Did you cook your lesson based on right recipe? (Accommodating the Students Preferences in Class)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify how accommodating the teacher behaves toward congruency and in congruency in the classroom. The major approach in this study was qualitative. The data were collected through observation and interviews. The participants were two lecturers and 100 students in an English major program in Iran. The findings from this study imply that it is crucial for teachers to have knowledge about learner preferences in their classes to consider in their teaching design. The students show a positive response and higher achievement when their learning preferences and needs are accommodated by their lecturers. © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

What is your learning style or what is your teaching style? This is one of the questions that most of us whether teacher or learner are being asked in different situations. Teachers and learners are different in many ways. The information on student learning styles can be useful when the learning style implementation in adult education is related with teachers considering the learners’ style versatility at different levels and in different subjects (Nielsen, 2005). The way learners learn does not have to do with motivation or overall intelligence, but with the different learning styles in which they conduct their learning.

This aspect of the adult learner normally is argued under the matching and mismatching of the teacher styles and their learners’ learning styles, and it is recommended to seek the relationship between them (Zhang, 2006). Findings of past studies done by Felder (1988), Goodwin (1995) and McDonald (1996) explained that a learner’s achievement in any class is managed by a few factors, such as native ability, and congruence level of the learner’s...
learning styles and the teacher’s teaching styles and subject matter. This study focused on the level of match and mismatch between teaching and learning style in the classroom and how it has been addressed by the lecturers.

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. According to Felder (1988) a possible reason for poor performance is that students may become bored and demotivated. 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. Some studies have also found that congruence (matching) between learning style and teaching style has a positive impact on achievement and satisfaction (Ester, 1994; Felder, 1988; Goodwin, 1995; McDonald, 1996).

The findings of many studies propose that mismatches often occur and have bad effects on students’ learning and attitudes (Cortazzi, 1990; Ehrman, 1996; Felder, 1995; Jones, 1997; Littlewood, Liu & Yu 1996; Oxford, Hollaway & Horton-Murillo, 1992; Reid, 1987; Stebbins, 1999). Research on the matching or otherwise of learning styles and teaching styles have been carried out before; many of the studies found that matching teaching and learning style improves learning, attitudes, behaviors and motivation (Bell, 2007; Felder, 1995; Hyland, 1993; Jones, 1997; Kinsella, 1995; Larkin, Feldgen, & Clua, 2002; Nelson, 1995; Oxford et al., 1992; Reid, 1987, 1995; Spolsky, 1989; Tudor, 1996; Willing, 1988; Zhang, 2006). Because of the lack of research in this discipline within the Asian context, this specific research can be considered as an exploratory study in the Iranian context.

2. Objectives and Research Question

The primary objectives of this research were to determine the extent of the learning styles preferences accommodation shown by the lecturers in the EFL classroom. Secondly, this study seeks to determine if the match and mismatch between teaching and learning styles affects the achievements among EFL learners in the faculty of foreign languages at Azad University in Iran. This study seeks to answer the following question: What are the accommodations of the lecturers towards students’ learning styles in a university classroom setting in Iran?

3. Methodology

The objective of this research was to determine the extent of the learning styles preferences accommodation exhibited by the lecturers in the EFL classroom. Secondly, this study seeks to determine if the match and mismatch between teaching and learning styles affects the EFL learners’ achievement in the faculty of foreign languages at Azad University in Iran.

2.1. Subjects and Setting

The subjects for this study are two lecturers and 100 of their students in undergraduate classes in the faculty of foreign languages in the main campus of one of the universities in Iran. The two lecturer participants have at least 10 years of formal teaching experience in English at university level. The two participants were teaching reading courses, which are part of the bachelors’ degree curriculum for students majoring in English.

2.2. Instruments

The instruments used in this study were interview and observation. However, the researchers used a survey questionnaire to identify the students’ and teachers’ learning style category. One of the characteristics of the interview, which makes it suitable for this study, was the flexibility and immediacy in data collection as well as the rich results (Bryman, 2001). Thus the interview method is applied in this study to provide more information and also clarify the data collection done in the previous stages of observation. All interviews were conducted in the office; the researcher sat facing the interviewee and audio taped all the conversations to be transcribed later for
analysis. Interview was done in three levels for each of the subjects. The interview and the observation session were scheduled such that after each interview there were sessions of observations.

The two lecturers in the study were interviewed after the survey was administered and during the time the classes were observed. The same set of questions was used in each interview. The flow of questions aimed to identify: How can teachers help students with different learning style preferences to achieve higher marks? How would they accommodate different learning styles when teaching (subject, e.g., reading or grammar)? And what types of teaching styles do they mainly use? The answer to each question was written and audio taped by the researcher, who also acted as an interviewer. The verbal information and observation noted were then transcribed into text, and these descriptions were directly typed and saved in a file for closer examination and analysis. In the process of observation, the two observers were present in the classroom, positioned such that they could see and hear interactions between the lecturer and students in the class and also observe the lecturers’ teaching styles.

The focus of this study is not to evaluate whether the level of teaching is good, satisfactory, or poor, but to investigate the existence of the match and mismatch between the learners’ learning styles and teachers’ teaching styles. Nor is it the intention of this study to criticize the teaching styles of the teachers participating in this study, because they teach based on the style they were taught. They have never been introduced to any different teaching styles. However, the teachers are aware that their teaching styles could be more effective in students’ learning, but they have never been exposed to any alternative teaching styles. This research aimed, in part, to help the lecturers at a foreign language faculty become more aware of learning style importance in the EFL context, especially in the classroom setting. Therefore, as the first step, the researcher looked briefly at the students’ and lectures learning style patterns and based on that the level of the match and mismatch between the lecturers and their students will be investigated through the observation and interview.

3. Findings

Many researches have recommended that matching lecturers’ preferred teaching styles to their learners’ preferred learning styles will lead to higher academic success in learners as measured by the final exam scores (Van Vuren, 1992; Zippert, 1985). The dominant (the most frequent) learning styles of EFL students were reported as active, sensing, visual and global. However, the dominant learning styles of the EFL lecturers were reported as active, sensing, visual and in the last dimensions the preferences have been equally distributed between the Sequential and Global dimensions. In order to accommodate different learning styles in the classroom, lecturers need to take into consideration that different types of learners have their own specific needs and preferences. The dominant teaching style used by the lecturers was reported as the traditional method. The participants in this study were flexible in adapting and modifying their teaching styles based on students learning style patterns and based on that the level of the match and mismatch between the lecturers and their students will be investigated through the observation and interview.

The findings indicated that the concept of learning style preferences in the EFL context is relatively new to the teachers. It also implied that the teachers are willing to create situations to optimize the learning outcomes in their class; therefore, they are concerned about meeting the learner’s needs and preferences in order to improve their academic achievements. The fact that students learn in different ways and that it is possible for instructors to adapt their instructional modes appeared as a surprise to many educators. Instructors whose previous education differed radically from the ways they are now being encouraged to teach in the EFL Program 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 teachers in their university classrooms. Moreover, the deeper the understanding and use of different teaching styles by the instructors, as well as the awareness of individual learning styles by the students the more likely will successful teaching and learning occur 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). Research on student learning indicated that the traditional method is not considered as the best teaching approach in terms of aligning with the students’ styles preferences (LeLoup & Ponterio, 1997).
However, Jackson and Prosser (1995) suggested that despite the nature of the lecture method which sounds interesting, students may not learn effectively through a lecture compared to other approaches in learning. By implementing and expanding different teaching styles, lecturers can create an environment which provides the chance to benefit all the learners with different learning styles preferences (Friedman & Alley, 1984). On the other hand, Gregorc and Ward (1977) suggested that lecturers should explore their students’ learning styles, then identify their own teaching styles and then align their teaching styles based on the learning style versatility. Getting the alignment right is important because teaching style and learning style match and mismatch will definitely influence learners’ achievement (Hyman & Rosoff, 1985).

References


