

Investigating Kurdish EFL Students' Learning Styles at University Level

Sanan Sh. Malo¹

¹ Department of English Language, Faculty of Humanities, University of Zakho, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

ABSTRACT

The present study aims at investigating the students' learning styles in EFL classes at university level. Being aware of the students' preferences and feedback concerning the way teachers teach and run their classes is important to ensure the success of the process of teaching and learning. Neglecting the students' feedback and preferences in the class might affect the process of teaching and learning negatively. To avoid such a problem, the present study equips the teachers with a way to deal with different learning environments and class diversity. To achieve the aims of the study, a questionnaire of 20 items on the different learning preferences was designed by the researcher to collect data from 40 EFL seniors (23 males and 17 females) at University of Zakho during the academic year 2020-2021. The items included in the questionnaire are based on Fleming's (2006) VARK model of learning styles with adaptation. VARK is an acronym referring to the four types of learners: Visual, Aural, Read and Write, and Kinesthetic. The data collected were analyzed using SPSS Software version 22 through One-Sample T-Test and Independent-Paired Samples T-Test. The results show that the students prefer using the board and taking notes during the lecture and dislike attending online lectures via Zoom and Google Meet platforms. They also do not prefer recorded PowerPoint lectures uploaded to the Moodle. This is an indication that locking universities and adopting a blended system of teaching due to Covid-19 has affected the process of teaching as well as learning negatively. This study can be considered as a road map for EFL teachers when launching teaching any module since it takes into consideration what the students are interested in, namely class diversity and students' preferences.

KEY WORDS: EFL Classes, Learning Environments, Learning Styles, University of Zakho, VARK

1. INTRODUCTION:

When learning new things, all people show natural characteristics of learning, each student tackles a problem or learns a set of facts or organizes a combination of feelings from a particular perspective (Brown, 2000). Learners have an important role in adopting any learning and teaching style at any teaching level. At the same time, they can make use of the teaching strategies recommended in each method by learning theories (Atkinson, 2011, cited in Richard and

Rodgers, 2014). On the other hand, the role assumed for learners in each approach or method accounts for the type of learning expected from learners. These include the ways in which they are expected to interact with the teacher and other learners in the classroom, and the ways they make use of the learning arrangements and resources. All theories of teaching have considered the role of the learners into consideration from many perspectives, such as psychology, education and second language acquisition (Ortega 2009; Alsagoff 2012, cited in Richard and Rodgers 2014). The present study deals with investigating EFL students' learning styles and their preferences. It is expected that this study will be of importance to both EFL teachers and students. Being aware of the learners' preferences and interests will enable course designers and teachers to run the courses smoothly and effectively towards achieving course goals and learning objectives. The significance of the present study lies in the fact that it can be considered as a road

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Corresponding author's e-mail: sanan.malo@uoz.edu.krd

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map for EFL teachers to take such a step before launching any teaching course. The present study tries to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the learning styles preferred most by the students?
2. Is there any statistically significant difference in the students' learning styles according to gender?

2. BACKGROUND

Dealing with the learning process, it is important to explain three terms related to learning: process, style and strategy. Process refers to the ways all humans of normal intelligence engage in certain levels or types of learning. People universally engage in association, transfer, generalization, and attrition. They all make stimulus-response connections and are driven by reinforcement. Hence, all people possess the abilities in the different intelligence at different levels. Based on that, the process is a universal feature in human beings. As for the term style, it refers to consistent and rather enduring tendencies or preferences within an individual. Moreover, styles refer to the general features of intellectual functioning and personality type that pertain to one and that distinguish a person from someone else. A person might be more visually oriented, more tolerant of ambiguity or more reflective than another one. These are the general characteristics that distinguish a person from another one; whereas strategies are specific methods of dealing with a problem or a task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information. Strategies might vary across time and intra-individually. To sum up, turning to the study of styles and strategies in second language learning, educationalists can make use of these layers of onions or pints on a continuum, ranging from universal properties of learning to specific intra-individual differences in learning (Brown, 2000).

Harmer (2015) states that any group of learners consists of individuals of different personalities, interests and perhaps learning styles. Scrivener (2011) points out that there are different ways to know about the learners' needs in the class via filling in a questionnaire, doing a task about a language skill or writing to the teacher directly via an email, etc. Teachers can interview the students individually, in pairs or in groups discussing the materials and techniques to be used in teaching a certain course. Teachers can also observe the students when doing tasks in the class which enable the teachers to observe how these students use language in the classroom and to know about their interests.

3. LEARNING STYLES

Keefe (1979, cited in Brown, 2000, p. 114) defines learning styles "as cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment." According to Reid (1995, p. iii), learning styles refer to "an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred ways of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills." Thus, they are broad preferences for going about the business of learning (Ehrman, 1996, p. 49). Brown (2000) states that the way we learn things in general and the way we tackle a problem depends on a rather amorphous link between personality and cognition, referred to as a cognitive style. When a cognitive style is specifically related to an educational context, where affective and physiological factors are mixed, it is generally referred to as a learning style. Learning style is the general approach preferred by the student when learning a subject acquiring a language, or dealing with a difficult problem (Oxford 2001; Reid 1998, cited in Oxford:2003). Moreover, Oxford (2003) mentions that it is a learning style that is an overall pattern that provides broad directions to learning and makes the same teaching method beloved by some students and hated by others. She adds that within the learning style frame individuals reflect sensory style dimensions (visual/auditory/hands-on) and social style dimensions (extroverted/ introverted). Individuals also have preferences along cognitive styles dimensions, such as: "concrete-sequential/abstract-intuitive, closure-oriented/ open, detail-focused/holistic (sometimes called particular/global), and analyzing/synthesizing." (Oxford: 2003, P.273).

Reid (2005) points out that the use of learning styles in the classroom can help teachers deal with many of the challenges they face in inclusive schools.

Given and Reid (1999, cited in Reid, 2005, p. 52) mention that there are at least 100 instruments designed to identify individual learning styles. Moreover, they say that these instruments usually focus on factors that are seen to have some influence over the learning process:

1. Modality Preference: preference for visual, auditory, tactual or kinesthetic input.
2. Personality Types: personality such as intuitive, risk-taking, cautious and reflective.
3. Social Variables: preference for working alone or in groups.
4. Cognitive processes: memory, comprehension and methods of information processing.
5. Movement and Laterality: active learning and left- and right hemispheric activities.
6. Emotional Factors: incorporated in many of the above categories such as personality and social preferences.

The concept of learning styles represents a profile of the individual's approach to learning, a blueprint of the habitual or preferred way the individual perceives, interacts with, and responds to the learning environment.

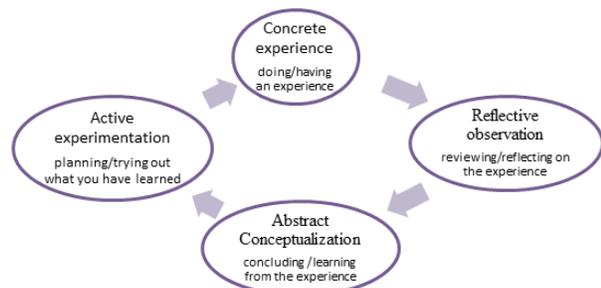
Chick (2010) points out that the term learning styles is commonly used to describe how learners gather, sift through, interpret, organize, come to conclusions about, and "store" information for further use. He also mentions that this term is formed into an acronym, written as "VARK" representing the styles categorized by sensory approaches as: visual, aural, verbal [reading/writing], and kinesthetic. Likewise, Cherry (2021) points out that VARK model for learning styles as one of the most popular models for learning styles has been introduced by Fleming in 1987 to help the students and others to learn more about their individual learning preferences. In this model, learners are classified by whether they are: visual, auditory/aural, verbal (reading and writing), and kinesthetic. Visual learners are those who are interested in using pictures, watching movies, making diagrams, mapping, etc. Auditory learners are those who like listening to music, making discussions, interviewing, and lectures. Reading and writing are used by learners who are interested in making lists, reading textbooks, taking notes, writing comments, etc. As for kinesthetic learners, they like moving, touching, doing experiments, solving problems etc. (See Hussain 2017).

Dörnyei (2005) says that the theory proposed by Kolb (1984; Kolb et al., 2001) is one that has been widely endorsed by both researchers and practitioners. He adds that this model is based on four categories:

Concrete vs abstract thinking and active vs reflective information processing. The first two categories indicate the way learners take information, whereas the other two categories show the way learners internalize information (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Kolb's experiential learning cycle (McLeod, 2010, p.1; Kolb, 2015, p. 51)



According to Kolb's model of learning styles, four types of learners emerge (See also McLeod, 2013).

1. Diverges (concrete and reflective) refer to those learners who prefer concrete situations that generate ideas, such as a brainstorming session. They also like to deal with things from many perspectives. Moreover, they are friendly and interested in other people, and they like to work in groups in the classroom.
2. Convergents (abstract and active) refer to those learners who are abstract thinkers and generate ideas and theories; they are not separated from reality. They are interested in active experimentation to find practical uses for their schemes to the problems. Moreover, they are good at solving problem, especially if they are technical, not interpersonal or social in nature. Based on that, people with this style prefer experiments, and simulations, laboratory assignments, and practical applications.
3. Assimilators (abstract and reflective) refer to those learners who assimilate disparate observations in a reflective manner. In other words, understanding a wide range of knowledge and putting it in a concise and logical form. Learners with this style manifest the stereotype of being unfriendly, since they are not interested in other people, they are less focused on other people and more interested in ideas and abstract concepts.
4. Accommodators (concrete and active) are the learners who like concrete experience and active experimentations, and they are encouraged by challenging experiences even to the extent to taking risks. In formal learning situation, learners of this style are interested in working with other on field projects.

4. PREVIOUS STUDIES

Jian-xiang (2007) carried out a study on the toxic teaching and learning styles that hinder the process of teaching and learning. The researcher added that teachers of English should adopt new strategies and techniques reflecting the students' preferences in the class. Zhou (2011) conducted a study on Learning Styles and Teaching Styles in College English Teaching in China. In his study, he focused on the use of the teaching and learning styles that reflect the students' preferences and potentials. He added that taking care of the new teaching and learning styles will lead to better learning achievement. Cimermanová (2018) also investigated the effect of learning styles on academic achievement in different forms of teaching. She used 81 university students (pre-service English language teachers) divided into a control group (55) and an experimental group (27) group. The findings arrived at in this study showed no significant findings, indicating that the students' preferences and method of teaching have no effect on

academic achievement. Alnujaidi (2019) studied the difference between EFL students' preferred learning styles and EFL teachers' preferred teaching styles in Saudi Arabia. 130 EFL students and 102 EFL teachers participated in this study. They found that there is a mismatch between the learning styles of EFL students and the teaching styles of EFL teachers. The students learning styles were sensing, visual, active, and sequential; whereas teachers' learning styles were abstract, verbal, passive, and global. Based on, they recommended. This mismatch between learning styles and teaching styles will affect the process of teaching and learning negatively. In addition, Mohammed and Malo (2020) conducted a study on the use of learning vocabulary through semantic mapping. They found that the strategy used in teaching vocabulary was not successful. In other words, it did not contribute to learning achievement because the results of the posttests did not show any remarkable difference in the mean scores on the post-test compared to the mean scores obtained on the pretest.

5. MATERIALS AND METHODS

5.1 Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative research approach. In other words, the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed in terms of mean scores compared to the level of significance 0.05. SPSS Software (version 22) was used for data analysis. Moreover, the items included in the questionnaire were based on the concepts and ideas derived from Fleming's VARK model of learning styles with adaptation (Fleming, 2006).

5.2 Participants and Sampling Procedures

The participants of the present study were 40 EFL seniors (23 males and 17 females) from University of Zakho during the Academic year 2020-2021. The sample was chosen non-randomly since they are already in classes and the random selection is not possible in this case. The present study is limited to studying EFL students' learning styles and preferences.

5.3 Data Collection Instrument

To conduct the present study, a Likert- Scale questionnaire (see Appendix 3) of 20 items was designed on the learning styles used by EFL students. After giving it to a jury and making some changes, in the light of the jury's comments, some changes were made to fit the context of the present study. Then, it was given to 40 seniors (23 males and 17 females) at the Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, University of Zakho to respond to the different items and tick the learning style that best suits them in.

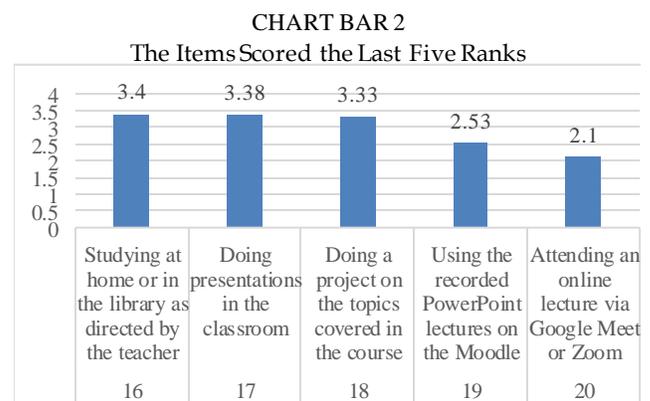
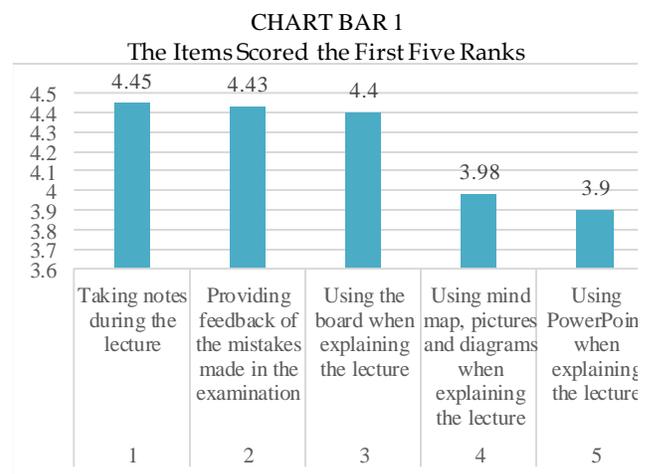
5.4 The Hypotheses

The present study hypothesizes the following:

1. The Students vary in their preferences of the learning styles.
2. There is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the items according to gender.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected for this study were processed via a computer Software SPSS (version 22). One- sample t-test was applied to show the mean score of each item representing a learning style, then to see which one is preferred most by the students. An independent paired - Samples t-Test was also used to show the difference in the students' preference of the items according to gender. The research questions (See Section 1) were answered in terms of the results the present study arrived at. The results show that the students learn better when giving the lectures on campus (Taking notes, using the board and giving feedback of the mistakes made in the examination). These items scored higher means than the items "doing projects, presentations, attending electronic platforms. The ranking of such items representing different learning styles with their mean scores from the highest to the lowest is shown in Appendix 1.



As it can be seen from Chart Bar (1) Items: “Taking notes during the lecture”, “Providing feedback of the mistakes made in the examination”, “Using the board when explaining the lecture”, and “Using mind map, pictures and diagrams when explaining the lecture”, and “Using PowerPoint when explaining the lecture”, scored the first five ranks respectively among the 20 items included in the questionnaire; whereas, items: “Studying at home or in the library as directed by the teacher”, “Doing presentations in the classroom”, “Doing a project on the topics covered in the course”, “Using the recorded PowerPoint lectures on the Moodle”, and “Attending an online lecture via Google Meet or Zoom” come in the last five ranks (see Chart Bar 2).

Apart from items “Providing feedback of the mistakes made in the examination”, the results also indicate no statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the items representing students’ preferences of the learning styles according to gender since P-values of all items are higher than the level of significant 0.05 (See Appendix 2). As far as Item “Providing feedback of the mistakes made in the examination” is concerned, it can be seen from Table (2) and Chart (3) that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the students’ preferences of the item in favor of the male students because the p-value is less than the level of significance 0.05.

Taking into consideration Fleming’s VARK model of learning styles, it can be seen from the results that the students are interested in the category verbal (write and read) learners. In other words, they prefer taking notes, making and writing comments in the class, providing feedback of their mistakes. Those who interested in giving the lecture in the class using the board are aural learners. They like to listen to the teacher explaining the lecture. As for those who learn better when using PowerPoint are visual learners. Based on the results, it can be seen that the students are of different learning styles.

As for the items representing learning styles related to visual and kinesthetic learners, the students did not like doing projects, attending Google Meet, Zoom, and the Moodle platforms. This might be due to some economic factors in that the students are unable to get electronic devices to access the lectures delivered via internet platforms. Another reason might be the difficulty of providing or getting good access to the internet.

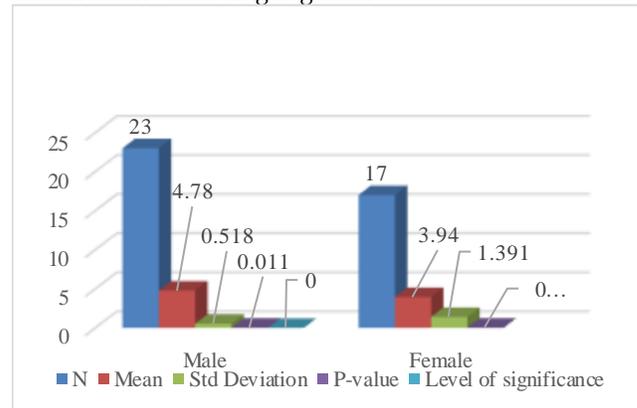
TABLE 1

Scores of items “providing feedback of the mistakes made in the examination” mean scores according to gender

Item 20	Gender	N	Mean	Std Deviation	P-value	Level of significance
Providing feedback of the mistakes made in the examination	Male	23	4.78	.518	.011	P < .05
	Female	17	3.94	1.391	.028	

CHART BAR 3

The statistically significant difference in mean scores the of item “providing feedback of the mistakes made in the examination” according to gender



As it is the case with other studies on learning styles such as, Jian-xiang (2007), Zhou (2011), and Cimermanová (2018), and Alnujaidi (2019), the present study is in line with those studies as it stresses the fact that in any teaching program instructors should take care of all learning styles and the students’ preferences before launching any teaching program. However, the study conducted by Mohammed and Malo (2020) adopted only one technique representing visual learners, that is mapping strategy that is why it didn’t succeed with the students who participated in such a study; therefore, is not in line with the present study. What makes this study different from other studies is that it has included some visual learning styles, such as using recorded PowerPoint lectures, Google Meet and Zoom platforms. Although some learners preferred some visual learning styles, such as PowerPoints lectures, they were not interested in Google Meet, Zoom Platforms and recorded lectures in the Moodle. Thus, it is important for the teachers to take into consideration the students’ learning styles before launching teaching any program to ensure learning achievement.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The present study arrived at the following concluding remarks:

1. Among 20 questionnaire items representing learning styles, items “taking notes during the lecture”, “providing feedback of the mistakes made in the examination”, “using the board when explaining the lecture”, “using a mind map, pictures and diagrams when explaining the lecture”, and “using PowerPoint when explaining the lecture” scored higher means and come in the first five ranks respectively; whereas items “studying at home or in the library as directed by the teacher”, “doing presentations in the

classroom”, “doing a project on the topics covered in the course”, “using the recorded PowerPoint lectures on the Moodle”, “attending an online lecture via Google Meet or Zoom” scored the least means and come in the last five ranks respectively.

2. The students are not interested in the lectures delivered via Google Meet and Zoom Platforms; they rather preferred the ones given on campus.
3. The study also showed no statistically significant differences in the means scores of the students’ attitudes toward the learning styles between males and females, except for the item “Providing feedback of the mistakes made in the examination” which was preferred more by males than females.
4. As for the types of learners emerged from the present study, the results show that students’ learning styles are verbal (write and read) and aural since they are interested in taking notes, providing feedback, and having the lecture in the classroom using the board. On the other hand, the results show that the students are less visual and kinesthetic since they do not like learning from watching videos, attending online lectures and doing field projects.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations can be forwarded to the instructors teaching EFL classes,

1. Since the success of teaching any program depends on how to cope with the class diversity and the students’ preferences, it is recommended that instructors explore their students’ preferences before launching teaching any module.
2. Since the students’ feedback of the teaching techniques is important, it is recommended to ask the students about their feedback of the teaching style adopted in the classroom to match teaching styles with the students’ learning styles.

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