“Have You Heard About the New Fashion?”

(Tailoring Your Lesson Plan Based on Learners Preferences)

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to explore if matched (congruent) learning and teaching styles have an impact on the students’ achievement. The sample for this study comprised of 310 English Major Students and four lecturers from the main campus of Azad University. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in the collection of the data. The instrument used was the Index of Learning Styles Inventory by Felder and Soloman (2006), observation notes and an interview schedule. The results indicated that matched teaching and learning styles have a positive impact on student achievement. The findings from this study imply that it is important for teachers in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classes to take into account the Learning Style Preferences (LSPs) of their students if teaching and learning is to be optimized. The quantitative data would be presented in this paper where as the qualitative results will be reported in the paper titled: Pride and prejudice.

Keywords: learners’ achievement, learning styles and teaching styles

1. Introduction

Students are tired, yawning, demotivated and checking their watch every now and then, as a teacher we feel there is something wrong in the class. Most of the time teachers look at the scenario with negative lens which means students are blamed due to their lack of attention in classroom. However, when the positive lens is used the teachers may question their own teaching styles. The compatibility of teachers’ teaching styles and students’ learning styles is the focus of this research, with Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students as the studied population. As early as in the 80’s, researchers had explored the strategies which help students to become successful learners and the effects of the teaching styles on student performance (Weinstein & Underwood, 1985). Educators have noticed that some students prefer certain ways of learning more than others; this preference is referred to as the learning style that can aid teachers in the successful teaching plan (Baumgartner, 2001). In other words, learning styles can

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be defined as the way the individual prefers to go about learning. The notion of learning style needs to be clarified, because in most situations, learning styles, learning strategies and learning preferences are used interchangeably. Smith and Dalton (2005) defined learning style as “a distinctive and habitual manner of acquiring knowledge, skills or attitudes through study or experience” (p. 7). The information on students’ learning styles can be useful when the learning style implementation in adult education is related with teachers considering learner style versatility at different levels and in different subjects. This aspect of the adult learners normally is argued under the matching and mismatching of the teacher styles and their learners’ learning styles (Beck, 2001; Zhang, 2006), and it is advised to connect and link the learners’ learning styles and teachers’ teaching styles (Zhang, 2006). The findings of past studies (Goodwin, 1995; McDonald, 1996) explained that a learner’s achievement in any class depends on a few factors, such as native ability, and congruence level of the learner’s learning styles and the teacher’s teaching styles. Some studies have also found that congruence (matching) between the learning styles and teaching styles have a positive impact on achievement and satisfaction (Goodwin, 1995; McDonald, 1996). Matching and mismatching between learning styles and teaching styles exist in any academic setting. The mismatch happens when the students’ preferred methods of processing information are not aligned with the teachers’ preferred styles of teaching. Of the many issues central to the effectiveness of students and teachers in the classroom, variations in learning styles, teaching styles and the impact of the match and mismatch between them on learners’ achievement appear to be the critical factors in the success of both. Farhady et al. (1994) have stated that Iranian EFL student’s achievement is unsatisfactory, some of the studies (Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh, 2004; Maleki and Zangani, 2007; Riazi and Riasati, 2007; Salehi and Shahnooshi, 2007) highlighted personal factors such as age, gender and motivation as influencing achievement of the EFL students while others (Farhady et al., 1994; Koosha and Jafarpour, 2006; and Zarei, 2002) believed that environmental factors such as parental intervention, physical conditions of the learning environment and teaching styles are the main cause of the EFL students improper performance but none of the studies considered/discussed the impact of learning styles and teaching styles match and mismatch on learner achievement. Research on the benefits of matching teachers’ teaching styles with students’ learning styles began in the 1980s (Bonham, 1989). Studies in this direction in both academic and industry environments have been done from different angles (Abdelhamid, 2003; Bell, 2007; Demirel, 2004; Ford & Chen, 2001; Kovacic, 2008; Peacock, 2001; Verster, 2006; Xiao, 2006). Elsewhere, it has been established that matching the learning styles and teaching styles will help learners become successful and better learners (Kovacic, 2008; Lage, Platt, & Treglia, 2000). Many researchers have found that matching teaching styles and learning styles will improve learning, attitudes, motivation, and behavior (Abdelhamid, 2003; Bell, 2007; Demirel, 2004; Ford & Chen, 2001; Kovacic, 2008; Peacock, 2001; Verster, 2006; Xiao, 2006; Lage, Platt, & Treglia, 2000). Some studies have indicated that mismatches do happen and that there are adverse consequences on students’ learning and attitudes to the class and to English language learning (Becta, 2005; Coffield et al., 2004; Doyle & Rutherford, 2003; Ellis, 2001; Felder, 1995; Oxford et al., 1992). The context of English language teaching in Iran, with its anti-Western outlook after the 1979 revolution and limited exposure to English language, makes it different from the EFL teaching context reported in other studies (Bada & Okan, 2000). Learning styles and teaching styles, especially the match and mismatch between them, are the key and “under-researched” aspects of L2 studies (Peacock, 2001). Furthermore, the literature is relatively silent with regard to learning and teaching style match and mismatch among EFL learners and their impact on achievement in the Asian context. It is hypothesized in this study that match between students and teachers learning and teaching styles will improve students’ marks in the final exam.

2. Objectives

The main objective of the current study is to determine and describe the key styles of EFL learners and the teaching styles of their teachers in one of the universities in Iran. After obtaining the preferences of the both groups, it attempts to explore the impact of the congruence and incongruence between students’ learning styles and teachers’ teaching styles in the EMSs classroom setting on their achievements.
3. Methodology

The independent variables of this research are teachers’ teaching styles and learners’ learning styles that were measured through the ILS (Index of Learning Styles) developed by Felder and Soloman, (2006), interview and observation. The dependent variable is student achievement, which is measured through their final exam marks. The research method used for this study is the mixed method approach using the survey, interview and observation. In the first round of research the researcher used the survey to obtain the variety of the students’ learning styles and their teachers’ teaching styles. In the second round, the researcher used interview and observation to provide the necessary information for the related research questions and also to strengthen the results obtained in the first round of data collection. Subjects for this study were from five undergraduate classes in the faculty of foreign languages in the main campus of Azad University in Iran. The total initial participants of this study consisted of 310 university students and 4 lecturers that taught the classes in the main campus of Azad University. All the students were native speakers of Persian, all of whom intend to be teachers/translators/linguists of English at the different levels or enter a field where expert use of the English language is required. Descriptive and inferential analysis of the quantitative data will be examined using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

4. Results

Table 1 displays the frequencies and percentages of the LSP1, LSP2, LSP3 and LSP4 dimensions. Findings indicated that majority (50.6%) of the students preferred active learning styles while 49.4% of them still preferred reflective learning styles. In the second dimension, 76.1% of the students are sensing learners while 23.9% of them are intuitive learners. In LSP3, 67.7% of the students are visual learners while 32.3% of them are verbal learners in class. Table 1 also shows that 48.4% of the students are sequential learners while 51.6% of the students are global learners in class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning styles</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Lecturers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td>N (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSP1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSP2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensing</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuitive</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>LSP3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>LSP4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequential</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LSP1= Learning Styles Preference (Dimension 1), LSP2= Learning Styles Preference (Dimension 2), LSP3= Learning Styles Preference (Dimension 3), LSP4= Learning Styles Preference (Dimension 4)

In addition, it was also shown that 75.0% of the lecturers are active learners while 25.0% of the lecturers are reflective. In the second dimension, preferences for the majority of the lecturers were sensing (75.0%) while intuitive only rated 25.0% among the lecturers. In the next dimension, visual rated 75% while 25% of the lecturers showed verbal as the minority. In the final dimension the distribution for the sequential (50%) and global (50%) was equal.

However the results of Post-hoc multiple comparisons using the Tukey HSD (Table 2) tests showed significant differences between Match Group 0 with Match Groups 3 and 4, $MD$ (Mean Difference)=-3.32, $p=0.00$ and $MD=-4.10$, $p=0.00$ respectively. Significant differences were also recorded for Match Groups 1 and 2 with both Match Groups 3 and 4. However, no significant differences in achievement were found amongst Match Groups 1, 2 and 3 or between Match Groups 3 and 4. The results indicate that Match Groups 3 and 4 outperformed the other Match Groups in achievement scores but their performance did not differ from each other. In short, the results imply that generally if teaching styles are matched to learning styles, achievement of students will be significantly better up to a point.
5. Findings

Matching of the learning and teaching styles have been proved to have an impact on higher academic success among learners as measured by the final exam scores (Van Vuren, 1992). The results indicated the frequent learning styles preferences among the participants were active, sensing, visual and global but the lecturers preferences were reported as active, sensing, visual and in the last dimensions their preferences was equally distributed between the Sequential and Global dimensions. In order to accommodate different learning styles in the classroom, lecturers need to consider that different types of learners have their own specific needs and preferences. However, in the current study, teachers used the traditional method in their classroom but they were willing to adapt their teaching styles based on the student’s preferences in the classroom by using different interaction method and teaching styles which optimize their students learning, therefore, they are concerned about meeting the learner’s needs and preferences in order to improve their academic achievements. Learners learn differently, thus to respect and understand those differences, teachers are supposed to provide the instructional alternatives to address and accommodate those diversities. Teachers whose previous education differed radically from the ways they are now being encouraged to teach in the EFL may benefit particularly from this deeper understanding of learning styles, style assessment instruments, and experience with alternative teaching styles that will help them function better as educators in their university classrooms. Moreover, a better understanding of teaching and learning styles differences by the teachers, will optimize the learning procedures in the classroom. Many studies have reported a positive relationship between the learning styles–teaching styles matching and learning achievement (in some studies achievement and performance have been used interchangeably) (Abdelhamid, 2003; Bell, 2007; Demirel, 2004). In contrary, Greenaway (2004) stated that there is little evidence addressing the positive impact of teaching and learning styles matching on learners learning in the literature. In the same line, some studies (Eliss, 2001; Becta, 2005; Coffield et al, 2004) agreed upon the fact that styles matching cannot improve the learning process and assist the students to achieve higher due to many factors such as learning styles inventories that are not measuring the same dimensions. It is therefore a necessity for teachers to have knowledge about the styles differences among their students and to be mindful of the significance of the catering to their students preferences.
References


