Cambridge English

LEARNING STYLES

The debate

The notion of 'learning styles' aims to capture from a cognitive and pedagogic perspective the different ways in which individuals process information. This idea has become controversial recently, mostly because of the tension between academic theory (which has found only weak empirical support for this concept) and pedagogic practice (which has found that different learning styles are a key aspect of successful learning). A useful way to approach the debate is as a strong and weak version of the same theory.

In the **strong version**, learning styles are seen as a finite set of styles (e.g. concrete/abstract and reflective/active as proposed by David Kolb, or wholist/analytic and verbal/imagery as proposed by Richard Riding). This finite categorisation is in turn used to classify individuals into one-style-per-student, and that style (assumed to be dominant and stable) is then used to choose appropriate learning materials. This strong version of the theory has now been discredited, mostly based on cognitive grounds.

The **weak version** of this theory is based on the premise that individuals learn differently, and they have their own preferences/styles/modes in approaching learning, and learning could be more successful if there is a match between that individual preference and the way information is presented. The key difference with the strong version is that learners are not limited to one specific learning style. The weak version of the theory has widespread recognition in education theory and classroom management: effective teachers are generally teachers who adopt an evolving and varied mix-and-match approach to teaching in the way they present information, to ensure they accommodate individuals' different ways of processing that information.

The Cambridge English position

In the Cambridge English Teaching Framework and in the Celta/Delta syllabuses we refer to 'learning styles' as a concept which teachers should be aware of, alongside other concepts. We believe that a prescriptive one-style-per-student concept is reductive and limiting. This is reflected in our materials and qualifications, which recommend that teachers use a variety of teaching methods, rather than link specific learning methods to specific learning styles. We are currently updating our documentation and the term 'learning preferences' will be used to capture the fact that this concept is not a simple binary dichotomy or a finite set of styles.

We see learning preferences as a core idea within online, adaptive, personalised learning and differentiated teaching. Different learning materials and teaching approaches add value to learners in different ways and the most effective and efficient learning is achieved through a varied teaching 'toolbox' which personalises teaching to individual needs and preferences, without being reductive. In fact, there is emerging evidence that an online learning environment is conducive to supporting a variety of learning preferences, and technology – when used appropriately to add value - can expand the toolbox of the teacher. Our approach is also based on a belief that learners exist in four intersecting worlds of learning: personal, educational, social and assessment, and the notion of learning preferences provides insights into their personal and educational worlds.

So what?

Theories have the most power when they bring practical value. And so, what are the implications of the concept of learning styles for teachers and learners? One key implication is the importance of *raising teachers' and learners' awareness* of the various learning preferences that may exist in the classroom and the importance of *using a variety of teaching approaches*. The five principles below (adapted from Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014) and Dörney and Ryan (2015)) could provide a beneficial conceptual way forward for teachers and learners, so that they optimise the premise and promise of learning preferences:

Principle 1   Effective teachers are aware of their own teaching beliefs and approaches, and the demands of the syllabus and the tasks they use.

Principle 2   Effective teachers are aware of possible areas of harmony and disharmony in their beliefs/approaches/syllabus/task demands and the learning preferences of their learners.

Principle 3   Self-aware learners are aware of their preferred approaches to language learning.

Principle 4   Effective teachers create learning environments which expand the comfort zone of learning preferences of their learners.

Principle 5   Effective teachers limit mismatches between learning preferences and teaching approaches through a varied approach to presenting and practicing language in and out of the classroom.

These general principles are aimed at helping to raise awareness of differences in learning styles and the importance for teachers and learners to be sensitive to potential mismatches between teaching/learning styles. In practical terms, these principles mean that teachers need a varied and evolving teaching toolbox. For example, the teaching of a grammar point in a language classroom can be structured around presenting the information deductively or inductively, concretely or in a more abstract manner, holistically or more analytically, emphasising communication or formal aspects of grammar, embedding it in a listening exercise, a reading passage, a fluency or accuracy speaking task, an open-ended 'real-life' task, etc.

This approach to teaching is fundamentally based on a theory that acknowledges individual differences, on the fact that learning happens in different ways for different learners, and the importance of raising awareness about such differences. Acknowledging and being aware of individual learning preferences, and using this information not to limit and reduce learners to the straightjacket of one style or preference, but to help teachers find synergy between different styles and preferences inside and outside the classroom would ultimately benefit both teachers and learners.

Useful references

Dörney, Z., & Ryan, S. (2015). *The Psychology of the Language Learner Revisited*. Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor and Francis.

Gregersen, T. S., & MacIntyre, P. D. (2014). *Capitalizing on language learners' individuality: From premise to practice*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Riding, J. (2002). *School learning and cognitive style*. London: David Fulton.

Jones, N. & Saville, N. (2016). *Learning Oriented Assessment: A systemic approach* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.