

AN INSIGHT INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING STYLES



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As a result of a more learner-centered approach in the field of foreign language teaching, the study of learning styles has received a lot of attention in the last two-three decades. The paper presents a brief overview of the current theoretical issues related to learning styles, and discusses the implications that a presence of learners with different learning styles might have on the teaching process. The paper also presents results of a research into the preferred ways of learning by a group of Croatian learners of English as a foreign language. Learning styles dichotomies that were investigated in this research were the following: field dependent/field independent, active/reflective, sensory/intuitive and visual/verbal.

Key words: learning styles, foreign language teaching, Croatian learners of English

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, the learner has become a central figure in the process of foreign language teaching. Therefore, it is not surprising that the issue of individual differences in foreign language learning (Robinson, 2002) and their implications on the teaching process has been widely researched and discussed. On the pages that follow, we will concentrate on one dimension of individual differences - learning style differences.

As other psychological and cognitive constructs important in the process of foreign language learning (e.g. motivation, attitudes, strategies), the construct of a learning style has been defined in many different ways. Recently, a rather transparent and influential definition has been the one proposed by Skehan. He defines learning styles as 'the characteristic manner in which an individual chooses to approach a learning task' (Skehan, 2001: 237); in other words, learning style might be considered as a preferred way in which an individual learner obtains, processes and retains information.

In the chapters that follow we will outline some possible classifications of types of learning styles, and present results of a research into the preferred ways of learning by a group of Croatian learners of English as a foreign language.

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LEARNING STYLES – CLASSIFICATION ISSUES



In the field of foreign language learning, one of the most discussed and studied types of learning style is the difference between what Witkin (1962, as cited in Skehan, 2001) termed as field independent/field dependent (FI/FD) learning style. What has to be pointed out in relation to the FI/FD dichotomy is that it basically encompasses all other cognitive (or learning) styles (Schmeck, 1988; Oxford, 1990). Some other terms that have been used over the years, and that basically cover the same pairing are: analytic and global, serialistic and holistic, left-brained and right-brained, atomistic and holistic, sequential and random learning style (for a more detailed overview see Henriques and Felder, 1995).

If we wanted to outline the most often stressed distinctions between the above mentioned pairings, we might say that FI (i.e. analytic, serialistic, left-brained, atomistic or sequential) learners are those who prefer analyzing and dissecting the linguistic input into smaller parts and 'deal more easily with grammatical structures and grammatical analysis' (Henriques and Felder, 1995:25). FD (i.e. global, holistic, right-brained, random) learners are considered to be 'better at learning language intonation and rhythms' (ibid.) and presumably like using the language in real-life situations. We might propose that FD dominance means a preference for the subjective and intuitive, while FI dominance represents the tendency to be objective and to rely on certain, established information.

Skehan (2001) goes on to further explain the difference between FI/FD, and also to explain how this difference might be manifested in the foreign language learning process. For example, when listening to the auditory input, a FI learner will focus his/her attention only to those parts which are relevant for the recovery of meaning; these learners, because of their ability to selectively channel their attention, will avoid all irrelevant information. In comparison, FD learner will perceive situations as wholes and compensate for his/her lack of ability to break the linguistic input down into smaller parts by good quality interaction with other people. In other words, these learners are drawn to situations of social interactions because this is where they receive high quality linguistic input. Skehan sums up his argument by saying that both FI and FD learners are seen as having 'good' and 'bad' sides. Although an analytic learner benefits from being able to decompose the input he/she has been exposed to, process it and reap the results for their language development, this kind of learner will avoid all the situations where actual language-usage as a means of communication is taking place. FD individuals will engage in real-life communication without any difficulties. This is an activity they will greatly benefit from because, despite the fact that they will not exploit the input given to them to its full extent, they will experience language in real use.

However, it is important to add that Skehan (2001) also stresses that FI/FD has nothing to do with the difference between the learning ability of analytic versus holistic learners, but rather with the way different people process and organize information. He also admits that FI/FD construct works well if we consider the world as divided into two extremities, but what about people who don't belong to either of the two poles on the FI/FD continuum. Skehan proposes two alternative solutions to this problem: either an individual has a fairly fixed position on the FI/FD continuum, or he/she can have a range of styles which are used

in different situations and the individual chooses the best style for solving the problem in question.

Skehan (2001) relates this latter idea to Kolb's (1976) four stages of the learning cycle.

The first stage is concrete experience stage, which could be also identified as the FD stage. The second stage is reflection-observation stage where a learner systematically observes and reflects upon his/her experience and establishes generalizations. The third stage should be the abstract conceptualization stage where learners theorize at a more abstract level in order to make deeper sense of their concrete experience. This stage could be considered as the FI stage. The last, fourth stage in Kolb's learning cycle is the active experimentation stage. For Kolb this stage is rather important because he points out that theorizing should not be an end in itself and should provoke further questions, and these can best be addressed by going back to concrete experience. In this way the learner actually closes one cycle and can start a new one. However, Kolb admits that such a scenario needn't always be the case and that some learners have a preference for some stages of the cycle at the expense of others.

Willing (1987) interpreted Kolb's (1976) learning cycle from two different perspectives. Willing sees the abstract-concrete dimension as cognitive-perceptual in nature, and views reflective-experimental dimension more in personality terms, i.e. more in terms of a learner's temperamental dispositions than in terms of the style of processing of the linguistic input a learner receives. Willing used Kolb's two dimensional classifications and conducted a study among the learners of English. On the basis of his research results, he outlined four types of English language learners:

Convergers are FI active learners who are able to process the linguistic input in such a way that they analyze its component parts and the relationship between these parts. These learners are very confident in themselves and they tend to avoid classrooms and groups of learners. They are the kind of learners who like to work alone and they are more interested in theorizing about the language than actually using the language.

Conformists are FI passive learners. When compared to convergers, they have only one thing in common - the fact that they also like to analyze language. They are primarily focused on learning about the language and dismissing any practical use of it. They are very systematic and highly organized but unlike convergers, they rely on the guidance of others in their language learning process. In other words, they are not solitary learners with enough self-confidence to depend on their own judgments as being the valid ones. For them, there needs to be some kind of authoritative figure, i.e. a teacher, who will impose a firm learning structure. For conformists, the classroom is not a place where they will engage in verbal communication with other learners. They will be more than happy to rely on the teacher's instructions and follow textbooks.

Concrete learners are defined as FD passive learners. They are the kind of learners who like classroom organization because they don't feel confident enough to use the language without the assistance and guidance of a teacher or some other imposed authority. They see the classroom as a place with a mixture of different individuals. These learners are happy when they can interact with other students in the classroom, seeing this as an opportunity to learn from first-hand experience. They are not interested in 'learning about language' as



much as conformists and convergers are. They are oriented to other people and work best in group work activities.

Communicative learners are the last group in Willing's framework. They are defined as FD active learners and for them the best way to learn is outside the classroom. They feel confident enough to engage in real-life communication and are ready to take risks and experiment with language, i.e. they are language use oriented. Communicative learners are holistic in orientation, meaning that they are not interested in any type of language analysis. The thing they are most interested in is effective interaction with other users of the language they are learning.

When commenting on Willing's classification, Skehan (2001) stressed the importance of perceiving these four learner styles as 'caricatures, in that they convey too neat and distinct a view of what learners are like to be convincing about real people' (ibid.: 249). According to some already mentioned Skehan's comments, what learners often do is not to have a fixed position in any kind of framework, but rather assume different styles in different learning contexts. In other words, learners exhibit a variety of different approaches when they find themselves in different learning contexts. Therefore, the issue of measuring learning styles or learning style preferences is a rather interesting one. Over the years, different methods of measurement and measuring instruments have been devised. We can mention, for example, Witkin's et al. (1979) 'rod and frame test', Skehan's (2001) GEFT test, its computerized and further elaborated version developed by Riding (1991), and many others. However, this issue is to be tackled in more detail at some other occasion.

THE RESEARCH – AIM AND SAMPLE

The aim of our research was to get an insight into a group of students' learning styles, i.e. to see whether there was a particular dimension of learning style which was commonly used by the majority of students. The research was conducted among 50 adult learners of a language school in Zagreb. The learners had different levels (ranging from elementary to upper-intermediate) of English language proficiency, since some had been learning English in the primary and secondary school, and some started learning it only a few semesters before the research was conducted. The majority of students received grades B and D (50 % and 32 % of the students respectively) on their last achievement test based on the course book material.

A vast majority of subjects were university under-graduates of engineering or information technology.

THE RESEARCH – INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURE

The research was based on the *Index of Learning Style (ILS) questionnaire* developed by Felder and Soloman (<http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/ILSpage.html>). This questionnaire consists of 44 questions and for each question there is a choice of two possible answers. The questions are formulated in such a way that they cover four different dimensions of



learning style, and by choosing exclusively one of the two possible answers, subjects reveal their preference for active/reflective, sensory/intuitive, visual/verbal or FI/FD dimension of learning style. Here are two example questions:

*'Understand something better if I
a) try it or b) think it through'*

OR

*'When I think about what I did yesterday I am most likely to get
a) pictures or b) words.'*



Before administering the questionnaire to the students, it was translated into Croatian in order to avoid the possibility that a subject's proficiency in English affects his or her answers. Students were specifically asked to answer the questions with only one answer, even when they could apply both answers to a particular question. In that case, they were asked to choose the answer which could be applied more frequently.

After the questionnaire had been administered, the students' answers were typed into the *ILS Scoring Sheet* and then transferred into the *ILS report form* (<http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/ILSpage.html>). (For a detailed presentation of the whole procedure see Opić, 2007).

For each of the four learning style dimensions, a student could be placed on one of the three different parts of the continuum. In other words, according to the results of the ILS measuring instruments, a particular student could be seen as being rather balanced as far as his/her preference for either extreme of a learning style continuum, or that he/she had either a mild or strong leaning towards a particular extreme (e.g. FD/FI). Since there was a total of 44 questions, the assumption was that this type of learning style indicator would give a rather clear picture of a particular student's preference for various learning style dimensions. The only problem that was observed in administering the questionnaire was that it seemed a bit tedious to some students to complete because of the bulk of questions students needed to answer. However, students were asked to answer the questions thoroughly and were given a sufficient amount of time for doing it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the results obtained from the research, the majority of students showed that they were rather balanced on each of the four examined learning style dimensions; that is, the percentage of students who were balanced active/reflective, sensory/intuitive, visual/verbal and FI/FD was always around 50 % and, in some cases, even went over 60 %. The exact percentages of students' preference for different dimensions of learning style are shown in

Table 1: Percentages of students' preference for different learning style dimensions

Balanced Active/Reflective	62%
Moderate preference for Active	18%
Strong preference for Active	8%
Moderate preference for Reflective	6%
Strong Preference for Reflective	6%
Balanced Sensory/Intuitive	56%
Moderate preference for Sensory	36%
Strong preference for Sensory	2%
Moderate preference for Intuitive	4%
Strong Preference for Intuitive	2%
Balanced Visual/Verbal	48%
Moderate preference for Visual	18%
Strong preference for Visual	20%
Moderate preference for Verbal	12%
Strong Preference for Verbal	2%
Balanced FI/FD	62%
Moderate preference for FI	26%
Strong preference for FI	2%
Moderate preference for FD	8%
Strong Preference for FD	2%

What strikes as interesting, apart from the fact that most students were balanced on each of the learning style scales, is that the percentage of students with a strong preference for any of the extremes was fairly low, always within the range of 1-10 %. The only exception to this was subjects' preference for visual input, which was as high as 20 %. This does not come as surprising since according to most research (Henriques and Felder, 1995) the majority of people are visual types and prefer to receive information in the form of diagrams, pictures, videos... This theory of strong preference for visual input can be supported also by the fact that as many as 18 % of our subjects showed a moderate preference for it. In other words,



almost 40 % of students showed either a moderate or a strong preference for the visual type of linguistic input.

Another finding was that 36 % of the learners surveyed showed a moderate preference for sensory learning style, as opposed to only 4 % of those who said they preferred intuitive learning style. This high percentage of sensory types is not surprising at all since the students who took part in the survey were mostly people who were studying engineering or information technology at the university. These learners are, in general, more attracted to learning facts and concrete information and to be practical. It is striking to point out the dissimilarity between our research and the research conducted by Moody (1988). Moody found that as much as 59 % of the 491 college students included in his research showed a preference for intuitive learning style, results completely different from the ones obtained from our study. However, his sample was based on first and second year language students who could be expected to prefer using their intuition when dealing with the language, and to show a leaning towards the abstract, towards analyzing the language. On the other hand, one of the students who took part in our survey and showed a strong preference for sensory learning style, was heard to comment that 'the questions in the questionnaire were too philosophical for him'.

Another very interesting conclusion that could be drawn from the research presented in this paper, is the one connected to the FI/FD dimension. While 62 % of students showed that they were fairly balanced on this learning style continuum, there were 26 % of those who moderately preferred FI, plus an additional 2 % of those who strongly preferred it. We might conclude that this is connected to the fact that most language classes these students had attended were sequential in nature, i.e. they examined various grammatical and lexical structures gradually and independently. Such an approach appeals to FI learners, and might have influenced a certain number of originally balanced FI / FD learners.

In sum, the results of the research revealed that most of the students who participated in it showed that their position on each of the four learning style dimensions did not lean towards any particular learning style, and that most of them were quite balanced in their preference for a particular style. We might interpret these findings as being in line with what has already been found in other research - most learners of foreign languages do not have a fixed position as far as their preference towards the two extremes of any learning style dimension is concerned. In other words, the two poles of different learning style dimensions can be seen as two opposite sides or, we might say, points of reference, and most learners employ somewhat different styles in different situations, i.e. in different linguistic and communicative surroundings. For example, it would be logical to assume that a learner, particularly in a language classroom environment, would start from a FI approach, analyzing and dissecting language into its component parts. Then he would move towards getting to grips with larger chunks of linguistic material, a trait characteristic of FD learners, thus using both parts of a particular dimension of learning style. It would be interesting to see how the learning style is correlated to how well learners do on their written and oral exams, and whether there is any connection between their preferred learning style and their foreign language speaking skills. However, it was not possible to gather such information from the research instruments that were used in this study.



CONCLUDING REMARKS: IMPLICATIONS OF LEARNING STYLES RESEARCH ON FLT



When discussing different dimensions of learning styles and their relation to foreign language teaching (FLT), special attention needs to be paid to different teaching methods which could be employed by teachers in order to ensure that the style of teaching caters to the needs of not just one, but several learning styles. Therefore, what could be done in the classroom environment to address the educational needs of all students?

When we talk about the sensory/intuitive learner distinction, one needs to be aware that vocabulary drills and grammar exercises, although much preferred by the sensors, may seem a little tedious for intuitive learners who show 'eagerness to get to the more interesting material - grammatical complexities, nuances of translation, linguistic concepts and cultural considerations' (Henriques and Felder, 1995:23). Therefore, a teaching style from which both sensors and intuitors would benefit from would have to include equal amount of grammatical definitions, drills and word definitions, as well as a deeper syntactical analysis combined with a lot of cultural context.

As far as the difference between visual and verbal learners is concerned, our research also showed that most people extract and retain more information from visual input, while the major part of classroom teaching is considerably verbal in its nature. Therefore, the best solution to bring together visual and verbal dimensions would be for teachers to aid their verbal presentations with as much visual material as possible. Henriques and Felder (1995: 24) propose 'showing photographs, drawings, sketches, and cartoons to reinforce presentation of vocabulary words, and using films, videotapes and dramatizations to illustrate lessons in dialogue and pronunciation.'

'The more opportunities students have to both participate and reflect in class, the better they will learn new material and the longer they are likely to retain it.' (McCarthy 1987, as cited in Henriques and Felder, 1995:23). In other words, what active and reflective learners need in a classroom environment is not to have a passive role but to actively participate in discussion, group work, and even to physically move around the classroom. They should not only interact with the students sitting next to them, but also exchange information with everybody in the classroom. Nevertheless, we have to bear in mind that while this kind of active learning may engage active learners and even prove interesting to reflective learners, too much of this kind of activity might not always be what learners enjoy doing. Therefore, a combination of active and reflective experiences, e.g. writing or question formulation exercises, might prove to be a perfect blend.

And last but not least, there is the issue of how to best cater for the needs of FI/FD learners. Since the majority of FI learners prefer a well structured teaching environment with a lot of grammatical rules and analysis, there should be enough of this type of activities to catch their attention and keep them interested. In contrast, FD learners prefer relatively unstructured approaches that are holistic in their nature so the emphasis should be placed on 'conversation and cultural contexts of the target language' (Henriques and Felder, 1995:25).

While all these different approaches sound like a perfect frame of reference to foreign

language instructors, they might better work in theory than in practice for two basic reasons. Firstly, a classroom consists of a number of individuals with a variety of different learning style preferences. Secondly, different teachers also have inclinations towards different teaching styles. However, a cardinal mistake every teacher could make would be to try to use one's preferred mode of instruction exclusively. Every learner will, from time to time, be forced to use a learning style or method which might not be their favorite (Hunt 1971; Cox 1988). This, in effect, is not a negative thing since we already mentioned that every individual employs not only one, but a couple of different dimensions of learning styles in order to tackle various tasks at hand. Nevertheless, what needs to be stressed is the occurrence of frustration and burnout when students are subjected to teaching styles inconsistent with their learning style preferences over extended periods of time. Oxford (1990) claims that, in order to achieve effective foreign language learning, teachers have to balance instructional methods, somehow structuring the class so that all learning styles are simultaneously, or at least sequentially, accommodated. The authors of this paper certainly agree with Oxford, although being fully aware of how demanding such an approach might be for many FL teachers.



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OSVRT NA STILOVE UČENJA STRANOGA JEZIKA

Sažetak

Kao rezultat sve veće usmjerenosti procesa poučavanja stranoga jezika na samoga učenika, u posljednja dva desetljeća dosta se istraživala problematika stilova učenja. U ovome radu donosi se kratki pregled nekih teorijskih razmatranja vezanih uz stilove učenja i raspravlja se o utjecaju prisutnosti raličijih stilova kod učenika na sam proces poučavanja. K tome, iznose se rezultati istraživanja o najčešće zastupljenim stilovima učenja jedne skupine hrvatskih učenika engleskoga kao stranoga jezika.

Ključne riječi: stilovi učenja, poučavanje stranoga jezika, učenje engleskoga jezika