

Exploring Sensory Learning Style Preferences of Learners in a Certificate Course in English for Foreign Students

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Abstract

Different people possess different styles of learning. While some are conscious of their style and harness it consciously, some use them intuitively, scarcely aware of the way they are functioning. This paper proposes that a conscious use of learning style is more conducive to learning. The subjects of the study are students pursuing their Certificate Course in English for Foreign Students at the Centre for English Language Training, Osmania University. Rebecca Oxford's Style Assessment Survey (SAS) was used as a research instrument for this purpose. Rebecca Oxford's SAS includes questions related to 23 learning styles classified under eight parts. For the purpose of this paper, only questions related to sensory preferences were taken into consideration. The questionnaire was administered to the students and the responses were tabulated and analyzed.

Key words: learning styles, SAS, research instrument, EFL, ESL, ELT

Introduction

Research on the ways and means of learning English as a second language (ESL) and as a foreign language (EFL) has been going on for a considerable amount of time. The quest has been to find the best method or approach to learn English. This has been the Holy Grail of English Language Teaching (ELT) ever since the formal teaching of English to speakers of other languages began. Inevitable, in the process several researchers proposed different teaching methods and approaches of language acquisition and learning; a plethora of learning theories, learning styles and strategies, teaching practices, testing patterns, curriculum design, and so on.

This quest is never ending. In recent years, research on learning styles has become popular among the researchers as these are considered to be the general abilities that the learners show while learning or perceiving anything new. The same is applicable to language learning too. Each individual possesses a unique learning style knowingly or unknowingly. If the learner knows his/her preferred learning style, he/she can manage to learn the language quickly. Such knowledge facilitates the addressing of errors and weaknesses, and the reinforcement of strengths. If a learner is not aware of his/her learning style it is the responsibility of the teacher to identify the learning style of that learner to make learning interesting. Several factors such as social, economic, cultural, emotional, prior experience, etc., influence one's learning style. This paper focuses in identifying the learning styles of the students pursuing a Certificate Course in English for Foreign Students.

Definitions of Learning Styles

Many researchers have tried to map what learning styles precisely cover. The following are some of the definitions given by different researchers on learning styles.

Rebecca Oxford (2003)

Learning styles are the general approaches –for example, global or analytic, auditory or visual –that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject. (p.2)

Keefe (1987) as cited in Patrycja Marta Kamińska (2014) defined learning style as “a broader construct, which includes cognitive along with affective and physiological styles” (p.3).

Willing (1988), as cited in Patrycja Marta Kamińska (2014) commented

The various notions of learning style put forward since the 1940's have all remained centred on 'mental' phenomena. Learning style, on the other hand, seeks to encompass the mental, the physical, and the affective realms, in order to account for individual differences in learning. (p.3)

Kolb's (1984) version, as cited in Selma Kara (2009) defined learning styles as generalized differences in learning orientation based on the degree to which people emphasize the four modes of the learning process. He introduced four styles, viz., diverger learning style, assimilator learning style, converger learning style, and accomadator learning style. Divergers have a strong imaginative ability, are good at seeing things from different perspectives, are creative and work well with people. Assimilators have abilities to create theoretical models, prefer inductive reasoning, and would rather deal with abstract ideas. Convergers have a strong practical orientation, are generally deductive in their thinking and tend to be unemotional. Accomadators like doing things, are risk takers, are in here and now, and solve problems intuitively. (Selma Kara, 2009, p.78)

Sensory Preferences

Sensory preferences are divided into four categories: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile.

According to Oxford (2003)

Sensory preferences refer to the physical, perceptual learning channels with which the student is the most comfortable. Visual students like to read and obtain a great deal from visual stimulation. For them, lectures, conversations, and oral directions without any visual backup can be very confusing. In contrast, auditory students are comfortable without visual input and therefore enjoy and profit from unembellished lectures, conversations, and oral directions. They are excited by classroom interactions in role-plays and similar activities. They sometimes, however, have difficulty with written work. Kinesthetic and tactile students like lots of movement and enjoy working with tangible objects, collages, and flashcards. Sitting at a desk for very long is not for them; they prefer to have frequent breaks and move around the room. (Oxford pp 3-4)

According to Fleming (2001) as cited in Selma Kara (2009)

Visual learners prefer maps, charts, graphs, diagrams, highlighters, different colors, pictures, word pictures, and different spatial arrangements; aural learners like to explain new ideas to others, discuss topics with other students, and their teachers, use a tape recorder, attend lectures, and discussion groups use jokes; kinesthetic learners like field trips, trial and error, doing things to understand them, laboratories, recipes and solutions to problems, hands-on approaches, using their senses and collections and samples. (pp. 78 - 79)

According to Reid (1995), sensory learning styles include two dimensions:

Perceptual learning styles and environmental learning styles. Perceptual learning styles contain four types of learning styles which are auditory, visual, tactile and kinesthetic styles. Auditory learners learn more effectively through the ears; visual learners learn more effectively through the eyes (seeing); tactile learners learn more effectively through touch (hands-on); kinesthetic learners learn more effectively through concrete complete body experiences (whole-body movement). Physical and sociological styles belong to the environmental learning styles. (n.page) (<https://www.ukessays.com/essays/linguistics/about-learning-style.php>)

Sensory preferences vary significantly in a multicultural EFL classroom. Reid (1987), as cited in Oxford (2003), discovered that students from Asian cultural backgrounds and especially Koreans are largely visual, Hispanics are mostly auditory, while Japanese are non-auditory.

Research Methodology

The present study attempted to explore the sensory preferences of the students pursuing 'A Certificate Course in English for Foreign Students' at the Centre for English Language Training, Osmania University. Students from different countries join this course to improve their English language skills. Rebecca Oxford's Style Assessment Survey (SAS) was adopted for the study. Questionnaire consisting of 30 questions related to sensory preferences was administered to 89 students belonging to Yemen, Turkmenistan, Congo, Djibouti, Somalia,

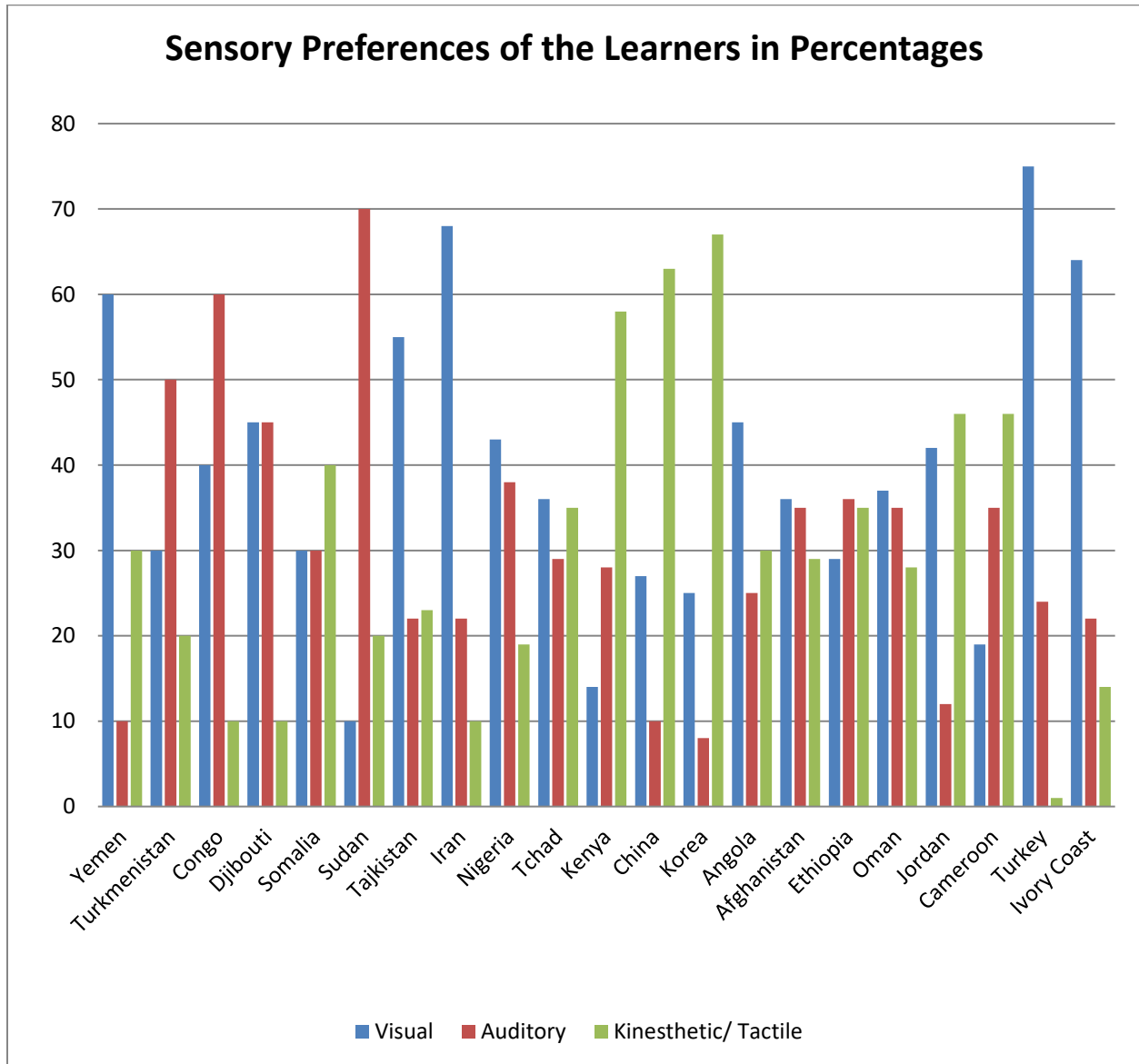
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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:3 March 2018

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Sudan, Tajikistan, Iran, Nigeria, Chad, Kenya, China, Angola, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Oman, Jordan, Turkey and Ivory Coast. Four-point scale (0-3) was used for the questionnaire where 0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = very often, 3 =always. The sensory preferences of the sample were explored based on the responses of the sample learners to the questionnaire.

Results



Discussion

The above graph shows that sample learners from Turkey, Tajikistan, Ivory Coast, Iran, Yemen, Nigeria and Angola are visual learners. Among these, learners from Turkey showed highly visual sensory preference. Learners from Sudan, Congo, and Turkmenistan are auditory learners. Among these learners from Sudan showed highly auditory sensory preference. Learners from Korea, China, Kenya and Cameroon are Kinesthetic/tactile learners. Among these, Korean learners showed highly kinesthetic / tactile sensory preference. Some learners are flexible in their sensory preferences. These learners showed more than one sensory preference. Learners from Djibouti are visual and auditory, learners from Somalia, Chad, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Oman are visual, auditory as well as kinesthetic, and learners from Jordan are visual and kinesthetic.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to explore the sensory learning style preferences among the sample learners pursuing ‘A Certificate Course in English for Foreign Students’ at the Centre for English Language Training, Osmania University. The study showed that majority of the learners are visual learners and very less number of learners are kinesthetic learners. However, there are a significant number of sample learners, who showed more than one sensory preference. These learners are flexible in their learning and they are at an advantage. This study found out that Korean learners are kinesthetic / tactile in contrast to Reid’s (1987) study, which showed that they are mostly visual. Sensory preferences might change sometimes depending on the circumstances the learner is placed in. Whatever learning style the learner possesses, if he/she can best utilize it for better learning, he/she would excel in professional and personal lives. The study holds considerable significance for the students themselves and can be a great help for all stakeholders in education—teachers, materials designers, curriculum designers, administrators, and the public at large.

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QUESTIONNAIRE

(Rebecca Oxford's Style Analysis Survey (SAS))

Retrieved from

<http://gordonintensive2012-13.yolasite.com/resources/Oxford%20Style%20Analysis.pdf>

INSTRUCTIONS: For each item circle your immediate response as follows:

0 = never 1= sometimes 2= very often 3= always

S.No.	Question	Scale
	Visual	0 1 2 3
1.	I remember something better if I write it down.	0 1 2 3
2.	I take a lot of notes.	0 1 2 3
3.	I can visualize pictures, numbers, or words in my head.	0 1 2 3
4.	I prefer to learn with video/ TV more than other media.	0 1 2 3
5.	I underline or highlight important parts as I read.	0 1 2 3

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **18:3 March 2018**

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6.	I use color coding to help me as I work.	0 1 2 3
7.	I need written directions for tasks.	0 1 2 3
8.	I get distracted by background noises.	0 1 2 3
9.	I have to look at people to know what they are saying.	0 1 2 3
10.	I am more comfortable when the walls where I study or work have posters or pictures on them.	0 1 2 3
	A – Total	
	Auditory	
11.	I remember things better, if I discuss them out loud.	0 1 2 3
12.	I prefer to learn by listening to a lecture rather than reading.	0 1 2 3
13.	I need oral directions for my tasks.	0 1 2 3
14.	Background sound helps me think.	0 1 2 3
15.	I like to listen to music when I study or work.	0 1 2 3
16.	I can easily understand what people say even when I cannot see them.	0 1 2 3
17.	I remember better what people say than what they look like.	0 1 2 3
18.	I easily remember jokes that I hear.	0 1 2 3
19.	I can identify people by their voices.	0 1 2 3
20.	When I turn the TV on, I listen to the sound more than I watch the pictures.	0 1 2 3
	B – Total	
	Kinesthetic/Tactile	
21.	I'd rather just start doing things than pay attention to the directions.	0 1 2 3
22.	I need frequent breaks when I work or study.	0 1 2 3
23.	I move my lips when I read silently.	0 1 2 3
24.	I avoid sitting at a desk when I don't have to.	0 1 2 3
25.	I get nervous when I sit still too long.	0 1 2 3
26.	I think better when I move around.	0 1 2 3
27.	Manipulating objects helps me to remember things.	0 1 2 3
28.	I enjoy building or making things.	

29.	I like a lot of physical activities.	0 1 2 3
30.	I enjoy collecting things – cards, stamps, coins, etc.	0 1 2 3
	C – Total	

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