

4. Learning Styles: Theoretical Background and Practical Applications for ESOL Learners and Teachers

**Review of a presentation by Tony Young of
Bell Educational Trust**

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Abstract

Rounding off the two-day colloquium featuring speakers invited from such far-flung reaches as Hungary, England, France and a good Welsh contingent, Tony Young hosted a presentation/workshop on a key area of pedagogical research: *Learning styles of students*.

Through the Style Analysis Survey, using the increasingly popular method of psychometric testing, (a questionnaire which repeatedly poses questions on specific areas to obtain the truest possible profile of the participant), Tony managed to involve the French and Anglophone teachers present in the most immediate way.

Tony proposed that a "Learning Style" is the characteristic cognitive and socio-behavioural way we prefer to learn". The notion is currently enjoying an explosion of interest in a wide variety of fields, and is seen by many as being a key component of a learner-centred curriculum. Its application to 'real-world' learning situations throws up interesting insights that go a long way to bridge the gap between Applied Linguistics and classroom practice. The workshop had three main aims:

1. To introduce ESOL practitioners to the theoretical background of the notion of Learning Styles, in the process elucidating key concepts and exploring some of the problems that the notion may present to us as teachers and to our learners.
2. To use Rebecca Oxford's (1993) Style Analysis Survey, both to define our own 'Styles', and to explore the utility of the Survey as a tool for use with learners.
3. To draw on the experience of the presenter; of other ESOL practitioners in Britain; of foreign learners of English in the UK; and of the participants themselves, to explore ways that this notion can be applied in real classroom situations.

Learning styles - a key element in learner-centredness?

The notion of learning style is frequently placed at the very centre of current language learning thought. It represents an attempt to construct a single tool

for categorising learners' psycho-social and cognitive involvement in their studies, and on the individual's sensory characteristics. It is a key element in attempts to centre a curriculum around the learner, an attempt to move away from a largely methodological underpinning to curricula. It is said to be highly practical. The workshop began with Keefe's fairly bamboozling, but certainly all-encompassing definition.

Definitions and origins of learning styles

Keefe's (1979: 4) definition of learning style is the one that is perhaps most frequently cited:

'the characteristic cognitive, affective and psychological behaviours that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment. Learning style is a consistent way of functioning that reflects underlying causes of behaviour'.

The learning style of an individual, it is widely claimed, is determined by biology and/or upbringing: an individual's educational and/or cultural background has a strong, possibly dominant, role in shaping his or her learning style. Learning style is either habitual and/or consciously preferred, but differs from learning *strategies* in not being consciously deployable in a learning situation.

Given these very general definitions, he highlighted a number of problems with the notion, namely the vagueness of definitions and ambiguous terminology, hence the constant need of researchers in the field to present their guiding definition of a 'learning style'. For instance, the assumption of a *culturally located* style of learning (is there really a peculiarly French way of learning English compared to a Brazilian one?) could also lead to overgeneralizations and stereotyping about individuals and their cultural background.

How does an understanding of what a learning style really is apply to the teacher? It can help a teacher in building up a picture of the learner, and should help the learner build up a picture of him or herself and his/her motivations.

Another shortcoming indicated was the doubtful validity of cognitive elements in

style inventories, in other words some tests conducted since the 1940s can now be considered as oversimplistic. He mentioned that the distinction of field dependence and field independence (often termed as 'global or analytic') are frequently used as the main or only cognitive aspect of style. Until very recently it was the main 'measurable' factor of difference between individuals' learning styles. Based on experiments carried out on pilots, Witkin made contentious and often damning claims that field dependent (global) people are warm and affectionate whilst those who are field independent (analytical) tend to be cold and distant in relations with others.

While Griffiths and Sheen attack the FI/D construct as lacking in foundation, they concede that this area of study continues to 'beguile', and that consequently 'the flow of L2 studies using it is undiminished'.

Oxford and Anderson's (1995) learning styles inventory

Given these objections, and the counter-arguments about the practical utility of learning styles for teachers and learners, Tony then turned to a more detailed look at an inventory of styles.

Quoting a 'state of the art article' in the journal *Language Teaching*, by Oxford and Anderson (1995:201), giving 'a more accurate and encompassing description' than previous efforts, he contended that learning style has six interrelated aspects. The six aspects identified are:

- **Cognitive** styles or elements, which include preferred or habitual patterns of mental functioning,
- The **executive** aspect, dealing with the degree to which a person seeks order, organisation and closure and manages his or her own learning process,
- The **affective** aspect, which reflect clusters of attitudes, beliefs and values that influence what an individual will pay most attention to in a learning situation,
- The **social** contribution to an individual's learning style, concerning the extent to which that person will prefer the involvement of other people in the learning process,
- The **physiological** element of a learning style at least partly

involving the anatomically-based sensory and perceptual tendencies of a person,

- Finally, Oxford and Anderson state that from the standpoint of **behaviour**, learning style relates to a tendency to actively seek situations compatible with one's own learning preferences.

This inventory can be seen as underpinning Oxford's Style Assessment Survey.

A study was carried out in the Bell Educational Trust's UK Centres using the Style Analysis Survey to address the questions:

1. Does a broadly mono-cultural group exhibit a single preferred Learning Style and is it influenced by gender or age?
2. Do teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) link Learning Styles to cultural groupings? Would the teachers be correct in their assumptions about given groups? Would they regard defining the learning style of a cultural group as useful or stereotyping?
3. Did students feel that the final analysis of themselves produced by such a survey accurately described them as learners? Would there be any significant differences between the views of teachers and students?
4. How useful or otherwise would teachers find the SAS in the teaching of advanced level students?

Results of the study and conclusions

1. Every group, but not every individual, exhibited the style preferences
 - Visual
 - Extrovert
 - Intuitive
 - Closure-Orientation
 - Global

However there were no statistically significant differences by gender or age group.

2. The very strong perceptions of 'cultural' learning styles on the part of teachers, were often, according to the students, wrong!
3. Over 80% of the students felt that the survey described them well or very well. However, the teachers were strongly divided.
4. For the fourth question the discrepancy was again extremely divided. About 40% of the teachers said that they would find the survey 'useful' or 'very useful' with about 30% of the teachers considering it 'not very useful' or 'not at all useful'

Ian Tudor (1996:113-4), also present at the Colloquium, argues that the notion of learning style is at the very centre of current language learning thought because it is the key element in attempts to centre curricula around the individual learner. It is indispensable for discovering who the learner is and what the learner needs and wants. Self-knowledge is a requirement if the learner is to employ the best strategies to optimise his or her chances of a successful outcome. Teachers who participated in the survey were anxious to avoid the trap of cultural stereotyping inherent in a 'culturally-located' learning style. They were, however, also unwilling in very many cases to accept the verdict of an instrument purporting to measure and define aspects of *an individual's* learning style. Many of the reasons for this rejection related to the instrument itself with others relating to the *type* of instrument. Still others, however, related to the whole notion of learning style itself. The rejection seemed related both to the vagueness of the notion and to the difficulty of applying it to 'real life' learning situations.

Whatever the often very valid objections teachers have to the notion of learning styles, and to instruments such as surveys which purport to define it, the fact remains that it is a useful way of promoting reflection in a learner. Such reflection can lead to a shared vocabulary between teachers and learners that goes beyond simplistic terms, and can aid the building of relationships between teachers and learners.

After completing the twenty-minute survey, the vast majority of us teachers attending the workshop found the results for our own tests to be fairly revealing and mirror-like. The conclusions are, in my opinion very clear: that this is a very simple and powerful tool. It can be used either in developing a curriculum from scratch or for increasing empathy with and teacher awareness of students struggling

with one particular style of exercise, or course book. With greater ownership for his/her own learning, born from a clear picture of preferences, a student can become more active in the process and improve the teacher-student relationship.

Tony Young has been a teacher and manager in EFL for over 15 years, and has worked in the UK, Malaysia, Spain and Italy. He is currently a teacher and course co-ordinator at the Bell Educational Trust's London centre. In 1999 he completed an MA in Applied Linguistics at Birkbeck College, part of the University of London, with research into the theoretical background to learning styles theory and its classroom applications. As well as teaching at Bell, he is currently undertaking research into inter-cultural competence as part of his doctoral studies at the University of London.

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