

CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS OF LEARNING STYLES THEORY IN EFL CONTEXTS

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Abstract: the concept of learning style, which proposes that learners have a favored mode of learning, has been extensively utilized in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Nevertheless, the method has also experienced intense criticism and challenges, particularly in connection with issues about the basis of the concept. This paper examines the principal problems encountered when attempting to identify and measure learning style. Moreover, the challenge of oversimplifying the concept by generalization and making assertions unsubstantiated by evidence are also investigated. The paper also proposes an adaptive and more evidence-driven method of classroom instruction for EFL.

Keywords: learning styles, EFL, language acquisition, teaching methods, learner differences, educational psychology, criticisms, challenges.

Introduction

In EFL classrooms, the concept of learning styles has attracted great interest from educators aiming to tailor instruction to individual learner preferences. Defined as consistent ways in which learners perceive, process, and retain information, learning styles often include categories such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities. This approach has been adopted by several teachers to engage learners and aid language acquisition through teaching procedures undertaken based on the learners' preferred styles. But despite its widespread use among teachers, this approach has faced criticisms from scholars, despite its popularity. This is based on the fact that there are no empirical proofs of the significance of teaching learners based on their styles to aid language acquisition successfully. Furthermore, the fact that learners exhibit different preferences in various situations affects the process of placing them in distinct categories. This study will seek to dissect the major criticisms of this approach in EFL.

Main body

One theoretical concept which has gained immense popularity in the classroom when it comes to the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is the learning style concept, according to which persons have different learning preferences, which could be visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. But on analysis of the

application of the learning style concept in the classroom, there exist a number of challenges, the foremost of which is the lack of a universally accepted definition of learning style. There exist several approaches, and each one of these involves different categories and learning style types, which is confusing to educators and researchers as well [1].

A further important challenge is related to the issues of methodology in the diagnosis of learning styles. A number of tools applied to determine the preferred learning style of students appear to have issues with reliability and validity to a large extent. For example, if the tools are questionnaires, they tend to be self-administered, and hence might not be very reliable and valid since the results tend to be guided by moods at the time and not the learned assumptions of the situation. Critics argue that even if learning styles can be reliably identified, there is little empirical evidence supporting the notion that teaching according to these styles improves learning outcomes. Multiple meta-analyses have examined the "matching hypothesis"—the idea that aligning instructional methods with individual learning styles enhances understanding and retention—and found no consistent positive results [2]. In EFL education, where language complexity and communicative competence are paramount, rigid adherence to learning styles may divert attention from more evidence-based teaching approaches that have stronger support from research, such as task-based learning or explicit grammar instruction. Moreover, the learning styles theory tends to oversimplify the multifaceted nature of language learning by categorizing learners into fixed types. This approach risks stereotyping students and ignoring the dynamic, context-dependent way in which learners absorb and process language. In EFL classrooms, learners encounter a range of linguistic tasks that require different cognitive and sensory engagements, and their learning preferences may shift depending on the skill practiced—listening, speaking, reading, or writing. This fluidity challenges the assumption that learners have a single, dominant style and calls for more flexible pedagogical practices [3].

A further criticism addresses the potential negative impact of emphasizing learning styles on learners' motivation and self-efficacy. When students are labeled with a particular learning style, they might develop a self-limiting belief that they can succeed only through specific methods, potentially narrowing their willingness to engage with diverse learning experiences. In language acquisition, where exposure to multiple inputs and strategies is crucial for comprehensive competence, such restrictive thinking can hinder overall progress, making the use of learning styles counterproductive rather than supportive [4]. In addition, the

theory often ignores cultural and contextual factors that influence learning. EFL learners come from diverse backgrounds with distinct educational traditions and cognitive habits, which can affect how they approach language learning tasks. Learning styles theory, largely developed in Western contexts, may not adequately account for these cultural variations, limiting its applicability and relevance. Successful EFL instruction requires sensitivity to these broader influences rather than a narrow focus on individual sensory preferences.

Another challenge is the practical implementation of learning styles in EFL classrooms, where resources are often limited. Personalizing teaching to accommodate multiple learning styles for large, heterogeneous groups can place excessive demands on teachers in terms of time, preparation, and materials. This pragmatic limitation often forces educators to either simplify their approaches or disregard learning styles altogether, raising questions about the feasibility of applying the theory consistently and effectively in real-world settings.

Furthermore, the focus on learning styles may divert attention from more critical linguistic and cognitive factors affecting language acquisition. For example, motivation, language aptitude, prior knowledge, and exposure to authentic communicative situations have been shown to play decisive roles in successful EFL learning [5]. Overemphasizing stylistic preferences risks overlooking these elements, which have stronger empirical support and practical significance for teaching and learning processes. Ultimately, the challenges and criticisms surrounding the learning styles theory in EFL contexts highlight the need for a cautious and balanced approach. While recognizing individual differences in learning is important, reliance on a theory that lacks robust empirical validation and practical applicability may limit educational effectiveness. Instead, EFL educators should prioritize evidence-based methodologies that accommodate learner variability through flexible, multimodal teaching strategies. Such an approach aligns better with the complex, dynamic nature of language acquisition and fosters more inclusive and adaptive learning environments.

Conclusion

The problems and critiques linked to learning styles theory in EFL contexts suggest that the concept should be used cautiously and critically in language teaching. Although accounting for learner preference is important, the rigid adherence to learning styles threatens to oversimplify the complexity of language acquisition and may lead to ineffective instructional practices. On the contrary, empirical research supports that a flexible, multimodal teaching approach, which

incorporates various strategies rather than exclusively tailoring to a fixed learning style, is more beneficial for diversified learners. In conclusion, EFL educators should focus more on evidence-based approaches and adjust to the changing needs of learners rather than rely heavily on learning styles frameworks that fail to achieve consistent validation. This balanced approach provides a more inclusive environment that creates greater effectiveness in the process of learning the English language.

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