LEARNERS STYLES AND STRATEGIES- A CRUCIAL FACTOR IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CONTEMPORARY TEACHING

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Abstract: Teaching in the modern era has undertaken greater responsibility in means of the teacher-student relationship and in the overall attitude of the learners. It now requires deeper analysis of the personality of the learners, upon their individuality and treats them as "wholly incorporated" in the learning environment. Learners now have more freedom of speech and are constantly engaged in the learning, either consciously or unconsciously. They have a dominant role in the process of reproducing what they knew with what they learned and are part of the planning. However, in order for the learner to be an active participant, the teacher must be aware of the matter of "knowing" the learners styles of learning. According to Richards & Lockhart (1995), "learning styles have been defined as characteristic cognitive and psychological behaviors, which serve as indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment. They can be thought of as predisposition to particular ways of approaching learning and are intimately related to personality types." Oxford (1990) states that "learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning. Strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement…which result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence." (1990, pg.1). Not only is the teacher now focused on teaching strategies, but is similarly focused on "how" the learner learns best, in planning and designing the syllabus with "multi-dimensional" activities for mixed-learner strategy learning and cultural differences i.e. "it is important for teachers to identify which approaches favor better teaching, but it is also important to recognize what learning styles may reflect learning and cultural factors." (Richards, 1994). Even though such issues may be referred to as "deja-vu" for most parts of the world, the truth is, they are hardly implemented in the region, due to different factors and circumstances.
The main aim of this article is to elaborate the issue of understanding and knowing our learners, with a dose of overall teacher-awareness.
It will further discuss psychological factors of learning and identify different learner styles and their importance, it will introduce different groupings of styles based on different scholars and research and will also reflect on personal experience related to the topic.
We hope that the conclusions and remarks help in further implementation of such factors in our everyday English teaching.
Keywords: learner styles, strategies, personality, cognitive and psychological behaviors, multi-dimensional etc.

AN INTRODUCTION TO MODERN TEACHING

"We cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his (or her) learning." Carl Rogers
Modern teaching is nowadays referred to the learner and their learning rather than the teacher and the teaching. This means that the learner is the center of the learning process and the teacher should establish instruction according to "how" the learners actually learn. Holec (1980) argues that "language learners take charge of their learning in all respects, including determining the objectives, defining the content and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedures (rhythm, time, place, etc.) and evaluating what has been learned." Teachers are now focused on knowing their learners, their personality, individuality, and of course, their preference and the manner they actually learn best. The syllabus is designed in accordance to the mixed learners' styles of learning and is usually adjusted even after the course has begun, to ensure effective teaching/learning throughout the course. The teaching of English as a foreign language and other subjects as well, now requires specific teacher training. New demands in education nowadays have changed the role of the teacher, as well as that of the learner. Teachers now are not taken as "sources of knowledge" but are seen as facilitators in the learning environment, and learners are now actively involved and in charge of their own learning. They are responsible, active learners, which rely on both previous knowledge and new knowledge that they acquire in class. Learners are now actively engaged in the learning environment and the teaching is now "student-centered." They have the right to explore, to conduct

research, to plan and create; they have the right to demonstrate and present and to make mistakes, and mistakes are seen as a normal part of the learning process. Holec (1980) further states that: "teachers can help learners take this responsibility, but the ultimate responsibility lies with the learners themselves…" More specifically, strategy awareness in this case is an inevitable part of the learning process, and learners must be aware of the responsibility they have. The classroom atmosphere must be warm and comfortable and the students' must be stress-free. Even though from different points of view, the teacher is nowadays seen as passive, it is not true. The requirements and demands of education focus on the teachers' monitoring skills, demonstrating skills and on the manner of management skills. The teachers should be very well-prepared and of course well-planned in order to manage interactive teaching and should normally be aware of different personalities and different learning styles in the classroom. Teachers should also keep track of all the progress, and identify which strategy works best for each student. All in all, being a good teacher nowadays is easier said than done. Many teachers are afraid of new approaches to teaching as they lack self-confidence and lack training and technology skills. This is a major disadvantage that will closely be examined further in the article. Since emphasis is put on learning strategies and the learner, let us firstly examine what they are according to different scholars.

DIFFERENT SCHOLARS' THEORIES ON LEARNING STYLES AND STRATEGIES

"They know enough who know how to learn." Henry Adams

If we wish to better comprehend the concept of learning style and strategy and their importance, we must firstly base it on previous research that has been conducted and on different theories concerning the terms. What are learning styles and strategies and what do they represent? Are they the same in meaning and in context, or do they differ? Different scholars have different theories, which are more or less similar in meaning, though we shall further examine the case.

Learning strategies

The word strategy comes from a Greek term "strategia" meaning generalship or the art of war i.e. strategy involves the management of troops, ships, or aircraft in a planned campaign. (Oxford,1990, p.7). We can now make a comparison between troops of an army for example with learners of a class, both groups requiring special organization and management in achieving success in winning the battle (in the first case, of winning a battle at war and in the second of winning the battle of learning a language). This simple example of strategy itself concludes that in the field of learning as well as in that of battle, the struggle is to maintain a certain pre-planned design of "who does what and how." The leader (teacher) should know what strategy to use with what learner, just as the general should know what soldier to put in what position. When language learning is taken into consideration, the whole process of understanding, perceiving and decoding is a very complex situation. We can compare effective strategy usage with composing music for example. It is not enough to know tunes and instruments- it's how the mixture of what we know produces something beautiful, almost extraordinary. It is simply like playing tunes on a piano. It's not the movement of the hands, but the rhythm of the hands combined with the inner soul. Weinstein and Mayer (1986) defined learning strategies broadly as "behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning" which are "intended to influence the learner's encoding process" (p. 315) According to Chamot (1987) "learning strategies are techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistics and content area information." Rubin (1987) states that learning strategies "are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly." (p. 22) Oxford (1990) further observes that "learning strategies are the particular approaches or techniques that learners use to learn a foreign language. Students use various learning strategies when they are faced with various problems. …" and continues "strategy concept has come to mean a plan, a step or conscious action toward achievement of an objective. In education, it has taken on a new meaning and has been transformed into learning strategies."

Learning styles

Although both terms are usually found together, some researchers argue that there might be a slight difference in between learning styles and strategies. Learning styles is another variable. Oxford (1989) however asserts that "little research has been dedicated to the relationship between learning strategy use and learning style" (p. 241)

Dunn and Dunn (1979 as cited in Reid 1987) define learning styles as "a term that describes the variations among learners in using one or more senses to understand, organize, and retain experience" (p. 89)

Reid (1995) asserts that learning styles have some fundamental characteristics, on which they are based. These are:
• every person, student and teacher alike, has a learning style and learning strengths and weaknesses;
• learning styles exist on wide continuums, although they are described as opposites;

• learning styles are value-neutral; that is, no one style is better than others (although clearly some students with some learning styles function better in a US school system that values some learning styles over others);
• students must be encouraged to "stretch" their learning styles so that they will be more empowered in a variety of learning situations; often students' strategies are linked to their learning styles;
• teachers should allow their students to become aware of their learning strengths and weaknesses.
(Reid, 1995, p. xiii) Whether they are steps, behaviors or tools is not a matter of relevance. The matter lies elsewhere: in the understanding of their importance in the teaching/learning process. The two-way process of teaching and learning and of teacher vs. learner is now "balanced." Both participants in the learning are now bound to working together as they facilitate the burden they have. They should be aware of how to maintain successful classroom instruction and how to plan it according to their personal learning styles and strategies.

DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES AND STRATEGIES

Research conducted concerning learning styles and strategies implies that there is not a strict statement that actually proves their difference; they are more likely to have more in common than is actually thought of. The most important feature that they both have in common is the fact that they are student-based theories on the way they learn best, on how they analyze best, how the function best in the classroom and out of it. Both styles and strategies build together the concept of active learning and learner awareness; they imply that the learner has as much part in the learning process as the teacher does, or even more and imply that a way or manner one chooses to learn should be acceptable in the learning environment. The teacher's awareness together with that of the learner, facilitate effective learning. However, only being aware of this fact is only the solution to half of the problem (issue), the cause being that of many different manners of learning. The chaos that may be caused is that of too many types of styles and strategies and the teachers not being able to monitor which style or strategy works best. Also, having in mind the large number of learners in the class, frustration of both the teacher and the learner is inevitable. In order to prevent such frustration, researchers have tried to group them into different groups and to define each group with its characteristics, namely defining how to detect learners' manner of learning. According to Knowles (1982) differences in the learning styles are reflected in four different types of learners: *concrete learning style learners*- are learners that are interested in information that has immediate value. They want to learn by games, pictures, films, by working in pairs etc. *Analytical learning style learners*- are independent learners and like to solve problems by themselves. They want to study by studying grammar or by reading books and want the teacher let them find their own mistakes. *Communicative learning style learners*- these learners prefer a social approach to learning and prefer learning a foreign language for eg by listening to natives, by talking to native speakers etc. *Authority-oriented learning style*- these learners are said to be responsible and dependable on the teacher. They prefer taking notes and having the teacher explain everything to them. Furthermore, Oxford (1990) identifies direct and indirect strategies:
Direct: memory strategies, which help students to store and retrieve information, cognitive, which enable learners to understand and produce new language, compensation strategies- which allow learners to communicate despite deficiencies in their language knowledge.
Indirect strategies: metacognitive strategies, which allow learners to control their own learning through organizing, planning and evaluating; affective strategies, which help learners gain control over their emotions, attitudes, motivations and values; social strategies, which help learners interact with other people. Another classification was made by Reid (1995) according to the senses. He further identifies: visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners. As you may conclude from the above, it is difficult to actually solve the puzzle of choosing the right tasks for the different learners. As a result, most teachers attempt to neglect the issue of learner styles and strategies, finding it rather confusing and time-consuming. In order to improve the theory of learning, let us further examine some advantages and disadvantages of knowing your learners.

WHY SHOULD WE KNOW OUR LEARNERS?
"It takes better teachers to focus on the learner." Peter Strevens
Some advantages concerning the issue are learner high-motivation and high self-esteem. Apart from having confidence in what you actually know, being able to put that knowledge to use makes learners more motivated to part-take in the process. As teachers, we know that maintaining learner motivation is highly recommended and that high-motivated learners get better grades and results, making it possible for us to achieve our aims and goals in teaching. Learners are not bored; they are actively involved and are proud of their success at the end of the course. Learners also develop themselves, they become more mature, they become critical thinkers. According to Rubin (1985) through better understanding and managing their learning strategies, learners can expect to:

-gain insights into their own approach in learning;
-learn to choose strategies appropriate to a task;
-learn to use these strategies in a classroom or self-study;
-be able to define strategies for improving memory for language learning etc. (Language learning, 1985).
Oxford (1990) defines learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed and more transferable to new situations. She suggests that language learning strategies have the following features:
-they contribute to the main goal, communicative competence;
-they allow the learners to become more self-directed;
-they expand the role of the teachers;
-they are problem-oriented;
-they are specific actions taken by the learner;
-they support learning both directly and indirectly;
-they are not always observable;
-they are flexible;
-they are influenced by a variety of factors, age, sex, race, motivation etc. (Oxford, 1990, pg. 9)

DRAWBACKS
As in every other attempt to facilitate the learning process, as much as there are advantages there are disadvantages as well. According to our personal experience, as much as we try to know our learners, it is truly impossible. The number of students in the class is usually over 30, and this makes it very difficult to design activities according to each learner's manner or style of learning. It is a frustrating experience. Secondly, teacher awareness and training is required, and this issue is a current one in Macedonia. Most teachers lack experience and training. Finally, there isn't an assessment tool that would measure students' overall success accurately i.e. we cannot actually monitor the scope of success when using different strategies in the class. However, we remain very optimistic regarding the issue. Many teachers (if not all) are trying very hard to surpass the difficulties with classroom management and strategy use, by which the implementation procedure is moving rapidly towards success.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS
Regarding learning styles and strategies, we strongly believe that they are very important in active learning. They help enhance learner's abilities and capacities and make learning an active process i.e. they shift learning from passive to active. They also help learners' individually complete certain tasks and help in their overall improvement of skills and self-confidence. According to Willing (1988) the following recommendations were proposed: "it is hoped that classroom practice will become geared to the developing of good and appropriate learning strategies (to a much greater degree than at present), by which, the following is required:
a) Exploration of strategies which learners are already making use of, which derive from their previous education and their own cognitive individuality; this exploration can be done through questionnaire and discussion.
b) Exploration of the relation between individual learning styles and the person's existing strategies." (Willing, 1988, p. 172)
Furthermore, they are an important part of modern teaching and should be further implemented and used.

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