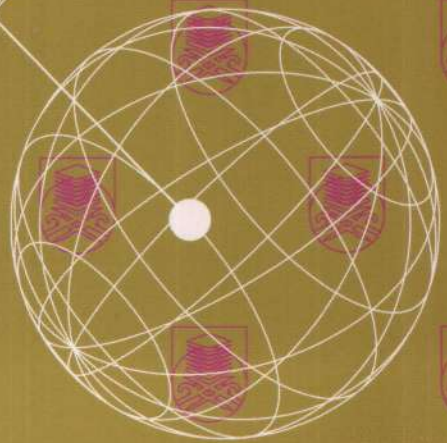
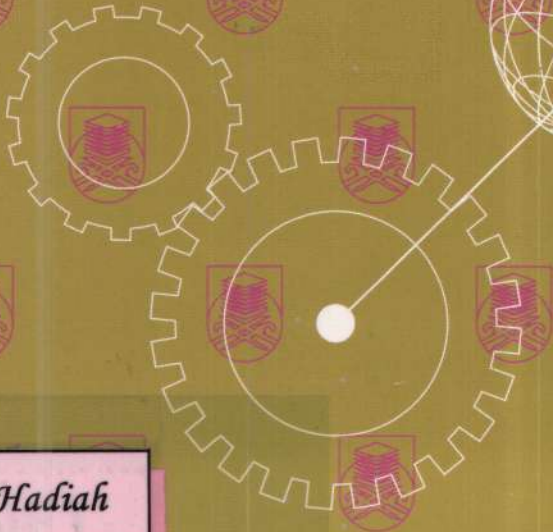
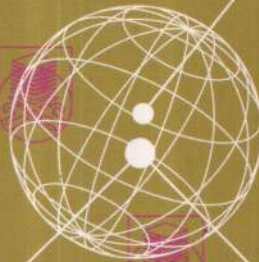
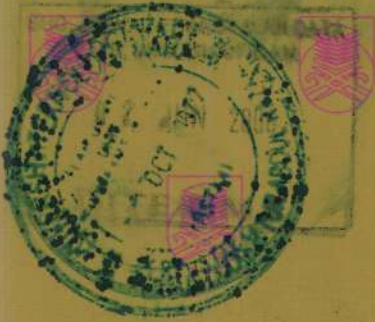


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Promoting Diversity In The ESL Classroom: An Approach To Learner Training

Suchithra Nair

Universiti Teknologi MARA

Pulau Pinang

email:suchithra@ppinang.itm.edu.my

Abstract

The ways in which students characteristically acquire, retain and retrieve information are collectively termed as the students' learning style. This exploratory research project was conducted to foster awareness of the diverse learning styles that co-exist in a language classroom. This study examines the possibility of using learning styles as content and contextual theme for the first unit in a proficiency class. At the heart of this study is the desire to help a group of Preparatory English Course (PEC) students discover their language learning styles and to suggest appropriate strategies to deal with their uniqueness. Research has proven that the integration of learning styles in the ESL classroom not only facilitates academic success but also establishes good foundation to teach learning strategies (Reid, 1996). Within this context, an instructional unit was designed and implemented. This paper describes how the unit was used in a PEC classroom comprising 30 Part I Engineering students. What conclusions can we make? A better understanding of learning styles can be beneficial to both lecturers and students. The lecturers should be aware of the diversity in learning styles present in the language classroom and adjust instruction accordingly. Just as importantly, students can benefit by learning about their personal learning styles and becoming active participants in the language classrooms.

Introduction

Among the students in my Preparatory English Course (BEL 100) last year was Jamil. In his teacher evaluation sheet, he indicated that he preferred to learn English from well-structured notes and oral lectures. In contrast, Saidah, also from the same class, revealed that she enjoyed the language games, role-plays and discussions in class. Salleh's tactile preference revealed that he preferred the 'hands-on' experience he gained in the class project. Very different and diverse learning styles are at work for these students, typically reflecting the different levels of cognition, experience and motivation. We as language teachers should no longer assume that all students will learn through whichever strategy the teacher prefers to use. Research has proven that students learn language at different rates and at strikingly different levels of completeness (Lowman, 1990). We cannot be held responsible for the differences in cognitive ability students bring along with them into the language classroom, but we should be responsible for motivating our students and for ensuring that they become involved in learning. How can this be done?

Because of my interest in learning and teaching styles, I reflected on how I might modify my approaches to the BEL 100 course, in ways that would give students like Jamal, Saidah and Salleh opportunities to become successful language learners. I decided to incorporate learning styles as a contextual theme for an introductory unit in my BEL 100 class. My rationale for this was based on my prior experience which clearly demonstrated that:

- students are interested in learning about themselves and each other
- the more aware students become of their own styles, the more they will know how to employ the strategies to access the necessary information from a lesson
- a 'personalized' touch will make language learning a dialogue and establish a sense of 'community' within the class
- students learn more rapidly and better if learning is presented in ways that the individual prefers (Claxton and Ralston, 1978)
- students can be shown how to become more responsible for their own learning (Gregorc, 1979)

It was within this context that I carried out this exploratory project.

Framework For Learning Styles Unit

The project was carried out in the first week of teaching. Prior to this unit, I conducted introductory activities which would settle and focus the students. The unit is designed based on a developmental sequence, which is as follows:

- Stage I : Awaken the Awareness
- Stage II : Amplify the Personal Style
- Stage III: Match the Style with Strategies
- Stage IV: Transfer Knowledge on Styles

I took 10 contact hours to complete the unit.

Objectives

The unit allowed my BEL 100 students to:

- access information about learning styles
- identify and describe their individual styles
- discuss and share information with classmates
- practise writing simple descriptive paragraphs

Each activity in this unit is designed to appeal to particular learning styles as indicated by abbreviations A, T, K, V.

The objectives of this unit take into consideration the practice skills and course content of the BEL 100 course as shown below:

Stages	Objective	Language Skills	Activities
I. Awaken the Awareness	Access information about learning styles	Reading	(a) Using a dictionary to identify difficult words. (b) Extracting information from learning style inventory.
II. Amplify the Personal Style	Identify and describe their individual style	Reading Writing	(a) Responding to questions. (b) Writing simple sentences using the descriptors given in the inventory.

Stages	Objective	Language Skills	Activities
III. Match the Style with Strategies	Discuss and share information with classmates	Speaking	(a) Speaking in small groups about their preferred learning styles and strategies that they can use to exploit their styles.
IV. Transfer Knowledge on Styles	Write a simple descriptive paragraph	Writing Speaking	(a) Writing a simple descriptive paragraph about their personal learning style. (b) Writing a paragraph on what specific actions they can take to make learning easier and more effective. This is based on the suggested strategies listed on the board by the teacher.

Applying Learning Styles In The ESL Classroom

Learning styles offer ESL students a way to examine their learning styles and strategies in the light of individual differences. The more aware they are of their styles the more effectively they access the necessary information from a lesson. In order to realize this, I planned my unit in 4 stages.

Stage I : Awaken the Awareness

This stage begins with an introduction of the concept of learning styles in general by telling them about:

- (a) visual learners (V)
- (b) auditory learners (A)
- (c) tactile learners (T)
- (d) kinesthetic learners (K)

I give them a short lecture on the objectives of the unit and the need to learn about individual learning styles (O). I also remind them to take notes if the particular style matches their style (T). In the oral presentation, I try to:

- create interest in learning styles
- introduce the terms, words used to classify learning styles
- explain how learning styles are determined and used
- tell students of the benefits of identifying their personal styles

Following the explanation, I ask students to work in pairs to share information about learning styles and their understanding of the various styles. At this point, I put several questions on the board to check their understanding of the topic. Some of the questions include:

- What is learning style?
- What are the different styles?
- Do you think you have a particular style?

I provide my students with the learning styles reading material, which describes preferences of learners (V). They read the given material and extract information, which they think matches their personal style. I encourage they use of dictionaries and questions to help them understand the passage. In addition, I use transparencies which describe the learning styles on the overhead projector (OHP), to provide visual learners with information before they complete the questionnaire.

At this point, students are reminded that preferences are not strengths and the unit is not intended to 'box' them into a mind set that they have been 'diagnosed'. Rather, they should be advised that it is designed to initiate discussion and reflection upon learning styles.

Stage II : Amplify the Personal Style

Students are given the learning styles inventory. I instruct them to complete the learning styles inventory, identifying their major style or styles. If they have any problems at this point, I talk to them individually (A).

As students work with the questionnaire, they are learning to respond to questions which reinforce thinking skills. The embedded curriculum here is building personal competence for students.

After they complete the questionnaire, I give a mini-lecture on how to tally results to the questionnaire (A, T). Students who have problems may tally their results based on the instructions on the OHP. This approach is for students who cannot cope with oral instructions (T, V). At this stage, students summarize their individual learning styles in short sentences (T). I write my personal style on the board to exemplify the required tasks. A student wrote the following:

“I find that I like to work alone and I prefer to learn from books where I can see the words in print”.

Stage III : Match the Style with Strategies

I begin this stage by asking students to find students whose learning styles matches theirs (4 students in a group). Students are also reminded that if they are unable to find their match, they can also work with students with different styles. Students mill around asking questions about their styles. Students then conduct a group discussion based on the following questions on the board (T, V):

- Does the style describe you accurately?
- Do you agree with the results? Why?
- Are you surprised by any of your results? Which one? Why?
- Were you aware of your learning style?
- What methods of studying have you used in the past?
- Do you have a good study technique that works for you?

At the end of their discussion, I find it effective, to enlighten them on the fact that teachers also have their personal styles. I explain that when teachers design a particular task, it normally appeals to one learning style, but it may well appeal to multiple styles for different reasons.

I begin a mini-lecture by bringing their attention to the methods students use to study. I introduce them to learning strategies and skills. Again, I remind them that they can use the recommended strategies to match their personal styles (A).

Finally in their discussion groups, students discuss suitable strategies which relates to their learning styles. A list of strategies for individual style is displayed on the OHP (A, V, T).

Stage IV : Transfer Knowledge on Styles

I assign students a paragraph draft. They choose the topic sentence which reflects their personal language learning style, following topic sentences:

- I am an auditory learner.
- I am a visual learner.
- I am a tactile learner.
- I am a kinesthetic learner.
- I am a multimodal learner.

They write a short paragraph about their preferred learning style based on the information they gathered during the mini-lecture and the discussion session with their group. They are asked to use examples from their personal learning experiences to support their topic sentence (V, A, T,K).

Next, the class does a peer response activity with their paragraphs, based on the instructions below:

- Share your paragraphs with your shoulder partner.
- Below his/her paragraph, write your suggestions on how he/she can learn effectively. You can suggest strategies which you learnt in this class on your personal skills which has worked for you.
- Return the draft to your partner. Ask any questions about his/her comments.
- Review the recommended strategies and see if you agree with the suggestions (G, V, A, T).

Finally, I conduct a large-group discussion, finding out what they learned. When I tried this activity last semester, the Semester One students were very thoughtful and insightful about their own learning experiences. Students know a lot about themselves and each other as they are given time to reflect. Most of them felt the process of sharing information with their classmates in a structured manner was helpful in classroom community – building which is an important aspect of language learning. The overall evaluation of this unit proved that self-awareness of learning styles will serve my students well in future classes because the more they reflect and know about learning styles, the simpler it is to apply the appropriate strategies to learning.

Conclusion

As educators, we should seriously re-examine our approach to create a positive triadic relationship between our students, our curriculum and ourselves. Whatever the approach, we should emphasize the fact that individuals perceive and process information in different ways. Many researchers feel that learning is more productive when instructions take learning styles into account (Boylan, 1984). An implication of this exploratory work, students can be taught of learning strategies that will improve learning efficiency.

Although matching instruction to every learner's needs is difficult in terms of classroom and time constraints, we should try to provide a variety of learning experiences to accommodate the various learning styles that exist in the average classroom. As students practise a variety of activities, they also become consciously selective of the strategies that they employ in the classroom.

In pedagogical terms, a language classroom should have more than a single focus, not only teaching language content but also developing learning processes as well. In this project, this was carried out by integrating a conscious focus on styles and strategies into the course content of BEL 100. The more ways you teach, the more students you reach.

From this project, it seems that learning styles and strategy awareness, plus provision of opportunities to reflect on learning process leads students to greater sensitivity to the learning process. There is also evidence in their evaluation sheet that through engaging in a learning styles unit that focuses on the learning processes as well as language, students are given an opportunity to reflect and consciously choose how they want to learn.

Personally, I feel the word 'teaching language' has reached obsolescence in modern times, we as language teachers should strive to switch our focus from being proponents to creating learning stewardships in our students. And stewardship can be created when teaching and learning becomes a collective dialogue. A starting consideration for doing this would be incorporating learning processes within content areas.

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