Learning Style Differences as an Issue in EFL Classroom

Harischandra Bhandari

Lecturer, Department of English Education, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara

Abstract

This article explores the concepts on learners' learning style differences as an issue in EFL classroom. In a large and heterogeneous classroom, different learners have different learning styles due to their different nature, preferences, interests, attitudes, skills and ways of grasping knowledge about the world. Existence of differences in a classroom generally creates difficulty to the EFL teachers. I mainly reviewed and analyzed the documents consisting books, articles and reports of seven authors on the basis of five themes: learner differences, factors of learner differences, models of learning styles, aspects of classroom management and raising awareness.. It was found that to deal with the students of learning style differences and managing classroom situations, raising awareness on the learning styles of teachers and students is essential. Recognizing students' and teachers' learning styles, knowledge of factors of learning style differences, familiarity on the concept of learning style differences and knowledge of the models of learning styles help the teachers to be well introduced with the issue and deal with the students in the classroom.

Keywords: classroom, language learning, learners, learning styles, teachers.

Introduction

This article highlights the concept of learning style differences in terms of learner differences, causative and general factors, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) model, Multiple intelligence (MI) theory, models of learning styles and classroom management. It further sheds lights on raising awareness on learners and teachers to address learner differences in EFL classroom.

Style is the particular way, manner or design in which the work is done. Lesiak (2015) defines, "Style is a term that refers to consistent and rather enduring tendencies or preferences within an individual" (p.252). They are the general characteristics of individuals that differentiate one individual from other especially on intellectual functioning.

Jaleel and Thomas take learning styles as learners' individual characteristics related to the particular mode of instruction or study that the learners effectively use (Jaleel & Thomas, 2019, p.3); Harmer takes as responses to stimuli such as pictures, sounds, music, movement, etc. (Harmer, 2007a, p.16); and Brown takes as approaches to learning a foreign language (Brown, 1994). Teachers perceive learner style differences everyday in the classroom; face complexities in dealing with the learners of different learning styles; be aware of the issues; and adopt certain knowledge and skills for the total learning management in EFL classroom (Harmer, 2007a & 2007b). The knowledge and awareness of learners' learning styles is beneficial for both, students and teachers to recognize their learning preferences and specially instructors to create and manage a supportive learning environment in classroom (Yassin & Almasri, 2015). Hence, learning styles have been the subject of discussion in the field of EFL teaching and learning.

Everyday learners learn new language items and ideas formally or informally as a lifelong process and adopt the learnt ideas into their behaviour. In this context, Pritchard (2009) states that learners take part in a very wide range of formal and informal settings and begin a long time before school admission and remains even after school in different settings that ultimately changes in behaviour (Pritchard, 2009, pp.1& 2). So, the present day EFL teachers' duty is to make change in the behaviour of the students promoting better learning environment in the school and as well as in the classroom.

Development of the Concept of Learning Styles Differences

There are two theories for looking at student variation: Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) model by Richard Bandler and John Grinder in the mid-1970s, and multiple intelligences theory (MIT) by Howard Gardner in 1983 (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, & Harmer, 2007a) that provide the origin and the development of the learning style differences.

NLP Model

Human beings tend to have different sensory preferences, some students in the

classroom respond best by hearing things (auditory), some others by seeing (visual), and some others by feeling or touching physical or tangible objects (kinesthetic) (Harmer, 2007a & Fleming, 2006). NLP is a set of techniques or a training philosophy as an alternative form of therapy through which therapists can use in building rapport with the clients to gather information on their internal and external world views, and to help them to bring personal change. Although, this model was not developed for the applications of language teaching in mind, it is helpful in changing the learning attitudes and to encourage them on self discovery and self awareness (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.125). This model helps EFL teachers to be aware of learners' preferences and behave in the same way.

NLP model takes account of how some students are especially influenced by visual stimuli and remember and respond the things better if they see them; how some students are especially understand by auditory input and respond very well to things they hear; and how other students learn effectively through kinesthetic activities such as: moving around, or rearranging things with their hands and perform in the same. Learners respond to all of these stimuli (visual, auditory, kinesthetic), but one of them is more powerful than the others in learning and remembering what they have learnt (Harmer (2007a, p. 16). By remembering a range of working modes of learners, teacher can plan his lesson. Teachers may not be able to consider all the learner differences in to account, however, they need to adapt the class lessons responding students' individual needs and differences (Scrivener, 2011, p. 85). The more the teacher knows the concept of NLP model, the more he will be able to deal the learners of different learning styles.

Multiple Intelligence Theory

Intelligence is a bio-psychological potential of human beings to process certain kinds of information in certain ways. Just as linguistic intelligence is activated when individuals receive the sounds of language or when they express something verbally to another person (Gardner, 2011). Gardners' theory (1995) of multiple intelligences that consists of eight different types of intelligences those human beings possess are: logical- mathematical, linguistic, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist. Later on, he added two other possible intelligences: existential intelligence, the intelligence of 'big questions' and pedagogical intelligence, the intelligence that allows human beings to convey knowledge or skills to other persons. Such existential intelligence makes learners aware and realize students on their status and existence in language learning (Gardner,

2012). And still there is another type of intelligence propounded by Goleman in 1996 is emotional intelligence (EQ) which is a type of social intelligence that provides the ability to monitor and discriminate the emotions of the self and others (Gardner, 2011 & 2012). Thus all together we have been introduced with eleven categories of multiple intelligences that we possess. And children who possess particular primary intelligence are to be addressed with the particular learning styles.

MI theory reminds us the perspectives that learners possess individual learning styles, preferences or intelligences and those individual learner style differences are to be recognized in teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.115). Initially, Gardner developed this theory as a contribution to psychology, but later on embraced soon in the field of education, teaching and training communities (Jaleel & Thomas, 2019, p.37). Thus, MI theory removed some of the traditional and educational misconceptions and showed the ways of teaching by assessing the existing myths and giving the right message.

Students in the classroom differ from one another in their cognitive abilities, background knowledge and learning preferences as well. Learners differ not only in terms of their aptitudes for learning, willingness to learn, and the styles or preferences on how they learn, but also a single learner has multiple traits, as a result classroom learning and teaching becomes complex as Jonassen and Grabowski (2011) state, "The large number of learner traits denotes the complexity of the individual learner and the learning process" (p.6). Style differences do not only create difficulties or imbalances in the classroom, but a good teacher can also take them as boons. Teacher can adapt and modify his own style and treat the students as they expect.

Methodology

In this article, I employed document analysis method as a form of qualitative study and a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating printed and electronic materials (Bowen, 2009, p.27) and drew the authentic, reliable and the accessible ideas. For the content, I mainly reviewed and analyzed the books, articles and research reports of seven authors and analyzed on the basis of five themes: learner differences, factors for learning style differences, models of learning styles, managing learning styles, and raising awareness. Further, I searched related books, articles and research reports in different websites in the internet and in the library to support the analysis.

This study mainly dealt with two research questions: How do authors take

different categories of learners' learning styles and how can the EFL teachers handle the classroom with different learning styles of learners? The presented themes exploring the views and perceptions of experts on learning style differences of learners, is the phenomenon.

Results and Discussions

The data of the studied documents that have been analysed on the basis of five different themes and the studied documents have been presented in the table 1.

Table-1: The selected documents and the themes of data analysis.

SN	Documents Studied	Data analysed
1	Individual Differences: the effects of diversity in the ESL classroom (an M.A. Dissertation, University of Alberta) (Petruskevich, 1997).	Learner differences in the classroom
2	Individual Differences in Second Language Learning (Ellis, 2004).	Causative and affective Factors in language learning
3	Learning styles theories and implications for teaching learning (Jaleel & Thomas, 2019).	Models of learning styles
4	Learning styles and inclusions (Reid, 2005).	
5	How to accommodate different learning styles in the same classroom: Analysis of theories and methods of learning styles (Yassin & Almasri, 2015).	
6	How to teach English (Harmer, 2007a).	Aspects of classroom management
7	Learning-Style Preference Of ESL Students (Mulalic, Shah & Ahmad, 2009).	Raising awareness

The table1 includes a research report by Petruskevich (1997), the four books of Jaleel and Thomas (2019), Reid (2005), Harmer (2007), Ellis (2004) and two articles of Yassin and Almasri (2015), and Mulalic, Shah and Ahmed (2009) from which the ideas on five different themes have been drawn and presented as a part of analysis here after.

Learner Differences in the Classroom

EFL teachers face learners with various preferences, learning styles, intelligences and motivation with a wide range of characteristics including age,

gender, intelligence, personality, learning style and previous learning experience along with their own individual beliefs, attitudes, expectations, motivations and strategies. Among them, here my concern is on varieties of learner style differences in a single classroom that creates imbalances among learners and becomes a barrier to the teacher to face them; and only the experienced teachers can better realize the differences and address the issue (Petruskevich, 1997). However, such learner characteristics can also be taken as resources to overcome such barrier and teachers diagnose student learning styles to deal with them appropriately. Differentiation of teaching is encouraged to accommodate learner differences.

Differences in expectations can be found in any classroom, creating a demanding environment for everyone involved, but imbalances in the language classroom could have particularly serious implications (Petruskevich, 1997, p. 20). Teacher teaches the learners but their performances or achievement is unequal with vast difference. To overcome the situation, identifying learners' learning styles, dealing them with appropriate instructional materials and managing the learning environment is a better solution.

Factors for Learning Style Differences

Three different factors that cause, influence or affect are the causative factors, influencing or affective factors, and personal and general factors that play roles on creating learning style differences and on their consequences.

Causative Factors

Lawrence (2006) presents two causative factors for learning style differences that are related to learners' individual and family concerns.

Learners' Capacity, Interests and Background Knowledge as the Causes. Students vary in their capacity i.e. talent, ability, or intelligence to learn different areas of content; in their interests; and in their background knowledge (Riener & Willingham, 2010, p.33) that cause on learners' learning style differences.

Parents, Family Background and Faiths as the Causes. Family differences automatically create learner differences as Lawrence (2006) states, "Families differ in the emphasis they place on belonging to a religious group and some have no allegiance to a particular religion." (p.49). Children from particular religious faith family when come into contact with the values of other religious groups may feel conflicting and different from their own.

Influencing Factors

Some factors are of influencing or affective type that their proper management or provision can facilitate in learning. Reid (2005) includes five influencing factors of learning styles differences: culture, school climate, expectations, teaching style and classroom practices (p.51). Similarly, Hedge (2000) includes three major affective factors: personality characteristics, attitudes and emotional responses that take part in language learning and learning style differences. An EFL teacher needs to remember both the causative factors and the influencing factors of learning style differences.

Personal and General Factors

Learning style is a general factor for language learning which can be modified managing appropriate learning environment, however number of factors work on learning as the causes of learner differences (Ellis, 1985). Such learner difference factors are the generations of the original causes such as: heredity and environment. SK and Helena (2017) state," Learning styles are influenced by many factors such as individual experience, different intelligences and personality factors such as a preference for learning alone or in a group"(p.17). However, these factors also influence on other factors just as age and motivation factors may influence on personality of learners; and intelligence may have relation with learning styles and learning strategies of the learners.

Rod Ellis is the outstanding figure who talks about learner differences, learner difference factors, consequences and on how to address on those differences. Ellis (1985) classifies learner difference factors into two broad categories: (i) Personal factors ('p' factors) and (ii) general factors ('g' factors) and both factors have social, cognitive and affective aspects. However, experts and researchers find very complex to describe and define personal factors which include: group dynamics (anxiety and competitiveness), attitudes to teacher and course materials and individual learning techniques such as: memorizing vocabulary, learning them in context and learning with practice (Ellis, 1985, p.101).

The 'g' factors are the five general factors: age, intelligence and aptitude, cognitive style, attitude and motivation, and personality. To Ellis, all general factors are more or less social or external or environmental or situational factors. Such 'g' factors are either modifiable (e.g. motivation) or unmodifiable (e.g. aptitude) (Ellis, 1985, pp.101-104). And learning style is 'may be modifiable' (Hoven, 1997). These factors for SLA create learner differences for L2 learning in the classroom.

Models of Learning Styles

Since the 1960s, different models have been emerged to explain and classify learning styles focusing on the selection of information and others on acquisition of knowledge (Cid, Ferro, Munoz & Contreras, 2018, p. 244). Different experts have proposed different models of learning style categories, however, Myers-Briggs model, Kolb's model and Honey-Mumford model have been introduced in this article.

Myers-Briggs model classifies individuals or learners on the basis of their preferences into eight different types: extroverts, introverts, sensors, intuitor, thinkers, feelers, judgers and perceivers (Pritchard, 2009). Kolb's model defines learning as the process of creating knowledge through experience, that is, learning is generated from subjective experiences and such process of learning is based on four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Kolb's model describes four general learner types of learners: diverger, assimilator, converger and accomodator that each of them is based on the two dimensions (Dornyei, 2005, p.129; Pritchard, 2009, p. 50; & Kolb & Kolb, 2018,p.8) where as Honey-Mumford Model describes the four styles of learners such as: activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists (Pritchard, 2009, & Jaleel & Thomas, 2019). Such models present the categories and the features of learners in terms of their learning style differences and remind the teachers on how their students grasp knowledge, and provide information to the teachers to be accustomed with their learners' characteristics in the classroom.

Managing and Addressing Learning style Differences

Different learners adopt different learning styles and teachers' duty is to address them in a single classroom for better teaching. Students have their own different style preferences, learning strengths and weaknesses in learning, and the mismatch between teaching and learning styles causes learning failure, frustration, and de-motivation, but the awareness on students' learning styles can enable teachers to adapt appropriate techniques and methods and use the materials that suit the students' preferences (Reid, 1987). By recognizing the learners' learning styles in the classroom, teacher can use the same or similar learning styles as well as the teaching styles to tackle with learners' learning styles.

To address the learners learning styles, Harmer (2007a) talks about ten aspects of classroom management: teacher in the classroom and his roles, use of the voice, talking to students, giving instructions, how teacher and students talk, use of the

mother tongue, creating lesson stages, seating arrangements, students grouping and disruptive behavior of the students in the EFL classroom. Appropriate management of these aspects in the classroom can contribute on better addressing the learning style differences.

EFL teachers face students with learning style differences such as visual learners, auditory learners and kinesthetic learners in a single classroom (Fleming, 2006) and further more such learner style differences create difficulty in teaching and learning process especially to the teachers (Pritchard,2009). Since students have different ways of perception and attitudes towards learning they also differ each other in their preferences of learning and acquiring knowledge. Therefore, teachers' duty is to understand the learning style differences to meet the diverse learning needs of their students (Inal, Buyukyavuz & Tekin, 2015, p.52). Teaching English as a foreign language is itself a complex job, however, it becomes much harder when we face students with different sensory preferences. Students of different backgrounds may differ one another significantly in their learning style preferences (Reid, 1987). In our daily classroom teaching, mismatch exists between the way learners perceive and the way teachers perceive and expose the materials. To minimize the mismatch and gaps, Teachers need to understand the learners' styles and expectations.

Teachers face challenging demands of students in the classroom and potential negative educational consequences in learning styles implementation in capturing and maintaining student attention, making students able to perceive and encode information and grasping visual and auditory formats of information. For this dual format information is better than single one to overcome the challenges. As for example, students attention can be drawn by presenting auditory format information paired with visual aids (Wininger, Redifer, Norman & Ryle, 2019, p.26-27) which is more likely than solely in an auditory format.

Integration of skills and modes of communication, dictation, aural-oral activities, showing visuals and presenting auditory materials, speaking while writing on the board, taking group and individual answers, conducting group and pair works, teaching like performing with signals and gestures are helpful in managing and addressing learners' learning style differences in the classroom.

Improving the quality of teaching and learning that accommodate the needs and preferences of learners; adopting appropriate instructional strategies; and designing instructional materials by the teachers to tackle this issue is the present day

need of ELT practitioners.

Raising Awareness

Learner style differences can have both boons and tensions in the classroom as Lawerence (2006) states, "All people are different. Even among children in the same families there are differences." (p.31) But these differences are not easily manageable in the classroom in that the greater the difference, the harder the classroom becomes to get on with others and such differences amongst people contribute to the rich tapestry of life. The world would be dull if every person were the same (Lawerence, 2006, p.31). Thus, the teachers must be aware of learner differences and also on teachers' own cultural prejudices, so that they can utilize the differences as the boons.

Raising awareness is an essential part of classroom teaching and learning. An EFL teacher is to be aware of learners' learning style preferences. Once teachers become aware that students learn differently, then teachers they will recognize their learning styles and try to accommodate for them (Mulalic, Shah & Ahmad, 2009, p. 9). Knowledge of learning style differences will help to improve in-service teacher practices with regard to meeting individual needs of learners, and significantly aware pre-service teachers to be prepared to face classroom situation of heterogeneous community.

Teachers are not likely to provide an effective instruction without having any awareness of students' style preferences and to respond to the diversity of needs among students and to have a good management in learning (Inal, Buyukyavuz, & Tekin, 2015, p.62). Therefore, we, EFL teachers, should internalize the potential benefits of learning styles preferences in the classroom and should develop an awareness of learners' preferences.

To understand how learners learn, awareness is to be raised on the four areas of learner style differences: (1) learners' general skills, aptitudes, and preferences for processing information, constructing meaning from it, and applying it to new situations; (2) their abilities to perform different school-based or real-world learning tasks and outcomes; (3) use of different skills, aptitudes, and preference; and (4) on accomplishing different learning outcomes (Jonassen & Grabowski, 2011, p.3). The skills and preferences the learners have, the tasks they can perform, the skills they generally use and the outcomes the learners can achieve are to be well recognized by the teachers.

The aim of education is to attain all round development of learners and for

this, analyzing learner needs are to be paid rapt attention so that the students can develop their potential to the full (Rukanuddin, Hafiz & Asfia, 2016, p.11). For this, teachers and experts first of all try to identify the common or group learning style differences among learners that make easier to

assign tasks to students. The main aim here is to find out the degree of similarity that differences among children become more salient to the teacher as the class begins its work, attempting tasks that themselves assume a degree of similarity among pupils (Crozier, 199). Teachers may not be aware of their own learning styles and their learning style preferences may differ from those of their students (Mulalic, Shah & Ahmad, 2009, p.10). Addressing individual learning style is complicated, however, being aware of the common learning styles of learners gives a pathway to the teachers to be aware of the issue and tackle the situations.

Conclusion

Learners' learning style differences is an issue in a heterogeneous EFL classroom. The knowledge of learner differences, knowledge of the factors of learning style differences, being accustomed with the NLP and MI theories as the origination of the concept of learning style differences, the knowledge of different models and categories of learning styles, considering the aspects of classroom management for addressing the issue of classroom learning style differences and teaching learning needs and raising awareness among students and teachers on their own and one another's learning styles are essential to minimize the complexities created by learning style differences. This article will not only make teachers conscious on learners' learning styles, but also aware teachers and students on their own teaching and learning styles which is better for classroom management.

Students have different learning styles. Out of existing multiple learning styles of a single learner, one of the styles will be the primary and to be recognized by the teacher to deal with and to treat students better in the classroom. For this recognition of learners' primary learning styles, interpretation of their learning styles and addressing their needs with aids and technology will be the better solution for the issue. Similarly, not only the language teachers need to be aware on the learning style differences of learners, but also both the teachers and the students need to be aware of their own as well as learning style differences on others.

Acknowledgement

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