

Learning Styles

Learning styles refer to the “cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment” (Keefe, 1979, as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 120). In other words, learning styles refer to the ways individual learners prefer to approach a learning task. These preferences in learning are determined by cognitive, affective, and physiological factors. Researchers have categorized learning styles in a variety of ways. Brown (2007, p. 121-129) suggests that five learning styles are relevant to second language acquisition.

1. Field Independence

Field independent (FI) learners tend “to perceive a particular, relevant item or factor in a ‘field’ of distracting items” (Brown, 2007, p. 121). In other words, FI learners tend to see the component parts of the whole, and are unable to see the big picture because of their attention to its parts. FI learners are “closely related to classroom learning that involves analysis, attention to details, and mastering of exercises, drills, and other focused activities” (ibid.). On the other hand, field dependent (FD) learners tend to perceive the whole picture or the larger view and are unable to separate details from the surrounding context. They are more successful in learning the communicative aspects of language. Research has shown that Both FI and FD styles are important and necessary for L2 learning.

2. Left and Right Brain Dominance

Research indicates that the two hemispheres of the brain process information differently, but operate together as one unit. The left hemisphere is believed to be associated with “mathematical and linear processing of information” (Brown, 2007, p. 125). The right hemisphere, on the other hand, is said to be associated with “processing holistic, integrative, and emotional information” (ibid.).

Research has found that left brain dominant second language learners prefer a deductive style of teaching. Right brain dominant learners, on the other hand, were found to be more successful in inductive learning. In other words, left brain dominant learners tend toward analytic, reflective, and self-reliant learning, while right brain dominant learners tend toward global, impulsive, and interactive learning. It has also been found that there exists a strong relationship between FI / FD and left and right brain dominant styles. Field independent learners tend generally to be left brain dominant, and vice versa.

3. Ambiguity Tolerance

This style refers to the “degree to which [a person is] cognitively willing to tolerate ideas and prepositions that run counter to [his or her] own belief system or structure of knowledge” (Brown, 2007, p. 126). In other words, ambiguity tolerant learners tend to accept information that contradicts their own views.

Lexical items that differ from the native language, the inconsistency of certain grammatical rules of the target language with those of the native language, and differences between the cultural system of the target language and that of the native language are examples of the contradictory information that L2 learners may encounter. The available research shows that learners with high tolerance for ambiguity are more successful in language learning. These findings suggest

that tolerance of ambiguity is an important factor in second language acquisition.

4. Reflectivity and Impulsivity

These two styles refers to “the degree to which, in the cognitive domain, a person tends to make either a quick or gambling (impulsive) guess at an answer to a problem or a slower, more calculated (reflective) decision” (Brown, 2007, p. 127). In other words, reflective learners are systematic. They tend to weigh all the considerations in a problem before making a decision and taking an action. On the other hand, impulsive learners are intuitive. They tend to make quick and gambling solutions for problems. In the language classroom, reflective learners tend to think about language and how to convey their message accurately. Impulsive learners, on the other hand, take risks with the language. They are more concerned with speaking fluently than speaking accurately. Research on R/I shows that both styles are important for success in second language learning.

5. Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic styles

Visual, Auditory, and kinesthetic styles refer to “the preference that learners show toward either visual, auditory, and / or Kinesthetic input” (Brown, 2007, p. 129). Visual learners prefer reading and using pictures, flashcards, charts, and other graphics when studying. Auditory learners prefer listening to reading. They enjoy conversations, debates, and interaction with others. Kinesthetic learners show a preference for learning that involves physical activities (such as role plays, demonstrations, manipulating objects, etc.) which allow them to move around and be active. Studies have shown that most successful learners use a variety of modalities in learning. In sum, research on learning styles suggests that learning preferences have an impact on learners’

choice and use of learning strategies, and that both styles and strategies affect the outcomes of learning. In the language classroom, teachers need to be aware of the ways learners prefer to learn. This would help them adapt their teaching method (varying the activities that they use for example) to ensure that they meet the learning preferences of most, if not all, the students. Also, teachers should help their students to become autonomous learners. This can be done through helping their students discover their own preferred learning styles, develop them, and choose and use strategies that suit their learning styles.