LEARNING STYLES: AN OBJECTIVE PERUSAL OF THE EFFICACY OF ESL TEACHING STRATEGIES IN A LEARNER-CENTRIC ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

For any teaching strategy to be effective, the learning needs, capabilities, preferences, strengths, weaknesses and ambition of the learner should be kept in mind. These particularities of the learners constitute their learning style and the rising popularity of English as a second language has necessitated the institution of several ESL teaching strategies that are based on the unique learning styles of the pupils. While some learners need to forge a bond with the teacher before they become receptive, some others require constant engagement in interesting tasks. New words and rich vocabulary, come naturally to some but other students like learning by doing. A few students who like structure, can understand and apply grammar rules although a number of them learn language through reading and listening to stories. In teaching of English as a second language, the first language or the mother tongue is used as a scaffold to begin with and is used in varying degrees of frequency in an ESL class, according to the need of the learners. The seven primary leaning styles are visual/spatial; aural, verbal, physical, logical, social (interpersonal) and solitary (intra-personal) which may be found in the learner, singly or in combination with several others. These learning styles in their turn influence the choice of ESL strategies which are of several types, viz: Memory; Cognitive; Comprehension; Metacognitive; Affective and Social. the learning process is most effective when it is in line with one's unique learning style and preferences.

KEYWORDS: *learning, teaching, strategy, style, preference, ESL, learner, mother tongue, second language*

INTRODUCTION

The belief that Language is imbued with the power to transform lives and enable its user to progress in the quest for accomplishment, is an unquestionably established premise. It is only natural then that the inability to express verbally renders one dumb in the literal sense and figuratively too. Articulation is a valuable skill, and its acquisition is only possible with a good command of the Language. Thus, anyone who wants to get ahead in life needs the backing of good communication skills, of which Language is an integral part. As English is the most sought-after Language today, the interest in learning it as a second Language is globally apparent. ESL teacher educators have developed novel techniques and strategies to facilitate the acquisition of English as a second language. effectively. This paper endeavours to look at some of the learning styles and strategies devised to benefit learners of English.

OBJECTIVE

To understand the different learning styles adopted habitually by individual learners and examine how their preferences, strengths, and weaknesses determine their inherent learning style for second language acquisition. This understanding is necessary for selection and implementation of a teaching strategy (or a combination of the same) for enhancing the effectiveness of instruction in an ESL classroom.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a result of inductive research approach. The methodology adopted involved observation of learning patterns in the ESL classroom, extensive review of literature, examination of the premise through study of patterns, resemblances and regularities in experience before reaching a conclusion.

RESULT

Educationists have identified several learning styles, and we shall examine a few of them here:

Community Language Learning

In this method of learning English, there is a great emphasis on the establishment of a bond between the teacher and the taught to make the student free of anxiety issues related to learning an unfamiliar language. This technique uses a lot of the L1 (mother tongue) for the purposes of translation, quite unlike the other methods and approaches of teaching English as a Second Language. (Suarez-2001).

Task-Based Language Learning

Task completion is the number one goal of this approach to learning English. A set of relevant and interesting tasks are devised by the teacher for the students who are expected to draw on their previous knowledge of English to complete the task with as few errors as possible (Teale, 1989).

The Lexical Approach

Based on computer studies, the Lexical syllabus or approach is to identify the most commonly used words and teach them to the learners in order of their frequency and use. This approach to language learning focuses on vocabulary acquisition and teaching lexical chunks. Teachers of the Lexical Approach make a great deal of effort to develop authentic materials and to create realistic scenarios for more valuable learning. (Wood, 1999).

Total Physical Response

Popularly known as TPR, this is an approach that follows the idea of 'learning by doing. Total Physical Response requires beginners to learn English through a series of repetitive actions such as "Open your book", "Come here";"Close the door", "Go there", "Stand up","Walk to the cupboard and open it." etc. The most important skill being developed through TPR is aural comprehension, and everything else will follow naturally later (Bier,2010).

The Structural Approach

Just as the name suggests, this learning method is all about structure in recognition of the fact that all Language is composed of complex grammar rules. According to these rules, the English Language needs to be learnt in a specific order. For instance, the verb "to be" is taught prior to teaching the present continuous, which requires the learner to use the auxiliary form of the verb "to be." (Chamot,2004).

EFL: English as A Foreign Language

EFL stands for English as a Foreign Language. This type of English learning is chiefly Language based. A typical EFL English class is for pupils who do not have English as a first language. The same method may of course, be used for learning other languages as well.

Content and Language integrated learning

The main feature of CLIL (Content and Language integrated learning - CLIL) is the learning of content through an additional language, be it foreign or second, thus teaching both the subject and the Language simply. No subject is taught in English. EFL is the type of lesson that a non-CLIL school offers to students who want to learn English as a second language.

Immersion: Integration of the subject

At international schools. one commonly encounters such a type of education. It is the type of language learning where students are immersed in the second Language during the teaching of all the subjects. However, not much attention is focussed on the target language itself as it is the medium of instruction, and therefore, it is assumed that the learners will master it eventually. The main difference between CLIL and immersion is that in the CLIL approach, attention is paid on the subject as well as on Language but the teacher in an immersion course does not focus on language teaching.

CBLT: Content-Based Language Learning

Content through Language**.** This learning style also combines both the content and the Language but the main difference between CBLT and CLIL is that the subject is taught by a language teacher and not the subject teacher. For instance, when an English teacher teaches Mathematics, the focus would be primarily on Language and not on the subject, which happens to be mathematics.

CLIL: Full integration of both content and Language

Content and Language Integrated Learning is the learning style that promotes second language learning by making students follow lessons taught in a second language by subject teachers who focus on both Language and content. The challenge here is that such a learning style requires teachers to be proficient in the subject and the Language. If handled correctly, giving sufficient time to the subject in question and also focusing on Language when needed, enables the students to learn languages quickly. With a wide variety of teachers interacting with them, the students get all kinds of exposure to different types of language input. Such an experience only adds to the mastering of the target language.

The Most Effective ESL Teaching Strategy

All teachers will agree that each of the students has a different personality, learning styles

and preferences; therefore the best ESL teaching strategy would take into account all of those and integrate a variety of methods and techniques that would be appealing to this diversity of student types., simultaneously allowing the teacher to maintain relative flexibility in adapting to various classroom situations.

Seven major learning styles have been identified based on differences in student preferences. As each category is defined broadly, it's common to find students who fit into more than one.
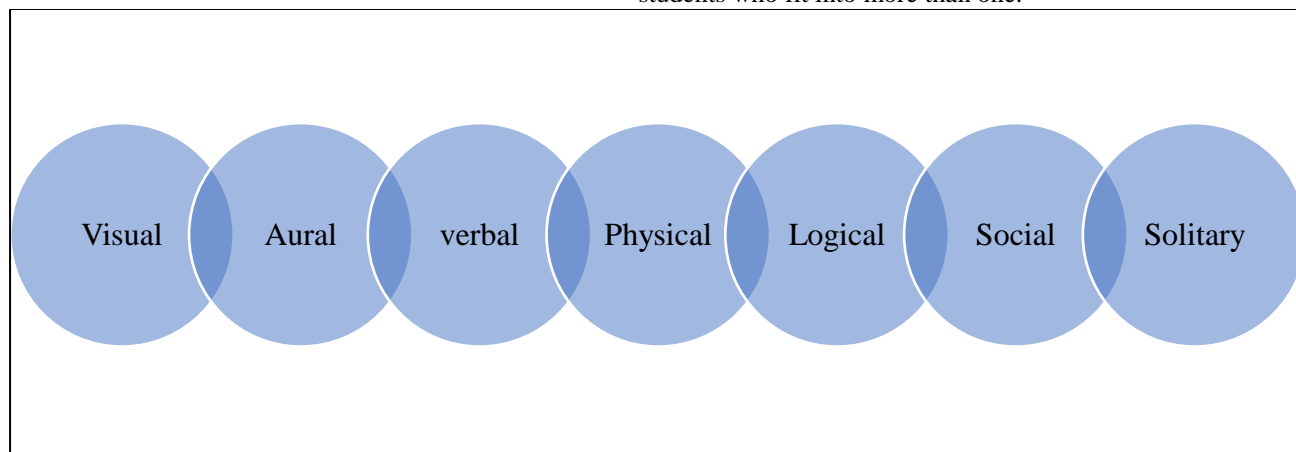
1. Visual (spatial)

For visual learners, pictures and images are the prefered medium of learning as they love to see lessons come to life. Visual learners often sit in the front row during a class to get a full view of whatever the teacher is doing or showing. The teacher's body language and facial expressions are observed keenly by such learners, and they try to steer clear of potential visual obstructions and distractions in order to get a spatial understanding.

2. Aural (auditory-musical)

Auditory learners rely primarily on sound for their learning, and music is often the most appealing medium of learning for them. Verbal lectures, discussions and audio presentations are, for them, the best way to acquire information.

3. Verbal (linguistic)

Such language learners are those who have a unique ability to pick up new words and learn best through the use of words, irrespective of whether they are presented in speech or writing. Students belonging to this category prefer hearing a detailed explanation while learning something new, rather than viewing a physical, visual demonstration.

4. Physical (kinesthetic)

Most hyperactive students may simply be curious kinesthetic learners who prefer to use their body, hands and sense of touch to explore and make sense the world around them. Such students tend to have difficulty sitting for long periods in one place. However, with the right strategy, an expert teacher may entice these energy bundles into getting involved in the learning process.

5. Logical (mathematical)

These students look for logic, reasoning and systems. They often have a keen sense for numbers, sequence association and problem-solving ability. An expert teacher is expected to identify these traits in the pupil and develop these skills to their advantage.

6. Social (interpersonal)

Some students learn best in interactive settings. These social (interpersonal) learners prefer group learning and social interaction streamlines their learning experience. They express themselves vocally and are always ready and willing to apply what they have learned in interactive settings.

7. Solitary (intrapersonal)

These types of students are the quiet and self-sufficient ones who can work alone with minimum instruction from or supervision of the teacher. Oftentimes they are labelled as shy, but these solitary learners can be pretty extroverted when given the right chance.

Having discussed the various types of learners, let us take a look at a variety of Language learning strategies that are being used to bolster the language learning experience.

Language Learning Strategies adopted by learners

As in any other discipline, strategies in language learning can facilitate the learning experience of every learner of the English language. The steps taken to learn a language determine the ultimate language performance. It is defined as "specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques — such as seeking out conversation partners or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task — used by students to enhance their own learning" (Scarcella, p. 63).

Six commonly used strategies for learning a language
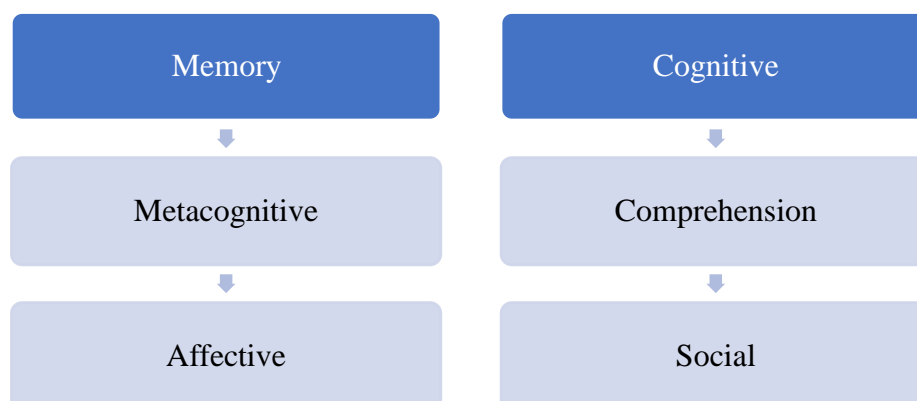
However, each individual learner has a preference for strategies that she uses more than others.

Memory Strategy

This is an age-old strategy for learning anything. The human mind is gifted with a remarkable ability for memorising. Learners who adopt the memory strategy depend on their ability to remember what they learn and devise ways to commit information to long-term memory. Some of the ways adopted to enhance memorisation are by creating mental linkages or a word-meaning map in their brain and then retrieving that information later when needed. This strategy aids the memorisation and recall via sound (e.g., rhyming), pictures (e.g., a mental image of the word itself or the meaning of that word); sounds and images in combination (For instance, the keyword method), movement (For e.g., total physical response), mechanical aids like flashcards or location (e.g., its position on a printed page or writing on a blackboard).

Cognitive Strategy

Learners who tend to analyse and rationalise (use reason and logic) are the ones to adopt the cognitive strategy. The formation of mental codes and their revision helps these learners to receive and retain information in order to reproduce it later in the target language. Adoption of this strategy enables one to internalise the Language through analysis, reasoning, note-taking, outlining, summarising, synthesising and practising structures and sounds formally in naturalistic settings.

Comprehension Strategy

Those who use the comprehension strategy often guess the meaning of unknown words while reading and listening. When such learners are speaking and writing, they overcome gaps in knowledge by replacing what they do not know with words that they know or with longer phrases.

Metacognitive Strategy

Students who adopt this strategy are able to focus, plan, arrange, and evaluate their own learning process. Such people have the acumen to identify and monitor their learning style, preferences and needs. They are able to gather and organise learning materials, arrange study space and maintain a schedule for L2 learning, revision, monitoring of mistakes and evaluation of task success. Such are the characteristics of Metacognitive learning strategy.

Social /Affective Strategy

These learners are social beings and learn best in social situations that help them to feel motivated, ask questions, facilitate conversation and learn the Language through conversation, communication and discussion with others. Interpersonal interaction is an important learning aid for those who adopt the social/affective strategy.

CONCLUSION

It is but obvious that while all the learning strategies mentioned above have their own advantages and shortcomings, each individual learner will adopt one or more of those strategies to tackle the task of learning. Research shows that effective learners are those who use an array of strategies to suit the occasion and need. Optimal learners come up with ways to amend their use of strategy and to develop combinations of strategies that work in their favour (Oxford, 1990). Through this study of learning styles and strategies, it is quite evident that each individual learner's learning style significantly influences the choice of learning strategy. When left to learn the Language by themselves, without any prompting, encouragement / guidance from the teacher, or required by the lesson itself to use a certain set of strategies, learners usually choose to use strategies that reflect their own basic learning styles (Ehrman, 1989).

This study of learning styles and strategies indicates that the learning process is most effective when it is in line with one's unique learning style and preferences. In order to determine which learning strategy to adopt one must first identify ones preferred learning style and this dilligence will help the learner to acquire knowledge quickly and effectively.

Research has indicated that successful learners are more open and receptive towards other learning styles to optimise the learning and be able to take in and internalise materials or perform well in assessments, regardless of their nature.

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