Exploring the Use of Learning Styles to Develop Materials: Reflections from a Government School ESL Classroom

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Abstract

In the recent years there has been significant development in the field of English Language Education with a gradual shift from 'teaching' to 'learning', and on placing the onus of language development to learners' preferred style of learning. The learning style approach is seen as an important factor in the success of second language learning because it takes into account the individual differences in the psychology of learners to acquire the target language. In this paper, the author shares her classroom experience adopting a learner-centric approach by developing materials to accommodate two learning styles—*active* and *reflective*. The paper demonstrates through a set of materials how the language learning process is supported and enhanced in the government school ESL classroom when the two styles are instantiated.

Keywords: language learning styles, active style, reflective style, ESL classroom

Introduction: Learning Styles

ESL classrooms, since the advent of communicative language teaching and task based language teaching approaches, have shifted the focus from being teacher-directed to being more learner-centric. In addition to these approaches, there has been a body of research on second language learning styles and strategies affecting the language learning outcomes positively (Oxford, 2003). To look at what the learners do on the basis of their personality traits and learning styles in approaching

and solving a task and thereby developing proficiency in the target language brings the onus of language learning to the learners. Learning styles are conceptualized as a set of general approaches such as global or analytic, auditory or visual—which can be equally effectively used by ESL learners. The styles are "an individual's natural, habitual and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills." (Reid, 1995, p. viii). A method adopted in the learning style research is to identify learners' style and individualise teaching-learning to suit the learner's learning needs (Coffield et al., 2004). For instance, different sensory preferences may drive some students to respond better to visuals, whereas kinesthetic students may enjoy activities that involve a lot of movement.The teaching-learning scenario has direct implications on how learners interact with materials. As thestyleshelp in accommodating learner needs, they constitute an important factor that helps in learning the target language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Oxford, 1990). The learning style approach aims to enhance students' learning capacities and maximise their achievement by providing learning situations that match their learning style.

This paper presents a few examples of the material developed and explores the advantages and shortcomings experienced during their classroom transactions. It is an attempt to understand the needs of a classroom, and the path that a teacher may follow to adapt and design material to suit the multiple learning styles of the students.This, in turn, would enable the learners to take control of their learning to accelerate the language learning process. Based on her own experiences, the author believes that learner styles led development of materials is a rich area for carrying out teacher research.This paper is organized in the following manner: it begins with a discussion on two learning styles—*active* and *reflective*—and later demonstrates with two tasks how teachers can use additional materials in the ESL classroom to help learners use these styles to improve their proficiency in the target language, here English.

Active and Reflective Learning Styles: An Overview

Though numerous models of learning styles exist today, each with its merits and demerits, the models differ in terms of their understanding of the term 'learning style.' A repository of learning styles can help a teacher understand how they can aid the process of gaining proficiency in a new language; but too many definitions of a concept can be confounding too

(Coffield et al., 2004). For this paper two learning styles are considered: *active and reflective* styles as a part of learners' personality trait or their psychological dimension. Table.1 below gives a summary of the models that incorporate active and reflective learning styles and shows how each model defines the two styles:

Table: Summary of Use of Active and Reflective Learning Styles in ESL Models

Name of the Model	Distinctive Features
Kolb's Learning Cycle (McLeod, 2017)	The model is cyclic in nature and learners move through it depending on the task at hand. It includes *active experimentation* and reflective *observation*.
Dunn and Dunn Learning Style Aspects ("Dunn and Dunn", n.d)	Within the psychological dimension there are four styles: global, analytical, impulsive, and reflective. (impulsive and reflective can be ascertained by observing to find if a student jumps into the problem or reflects before starting it?) What this model defines as *impulsive is* similar to the construct of active.
Honey and Mumford Learning Styles Model ("Honey and Mumford", n.d)	Includes a dimension of Active and Reflective learning styles and views them as opposites.
Felder and Silverman Learning Style Inventory (Felder & Soloman, n.d)	Includes the continuum of Active and Reflective learning aspects.

All the four models look at active and reflective styles as two parts of a continuum within the learner's mind. Either or both could be used to solve language tasks and the 'effort' would help learners use the target language communicatively. The following are some of the features displayed by learners who show a preference for one or both of the styles:

- *Active learners* retain and understand information by engaging with it actively. For example, using it, applying it, or explaining it to others; active learners engage with the language learning process and use the language. So the learner tries it out to see how language patterns or rules work. They show a preference for group work.

- *Reflective learners* prefer to think about the information presented.

> This kind of learners tend to think through the task first before they come up with an output. Thus, they may prefer working alone.

According to the four models listed above, every learner is likely to fall at some point on the learning continuum scale. It means every learner can have some amount of inclination towards either styles on the continuum. Utilizing this knowledge, teachers can develop tasks that may employ both the learning styles. Therefore, in the next section of this paper, the author demonstrates a set of materials that were developed to include both active and reflective styles. Supplementary teaching materials keeping in mind the active and reflective learning styles were designed to aid the existing textbook material prescribed in the syllabus. Learner feedback was collected to identify their style based preferences and evaluate the tasks and thereby establish the efficacy of the tasks for future use.

The Context

The material presented below was developed and transacted for a class of fifty learners enrolled in grade eight of a government school in Delhi. Many students belonged to families from outside Delhi and had Hindi as a second language and English as a third language. All of them had at least three years of exposure to English as a language in school.

Designing ESL materials to suit active and reflective learning styles

The material presented below was designed to compliment the textbook end exercises and help learners understand the text better. The tasks designed were discussed with other ELT teachers and experts to shape them into their final form. The language in the module was kept simple to suit the learners' linguistic levels. Language learning skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary, were included in the tasks designed. Activities with textual, audio and visual inputs were incorporated to elicit oral and written responses. Attempts were made to ensure that the material developed was appealing and calming for the learners; was relevant and individual-paced; was future-oriented; exposed learners to authentic language; included grammar and language used examples; provided learning and communication opportunities; took learning styles into account; incorporated both structural and creative tasks.

Though many young learners may prefer an active style over reflective, yet all learners have some amount of reflective prowess which needs

to be nurtured. Thus, both styles were given a balanced place in the classroom transactions. In the examples discussed below, the first task is a predominantly reflective task, followed by an active-reflective task. The tasks were transacted during regular classroom interactions while discussing the texts. Learner feedback was taken to determine their preference for the task.

Task 1: Using the Reflective Learning Style

Chapter: 'Children at Work' (Wolf & Sen, 2008, pp. 7-15)

Summary: A boy named Velu, who runs away from home and his father's beatings, and comes to Chennai, is the protagonist. He is lost in a new city and accepts help from a ragpicker, Jaya, who takes him around the city, helps him find food, and takes him to her home. The chapter vividly describes a day in the life of a rag picker. It ends with Velu contemplating his choices and accepting his life as a rag picker for the time being.

The task given was as follows:

I.   Velu does not like living in th city, but he agrees to stay with Jaya. What do you think he will do next?

II. Let's read the chapter further to see what Velu decides to do. Take turns to read the chapter aloud and answer the following questions on the basis of your reading of the passage.

> Jaya and Velu walked along the roads for half an hour, until they came to a bridge across a dirty trickle of water. "We are in Triplicane now. See, that's Buckingham Canal," said Jaya.
> Velu stared. This was a canal? Near some puddles of water was a row of the strangest huts he had ever seen. They were built out of all sorts of things — metal sheets, tyres, bricks, wood and plastic. They stood crookedly and looked as if they would fall any moment. "Is this where you live? These houses are strange!" said Velu. "In our village, the houses are made of mud and palm leaves." Jaya went around to one of the huts and dumped her sack outside. Then she picked up an empty one. "Let's go."
> She turned to Velu and gave him a shove. "At least help me now. Here, wear these and come with me." She threw him a pair of old shoes without laces and pushed a sack and a stick into his hands. Velu was confused. What work did she want him to do with these things? The only work he had ever done was on the landowner's farm, weeding and taking cows out to graze.
> "Are there any farms in the city?" he asked Jaya.
> She laughed and thumped her stick on the ground. "Farms! There are no farmers here. We are ragpickers."
> "Ragpickers?"
> "See my sack? Full of things I collected."
> "Collected? From where?" asked Velu.
> "From rubbish bins, where else?"
> "You collect rubbish?" Velu had never heard of such a thing
> "Ayye, blockhead. It's not any rubbish. Only paper, plastic, glass, such things. We sell it to Jam Bazaar Jaggu."
> Velu was puzzled. He had heard of people throwing away rubbish.
> But why would anyone want to buy rubbish?
> "Who's Jam Bazaar Jaggu? Why's he buying all this?"
> "You think he buys it for show? He sells it to a factory. Come on,
> I don't have time to waste, like you."
> Velu did not move. He hadn't run away and come to this new place to dig through garbage bins. Jaya poked at him with her stick.
> "Look here!" she shouted. "If someone gets there before us we don't get anything. Don't just stand there, posing. Big hero. I'm trying to help you. Who filled your stomach today?" Velu scratched his head and sighed. I'll do it for now, he thought, until I find a better job.

III. Answer the question on the basis of your reading of the passage.

   1. Velu knows life in the village, which is very different from life in the city. Identify the

    things from the passage that tell us this.
2. What did Velu finally decide? Do you think be made the right choice?
3. If you were in Velu's place, what would you have done? Why or why not?

Comments on the Task

The task box given above shows a few post-reading task questions that required learners to reflect and then come up with plausible answers. The final question asked learners to empathise with the character to help them understand the text and express their opinion. All of these would help learners reflect and use the target language to give reasons in order to substantiate their opinion. It would improve their L2 output as in giving opinions and reasons learners would be pushed to using sentences with multiple clauses and coordinating and subordinating structures (e.g. *I think Velu would decide to stay because…; In my opinion to choose between city and village is difficult..*).

Observations About Learners

When asked to think about Velu's choices and what would they have done in his place, most learners gave a practical response that they would do whatever was available then. Finding a better job was the right choice and they too would have done the same because they would have had to survive and would have needed food and money to do so. It was observed that the learners could draw parallels from their personal lives. It was observed that:

*   learners faced difficulty answering questions that were not factual; they preferred to be tested on things that were explicitly stated;

*   as the learners preferred active learning, the questions that pushed them to adopt the reflective style posed a challenge to them; the learners could not comprehend the reflective questions and answered parts of such questions or altogether avoided answering them.

Task 2: Using the Active-Reflective Learning Style

The second task discussed here is an active-reflective task. This was taken up as a follow-on activity to the former task. The objective was to discuss and identify how the society could contribute to the well-being of the ragpickers. Learners were expected to empathize with the problems Velu faced and respond to the task. They were provided cue-cards to

discuss and identify solutions for the well-being of the ragpickers. The following are the details:

I. All kinds of child labour ar considered bad, but rag-picking is the worst. The life of a rag-picker is always in danger because their work can make them very sick, and it is not even rcognized. They need immediate help and attention. Some government agencies and private agencies work with rag-pickers to make their lives better. The teacher will give you infformation cards about these agencies. The card has the name ofthe agency and points on the kind of work they do in order to help rag-pickers.

Work in groups of six. Each group will get one card. Imagine that you are a member of that agency. Select the head of the agency from amongst the members. Discuss and write down points about how you can help the rag-pickers. Use the space given below.

II. Have a combined meeting of all the agencies to decide how the problem of rag-picking can be eradicated and how the rag-pickers can be helped.

Learners were equally divided into government agencies and private agencies such as the healthcare sector, NGOs, among others. These were agencies who directly influence the lives of ragpickers. Each group was given some information about the agency in the role card. Learners were asked to imagine themselves as a member of the agency and carry out a discussion and put down points about how they can help ragpickers.

Comments on the Task

In theory, it was assumed that this task would work for most of the learners as both ends of the learning style continuum—active and reflective—were incorporated.The role card about every agency would help the learners actively participate in the first meeting. While the second task where all the agencies meet was likely to help learners reflect before they expressed their opinion. This decision making task would make them use a reflective learning style and also use the complex language of reasoning with multi-clausal sentences.

Observations About Learners

The learners found the task complicated as it required them to use complex language in speech. The amount of scaffolding that a task requires and the limit to which it may push the learners ahead depends on the learners' current level of learning. Pushing learners out of their comfort zone did not work in favour of this task. The first part of the task had to be modified on spot to convert it into an individual writing task. This enabled the learners to write down points before moving onto a group discussion. Keeping written cues in front of them gave them more confidence to speak out their minds, this simplified the process a little, enabling learners to engage with the task without apprehensions.

The modified task, that is, discussion after listing the points, made all the learners participate easily. While some learners did take a natural lead when carrying out a discussion, others shared their opinions. Learners with better fluency in speaking represented their teams. They used their understanding and the given cards to build their perspective. The group discussion and the meeting of the agencies were new for them, and the discussion fell short due to a lack of points. They were scaffolded to imagine how a department or agency could contribute to do the work done by another department or agency. It was evident from the discussion that the learners had used their personal experiences, knowledge, text, and the module, in order to think and reflect on the task at hand.

Task Evaluation

In their feedback, the learners indicated that they found the first task to be interesting but difficult. In contrast, their feedback to the second task was that most of them found the task to be interesting and that they could participate in the task easily. An observation made across the two tasks was that the learners needed to be given more exposure to reflective style in order to develop it. For instance it was felt that the learners could work with some alterations in task two to make it more active in the first part. The first task for example could have had a stage of active research where the learners in small groups could actually visit an agency to collect information and list them. Then the lists could be brought back to class and compared and then the role play could be done. Similarly the task could also have had another reflective cycle added at the end: the groups could have looked at all the possible points, compared and chosen the ideas that their agency could use to help the ragpickers.

Overall teachers may modify the tasks to initiate a variety of learning styles helping the learners solve the tasks and use the target language for real-life communication. Depending on learner needs, the tasks are open to modifications to enable better ESL comprehension and production.

Conclusion

The tasks reported in this paper demonstrate that it is important to actively engage our learners in the process of language learning. This can be done by employing a variety of language learning styles in

supplementary materials and this can improve proficiency in the target langauge. By doing so teachers can experiment and identify which styles work better for a learner group, enabling the latter to take control of their learning. ESL materials should be designed in such a way that learners can engage with it on their own and in collaboration with their peers, with the teacher attending to the problems they face and giving meaningful feedback as well as altering tasks to suit the needs of the learners. When this happens, a teacher is not only able to provide language feedback but is also able to make changes in the content as required to support individual learning differences. The material should also be flexible such that it can be adapted to different learning styles by making small alterations as and when required.

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