

**Measuring L2 Learning Preferences through
Ehrman and Leaver Learning Styles Questionnaire**

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Abstract

It is a challenge for teachers to accommodate the variability of students into their instructional strategies. As students differ in their interests, knowledge, skills and learning styles, teachers need to introduce a variety of instructional approaches and methods in their class. A single method of teaching cannot accommodate all students with different learning styles. Learning styles can be described as a set of factors, behaviors and attitudes that facilitate learning for an individual in a given situation. In this context, an attempt has been made to look at the learning styles preferred by the students using Ehrman and Leaver learning styles questionnaire. The questionnaire is an instrument specifically designed to measure L2 learning styles. It follows a self report format in which the student has to mark on a 9 point rating scale. The model has only one super-ordinate style dimension which consists of two poles on a continuum: **synopsis** and **ectasis**. The synoptic learner depends more on subconscious processing, whereas the ectenic learner needs conscious control over the learning process. The thirty items in the questionnaire helped the learners to create a profile and get to know more about their own learning styles preferences. As a result they became aware of their learning strengths and weaknesses which, the researcher believed would foster the right and positive learning behaviour in them.

Key words: learning preferences, continuum, synopsis and ectasis.

Introduction

As a teacher working with over 60 Engineering students I think it is a bit challenging to organize lessons everyday that support learning styles of all students. However, the eminent

educationists feel that students will learn better when the teachers use their (students') preferred learning styles to make them successful. Consequently, more students will succeed in their language learning endeavours. Learning styles are various approaches or ways of learning. They can be described as the way people absorb, process and retain information. Teachers can incorporate all the major learning styles suitable to cater to the learners' needs. It has been claimed that an understanding of learning styles will help teachers plan their teaching to include activities which will be in consonance with the different learning styles.

Ehrman and Leaver Learning Styles Questionnaire.

The questionnaire is an instrument specifically designed to measure L2 learning styles. It follows a self report format in which the student has to mark on a 9 point rating scale. The model has only one super ordinate style dimension which consists of two poles on a continuum: **synopsis** and **ectasis**. The synoptic learner depends more on subconscious processing whereas the ectenic learner needs conscious control over the learning process. The thirty items in the questionnaire do not reflect any innate quality one is born with. They refer to 'personal preferences'. These preferences are bipolar, representing a continuum from one extreme to the other and there is no value judgment attached to where a learner's style falls on this continuum.

According to Ehrman and Leaver the distinction in the continuum is based on the 'degree of conscious control of learning desired or needed'. Synopsis refers to the preferences to rely on a holistic perception of information, while 'ectasis' refers to the preference for relying on detail and system when processing new information. Synopsis is related to right hemisphere dominant learners, and ectasis to left hemisphere dominant learners. The ectasis-synopsis continuum is measured through ten subscales. The ten subscales are grounded in established learning styles.

Description of 10 Subscales

1. Field dependence – independence scale refers to the preference for selecting and prioritizing information vs. treating the whole context as the same.

2. Field sensitivity - insensitivity scale concerns the preference for considering materials in a context and an awareness of their position in the larger or broader context.
3. Random - Linear scale relates to how information is structured. The random learner follows an internally developed idiosyncratic order, while the sequential learner prefers a step by step externally provided order.
4. Global – Particular scale deals with the direction in which the learner prefers to process new material, either with a top down approach (getting the global picture), or with a bottom up approach (building up the picture through particular details).
5. Inductive – deductive: Inductive learners use details and facts to build hypotheses and then test them (from example to rule), while deductive learners start with hypotheses or rules and then apply them to examples (from rule to examples).
6. Synthetic – analytic: Synthetic learners prefer to use pieces of information to build up a new while analytic learners like to break down wholes into parts to understand their structure.
7. Analogue – digital – These styles differentiate between the ways in which learners look for deeper meanings in whatever they learn. While analogue learners like to focus on metaphors, analogies and conceptual links and their meanings. Digital learners tend to arrive at a surface (literal and logical) understanding of what they see or hear.
8. Concrete – Abstract – Concrete learners prefer direct concrete experience of the language content, while abstract learners tend to look for the rules or system underlying language rather than the actual language of communication.
9. Leveling – Sharpening scale concerns things like how people perceive, store and retrieve information. Levelers tend to rely on episodic memory and look for commonalities to form a generalized image, while sharpeners notice small details and difference and store them in long term memory.
10. Impulsive – Reflective – deals with the speed of processing of incoming information. Impulsive learners tend to respond rapidly, often giving gut reactions, while reflective learners prefer to think and reason out before they respond.

Methodology and Study Design

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This study was conducted with sixty engineering first year students over a period of two weeks. Most of the students hail from rural background with an average proficiency level of learning. Their attention span was very less and they always resorted to rote learning to pass the impending examinations. During the previous years of learning they were rarely involved in any kind of activities in the class. In the present context they were supplied with copies of Ehrman & Leaver (E&L) construct which consisted of two poles on a continuum: synopsis and ectasis and 10 sub dimensions drawn on established styles. As a part of the present study they were asked to place their choice between these two poles from the numbers 1 to 9. The balance point is represented by the number 5. For example, if a student likes writing much more than listening, s/he can mark in space 1, taking number 5 as the base point. This can be illustrated as follows:

I like writing

Most like this

X — — — — — — — —
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

I like listening

Most like this.

As the learner approaches closer to each pole in his/her preference, it means that he likes that item more and the opposite less. Neither end indicates more efficiency or success and both poles can be equally useful or dysfunctional.

In order to arrive at the learning style of the learner, the scoring pattern is followed like this. The totals from the questions 1, 11, 21 have to be added. If the score is between 1-15, the interpretation is that the learners are field dependent and between 16-30, field independent. The scoring system is followed in the same pattern taking the score for questions 2, 12, 22 and 3, 13, 23 and so on. When the scoring is completed, each pole will determine the overall tendencies of the learners either as synopsis or ectasis type. Learners with 5 learning styles in each pole are considered as balanced.

Discussion

The present model describes the learning style of a learner rather than measuring his/her ability because both poles can be equally beneficial or flawed. The ten dimensions in the E & L

construct are measured through the Ehrman and Leaver learning style Questionnaire. There were thirty items in the questionnaire that helped the learners to find out their preferences, creating the synoptic-ectenic construct. Thus the learner could create a profile and get to know more about his/her own learning style preferences. In this context the researcher believes that the learner would become aware of his/her learning strengths and weaknesses which will foster the right and positive learning behaviour.

Conclusion

The E & L construct was an identifiable method of interacting with, taking in and processing information which suits the learner best. The ways students like learning are by seeing and hearing, reflecting and acting, reasoning logically and intuitively, analyzing and visualizing, responding steadily and in fits and starts. On the whole it refers to their preferred ways of learning, synoptic learners with a sub-conscious learning methods like learning intuitively, while the ecstatic learners improved when they exercised conscious control over their learning.

The present study helped me realize that the learners have various preferences of learning though they belong to the same class. If the teachers take different learning styles into account, students will learn better when using style preferences in which they are successful and consequently more students will succeed in their language learning efforts. Overall, the use of the above questionnaire was really effective in making one aware of one's strong preferred learning styles. The findings of the study provided a huge learning experience in ascertaining the learning styles of the learners.

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