, consultants, coordinators and facilitators. The starting and the ultimate point in teaching in the ELT is enabling students to use the language communicatively and confidently even when teachers are no longer there to help, and this change of focus might be a huge step towards this goal.

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Appendix 1 and Appendix 2: Research Instruments

Perceptual learning style preference questionnaire

This questionnaire has been designed to help you identify the way(s) you learn best – the way(s) you prefer to learn. Read each statement and respond to them AS THEY APPLY TO YOUR STUDY OF ENGLISH. Decide whether you agree or disagree with each statement.

SA	Strongly agree
A	Strongly disagree
U	Undecided
D	Disagree
SD	Strongly disagree

Please respond to each statement quickly, without too much thought. Try not to change your responses after you choose them.

1. When the teacher tells me the instructions, I understand better. SA
A U D SD
2. I prefer to learn by doing something in class. SA
A U D SD
3. I get more work done when I work with others. SA
A U D SD

4. I learn more when I study with a group. SA
A U D SD
5. In class, I learn best when I work with others. SA
A U D SD
6. I learn better by reading what the teacher writes on the board. SA
A U D SD
7. When someone tells me how to do something in class, I learn it better. SA
A U D SD
8. When I do things in class, I learn better. SA
A U D SD
9. I remember things I have heard in class better than things I have read. SA
A U D SD
10. When I read instructions, I remember them better. SA
A U D SD
11. I learn more when I can make a model of something. SA
A U D SD
12. I understand better when I read instructions. SA
A U D SD
13. When I study alone, I remember things better. SA
A U D SD
14. I learn more when I make something for a class project. SA
A U D SD
15. I enjoy learning in class by doing experiments. SA
A U D SD
16. I learn better when I make drawings as I study. SA
A U D SD
17. I learn better in class when the teacher gives a lecture. SA
A U D SD
18. When I work alone, I learn better. SA
A U D SD
19. I understand things better in class when I participate in role playing. SA
A U D SD

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| 20. I learn better in class when I listen to someone. | SA |
| A U D SD | |
| 21. I enjoy working on an assignment with two or three classmates. | SA |
| A U D SD | |
| 22. When I build something, I remember what I have learned better. | SA |
| A U D SD | |
| 23. I prefer to study with others. | SA |
| A U D SD | |
| 24. I learn better by reading than by listening to someone. | SA |
| A U D SD | |
| 25. I enjoy making something for a class project. | SA |
| A U D SD | |
| 26. I learn best in class when I can participate in related activities. | SA |
| A U D SD | |
| 27. In class, I work better when I work alone. | SA |
| A U D SD | |
| 28. I prefer working on projects by myself. | SA |
| A U D SD | |
| 29. I learn more by reading textbooks than by listening to lectures. | SA |
| A U D SD | |
| 30. I prefer to work by myself. | SA |
| A U D SD | |

Learning Strategies Checklist

Look at the following list of basic 'learning strategies'. Which ones do you most often use in your own process of foreign language learning? (Place a tick beside these.)

1. Comprehending and practising language primarily in real-life context having personal significance: i.e. to a large extent, trusting in 'picking it up'.

2. When listening or reading, directing attention to a specific feature (e.g. a verb tense, main ideas, etc.): thus, 'selective focusing'.
3. Practising common structures, conversational phrases, polite expressions and other set formulae i.e. learning them off by heart, in order to have a ready stock of conversational gambits.
4. Trying to extend the known by 'hypothesis' testing' (e.g. having learned 'truck-driver,' guessing what would you call someone who operates a taxi?)
5. Listening and watching (and deriving meaning from) observed situations, over-heard conversations, etc.
6. Using semantic context, linguistic markers, gestural cues, intonation, situation, etc. To guess meaning i.e. inferencing.
7. Interacting with a native speaker, utilizing learning techniques (e.g. asking for repetition, clarification, correction; paraphrasing and asking if that is accurate etc.)
8. Speaking freely, without worrying too much about errors; persevering in a focus on your meaning and getting it across in any way possible: re-stating, giving examples, gesturing etc.
9. Monitoring listener's practical and affective responses to one's productions: paying careful attention to this and making alterations accordingly.
10. Focusing on understanding meanings socio-culturally: customs, expectations, interpretations, cues, etc.
11. Self-monitoring one's own individual difficulties, working out plans for improvement.
12. Comparing, for example, several sentences in an effort to deduce the underlying rule; i.e. in your own way, looking for generalizations or basic principles of language.
13. Seeking from other people, explanations of linguistic, grammatical (etc.) points.
14. Reading grammar explanations, contrasts; doing exercises and drills.
15. Making visualizations (diagrams, pictures) to clarify meaning and remember it; or to clarify structures.

16. Using mnemonic techniques in order to memorize.
17. Using phonetic symbols or some personal system for reminding oneself about particular sound features, intonation patterns etc.
18. Taking notes, writing down new items; keeping vocabulary lists; keeping a personal learning journal etc.
19. Repetition for pure reinforcement or motor practice; for fluency of sound production, phonetic difficult spots etc; pure enjoyment of articulation, sounds in general.
20. Focusing on and learning from public message of all kinds (signs, ads, labels, train announcements, radio, TV, films etc.).
21. Familiarization with a specific language 'field' by deliberate specialization (e.g. getting to know the language of politics and current affairs by always watching the same TV news program etc.).
22. Working through a 'cassette-course' on the language.
23. Practising the language in deliberately artificial contexts (simulations, games, crosswords etc.).
24. Experimenting with transferring a message from one medium (or format, register etc.) to another: (e.g. recounting, as a narration, the story-line of a movie; discussing, conversationally, an issue read about in a magazine or newspaper, or writing a personal letter about the same etc.).
25. Just relaxing and keeping sensory pathways open ('absorbing').